

MOVIE

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ARTICLES

A 'Wounded Cinema': Failed Utopias, Décor Leitmotifs, and the *Homo Minnellianus*

An empty classroom. Standing behind her desk in the right foreground, Miss French (Martha Hyer) goes through some books, her back to the camera. Meanwhile, in the left background, a woman in pink enters, closes the door, and introduces herself as Ginny Moorhead (Shirley MacLaine). The shot / reverse-shot that follows directly opposes the two characters: the teacher is framed in a medium long shot against a window through which a white, Greek-style portico (an imposing symbol of knowledge) is visible. The camera is placed just below eye-level, from the outset strengthening Miss French's superior position in the conversation that is about to occur. Meanwhile, the light emanating from the windows behind her casts a golden hue on the young teacher, bestowing upon her a distinct auratic quality. Ginny, on the other hand, appears in a full shot at the back of the room, standing between two blackboards on which pristine, white cursive handwriting (indicative of learning and discipline) can be seen. As she advances towards the teacher, the camera repositions itself to keep the two characters equidistant from the edges of the frame, moving forwards and rightwards ever so gently. Costume and the use of colour further stress their differences: Ginny's tight, low-cut pink dress, cropped reddish hairstyle, and heavy make-up contrast with the



Fig. 1: Miss French (Martha Hyer) in a medium long shot, just below eye-level, against a Greek-style portico symbolising intellectual superiority.



Fig. 2: Hesitant Ginny (Shirley MacLaine) enters the classroom in a full shot.

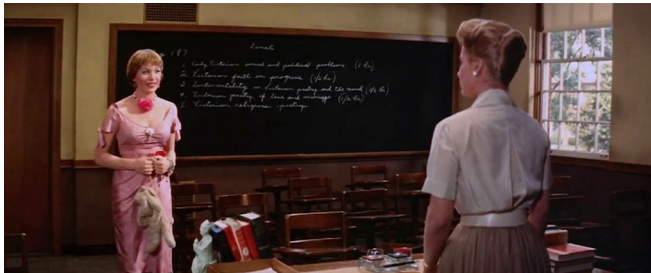
nude pastels of the teacher's attire, her seamless complexion, and her blonde hair in a perfectly coiffed updo. Miss French's pale-yellow blouse and beige skirt, neatly separated by a thick white belt, are capped off with a delicate string of pearls adorning her neck. A recognised symbol of class status, propriety, and femininity, the small, milky white pearls are visually matched by Ginny's mock-pearl necklace, in which big white beads alternate with smaller pink ones. A large artificial bright pink flower springs from the necklace's right side and is emphasised by a similarly large but lighter-coloured pink flower attached to the left side of her very thin pink belt. In between the two bold flowery ornaments, a small white embroidered flower detail draws attention to Ginny's wide oval décolletage. The cheap accessories and appliqué are in tune with the sui generis light brown bunny-shaped bag she holds as she tentatively walks into the classroom, and which she places on the tablet-arm of the student chair-desk combo after asking Miss French's permission to sit. These markers of childhood are not only unexpected in a grown woman but create a very clear visual counterpoint to the serious tone of their exchange. 'I want him to have what he wants, even if it means you instead of me' encapsulates Ginny's frank and

sympathetic approach to the love triangle situation in which she finds herself. Further troubling her childlike ways and accentuating the woman-child duality is a persistent black bra strap that peeks from underneath the off-shoulder neckline on her right side. Next to the pink, satin-like fabric of the dress and the different shades of pinks and reds that bring youthful, if excessive, colour to her presence, that hint of black sorely stands out, overtly disrupting the colour pattern of the character and drawing attention to the tainted innocence that defines her life.

The film is *Some Came Running* (1958) and the scene is emblematic of American director Vincente Minnelli's cinema: it is the conflict between two disparate personal worlds, two antithetic ways of apprehending and facing reality that structures and guides the narratives. As Gilles Deleuze remarks, '[t]he plurality of worlds is Minnelli's first discovery, his very great position in cinema' (1989: 63). Indeed, from his first film, *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), to his last, *A Matter of Time* (1976), the tension between incompatible dreamworlds is arguably the most striking feature of Minnelli's work. Going back to that classroom, a host of other aural and visual elements opposes the two women, underscoring the film's

layered tonal dimensions and its preoccupation with social performances of identity, gender, and class. In his study of tone in film, Douglas Pye discusses how this device is indissociable from interpretation and how tonal qualities and complexities can serve as productive critical tools to explore a 'film's shifting textures' ([2007] 2014: 7, 18). Focusing specifically on *Some Came Running*, Pye analyses in insightful detail the multifaceted ways in which Minnelli dramatises 'emotional discomfort' and alienation, namely by opposing 'seemingly relaxed and tense bodies' (49): the schoolteacher's inhibited, 'stiff and stilted performance' (48) and Ginny's vulnerable, 'emotional openness and trust' (55) convey nuanced and highly effective tonal registers that decisively contribute to the film's 'deepening mood of fatalism' (39).

In their classroom interaction, differences in name usage, diction, linguistic expression, respective modes of address, and general demeanour denote a tonally rich scene where 'embarrassment, pathos, pity, emotional engagement and critical detachment, mingle with extraordinary intensity' (Pye [2007] 2014: 54). The naïve trespasser uses a diminutive (Ginny) to refer to herself and attempts to maintain a formal register throughout by appending 'Miss' to Gwen French's



name. The social distance attached to the title is nonetheless immediately undermined by her informal style, poor grammar, and heavy Chicago accent, which starkly contrast with Miss French's proper enunciation and restrained speech. Furthermore, the uneducated 'hostess' has a childlike quality to her voice, which frequently changes volume as well as tone, whereas the teacher is as poised vocally as she is physically. Ginny appears utterly out of place and her inadequateness becomes even more painfully obvious through the thoughtful use of ambient sound. As Ginny first walks up to Miss French, right after entering her classroom uninvited, the unladylike noise of her approaching footsteps disrupts the otherwise silent room while the chunky silver bracelets on her left wrist jiggle and jingle audibly as she gestures. The significance of these sounds to the scene's 'tonal colouring', to borrow Pye's phrase, is stressed by the absence of non-diegetic music ([2007] 2014: 43). She then sits down, noisily and eagerly pulling up a chair as close as possible to the imposing teacher's desk. While she speaks, her nervousness is patently clear and is conveyed visually long before it is confirmed via the dialogue towards the end of the scene. As she addresses the teacher, Minnelli's tight framing and MacLaine's compelling acting skilfully intensify the unease of a scene that was already emotionally uncomfortable. Framed in a medium close-up, Ginny's body betrays her acute awareness of her disenfranchised status: she inelegantly scratches her bare shoulder, her forehead, and the back of her hand, fidgets with the flower on her necklace (all the while casting shadows on her skin), touches her nose, raises her eyebrows, shakes her head (making her long earrings dangle), sighs, points, and finally cries, in a close-up shot, half-covering her face – first with her right hand and then with her left – her red nail polish matching her lipstick and her bracelets sliding down her arm.

These little, understated actions lend a sustained pictorial and sonic liveliness to the shots: all of Ginny is light, colour, and movement. Miss French, on the other hand, wears studs on her ears, a golden watch on her left wrist, and keeps her hands still for most of the scene, moving her head and her eyes very subtly as she replies to Ginny's personal and intrusive questions. Her speech is likewise carefully controlled almost until the very end of their exchange. After Miss French reassures



her she is not interested in Dave Hirsh (Frank Sinatra), the man with whom they are both in love, Ginny prepares to leave. Relieved, but still sniffing, she looks at Miss French and says, 'I haven't got nothin' ...' – adding, seconds after getting up from her seat, head tilted forward, eyes looking down, in a half whispered, confessional afterthought – '... not even a reputation.' 'I'm sure you have a reputation, Miss Moorhead', is Miss French's cutting retort, which she utters projecting her voice slightly higher than she had up to that point. The teacher's offhand remark and 'momentary breakdown in politeness' feel, as Pye observes, 'especially unpleasant' ([2007] 2014: 55). Ginny momentarily freezes and looks straight at Miss French: clutching her bunny-purse in a medium shot, she



does not look offended, but equal parts hurt and genuinely surprised. We can sense the teacher's silent prejudice, her haughty little outburst somewhat releasing the tension that had been building from the moment Ginny first mentioned Dave. Her bittersweet and disarming reply – 'Well ... that's one thing don't bother Dave none' – is met with an uncomfortable glance from Miss French, whose demeanour changes: she becomes more curt and urges Ginny to leave before her next class comes in. During this pointless remark (Ginny was already on her way out), she moves her head from the right to the left and then up at Ginny. Paired with the slight change in speech tone, pitch, and volume, this is the most movement we see in her counter shots. Setting, décor, costume, make-up, sound, shot composition, camera movement, lighting, colour, and acting: everything in the frame seems to place an insurmountable chasm between 'the woman who knows nothing but understands everything', and 'the woman who knows everything but understands nothing' (Costa 2003: 165).¹

V. F. Perkins describes Minnelli as a 'governor of the action', a role which, to this day, is still 'most consistently neglected by the film theorists' ([1972] 1986: 77). The overall dismissive attitude towards his work and the generalised reluctance to take

Minnelli seriously derives primarily from the auteur theory, specifically the idea that Minnelli was more a stylist (*metteur en scène*) than someone deeply involved in the creative process of filmmaking (*auteur*). On that account, the significance of his cinema, beyond its widely acknowledged stylistic excellence, has been undervalued. Underscoring this critical neglect is the fact that Minnelli is especially remembered for his colourful film musicals. As Albert Johnson observes, if 'a director's interests [...] are identified with a particular genre, it is extremely difficult for critics to accept his experiments with other material' (1959: 32). When discussing Minnelli, however, we are not talking about mere 'experiments', a term which relegates his non-musical works to a subaltern position. Minnelli's filmmaking career spanned more than thirty years, during which time he completed thirty-four films, as well as many sequences for other directors, and his films are relatively evenly distributed between three genres: he directed thirteen musicals, thirteen melodramas, and eight comedies. It is therefore counterproductive and inaccurate to consider his oeuvre solely in light of his musicals. Aware of the over-emphasis being given to this genre at the height of the auteurism debates, *Movie* defiantly adopted an original approach and defended Minnelli as an auteur, centring the discussion almost exclusively on his 1960s melodramas (Elsaesser [1969–1970] 1981: 11). This position, however refreshing, is not entirely satisfactory either: we should not split Minnelli's authorial text, which is the ensemble of his work, into one film genre and from there alone extrapolate his contributions to cinema history and aesthetics.

In the wake of auteurism, key film scholars saw in Minnelli's keen attention to décor and his elaboration of a singular visual vocabulary both an eloquent articulation of core diegetic dilemmas and a biting commentary on the contemporary social reality. In the late 1970s, Andrew Britton (1977) and Robin Wood (1979) focus on *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) to investigate the horror politics of American family life as disclosed through Minnelli's aesthetic choices. Britton uncovers the many disturbing ambivalences in the cultural myth of the family that run through the film and stresses its gothic, horror, and noir undercurrents, positioning Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) as a precursor to the devil children in *The Exorcist*

(1973) and *Carrie* (1976). Like Britton, Wood develops a psychoanalytic reading that locates the return of the repressed in the heteronormative nuclear family, arguing that *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the slasher horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) foreground a variation on the same type of familial horrors. Writing in *Movie* in 1990, Edward Gallafent shifts attention to the bourgeois family in *Home from the Hill* (1960) and identifies generational conflicts and threats to the patriarchal order that taint the American myth of 'home', equated with stability and community. Douglas Pye (2007), in turn, offers a close analysis of class, gender dynamics, masculinity in crisis, and social performance in *Some Came Running* through a careful investigation of mood and tonal qualities. Pye's detailed readings dialogue closely with the formal-aesthetic analyses conducted by Joe McElhaney, whose work has been crucial to a reappraisal of Minnelli, and who states that the director's films 'give voice to some of the basic conditions and repressive aspects of the culture of which they are a part' (2004).

In line with these groundbreaking explorations of the significance of Minnelli's oeuvre, I suggest that his output deserves further critical scrutiny and recognition. There is a poignant timeliness and urgency in his films which, I argue, appear as projections of a culture increasingly disrupted by deteriorating communities, fragmented identities, and disjointed experiences. The estranged, broken self that emerges from these tensions is especially relevant to our global age, where reality and illusion mix and meld with unparalleled uncanniness and rapidity. McElhaney claims that 'what we have in Minnelli's films is not simply a style, [but] rather [...] a vision, if not a philosophy, of (and for) cinema' (2009: 5). The 'painful to watch' encounter between Ginny and Miss French (Pye [2007] 2014: 54) epitomises such a 'vision' in its dramatic staging of Minnelli's most distinctive stylistic traits and narrative preoccupations. In other words, it displays a thoroughly cinematic language that makes décors speak. The *mise-en-scène* mobilises Minnelli's particularly disenchanted outlook on dreams and love, conveyed cinematically through sharp visual and aural counterpoints between discordant worlds. I propose here that Minnelli's philosophy hinges on the representation of alienated individuals who consistently

fail to fully partake in or escape reality. In each film, the director weaves complex stories of erasure and forlornness into his visuals, allowing for a questioning of the recurring association of utopian oneirism with apolitical escapism. This article follows the example of the pioneering critics who challenged the still widespread assumption that Minnelli's films are chiefly concerned with carefree entertainment, happy endings, and gleeful characters that suddenly burst into song. I aim to continue their work and discuss Minnelli's style as uniquely dramatising the interface of aesthetics and politics.

In interrogating the socio-political relevance of the Minnellian utopia, I claim that we should not 'peel away the tinsel', as Jane Feuer advocates (1982: ix), but should instead engage closely with it, with the surface of the moving images: the tinsel (the aesthetics) is where the uniqueness of the medium resides, in the bringing together of the visual and the aural, technique and technology, style and substance. In this article, I contend that Minnelli's musicals, comedies, and melodramas construct a striking aesthetic of utopian disenchantment, favouring images in which the negotiation between reality and dream is not only urgent but ontological at its core, for the characters define themselves (their selfhood and identity, along with their interpersonal relationships) in relation to it. Ultimately, the balance between experience and expectation, or desire and the real, remains ever elusive – it is on this point, I suggest, that Minnelli's films become political and resonate with underrepresented groups: in their failure to achieve utopia, the characters show us 'glimpses of discontent with prevailing social structures', and the 'fervency' of their continued belief in an imagined better place 'can speak of oppression and speak to the oppressed', as Kenneth MacKinnon astutely observes (2000: 46). MacKinnon is analysing generic traits and roots the film musical's subversive property in the idea that 'the cruciality of [the genre's] wishfulness' lies in the dream's 'rarity of actualisation', in the sense that quotidian life never quite matches 'the fantasy of escape' (40, 46). While many musicals may accrue appeal and power from this mismatch, I argue that MacKinnon's words are especially fitting to characterise Minnelli's musicals and comedies, for in them we can see a sustained concern with outcasts, all of whom Minnelli frames as incorrigible dreamers, establishing

a tight socio-political connection between these typically 'lighter' genres and his melodramas. Those individuals whose feelings and aspirations are not accommodated by their circumstances can see themselves reflected in the ambivalent, or downright distraught, experiences of the characters. This political resonance does not derive merely from the interstitial portrayal of 'longings and absences' (45), but from an overt aesthetic representation of intense displacement and frustrated ambitions. Exploring Minnelli's films through the lens of failure and utopia permits a reconsideration of his work's significance while providing a layered reading of the *homo minnellianus* as an avatar for minorities.

To illustrate the powerful charge of politicised utopia, I will refer to a selection of Minnelli's films, focusing more closely on two productions that have received little scholarly scrutiny in English-language criticism – the musical *Brigadoon* (1954) and the melodrama *Some Came Running* (1958). My analysis is anchored in and will pivot around the classroom scene that opens the article and which encapsulates Minnelli's singularly dystopian construction of cinematic oneirism. After probing the role of dreams and décor in the first section, I will draw on *Brigadoon* to examine the transmutation of utopia into nightmare, along with the implications of this shift, and will then explore the distinctive features of the prototypical Minnellian hero. Overall, as I will argue, Minnelli's inclination towards the depiction of the unsuitability of the dream raises doubts about its desirability. The result is a poignant commentary on the human condition in contemporary societies.

Décor leitmotifs

'What are dreams made of? Where do they come from?', Flaubert (James Mason) asks at the beginning of *Madame Bovary* (1949). In Minnelli, they are built through the décor and made of the relentless hope that imagination (or desire) and everyday life can be conciliated. Even when her plans go awry, 'in Emma there was a terrifying capacity for pursuing the impossible', Flaubert elucidates, and so '[t]he dream did not end. She had learned to be a woman for whom experience would always be a prison, and freedom would lie always beyond the horizon'. Like so many of Minnelli's heroes,

Emma (Jennifer Jones) lives in her own world, progressively alienated from reality, and strives to embellish and tailor the insipid world of actuality to suit her dreams of 'high romance and impossible love', vividly present throughout the film: even the decadent hotel room where she meets with her lover seems like a picture out of a book, with its enormous bed in the shape of a gondola. The crammed rooms Emma navigates



illustrate what Kay Young calls 'suffocation-by-thing' (2004, 69), effectively representing the two clashing worlds she inhabits as she is engulfed by her own ambitions. Her décor, marked by an excess of want and of things, intrudes upon the décors of those she meets: she does not simply inhabit her surroundings, but transmogrifies them so that they mirror her confabulations.

In Minnelli's films, the camera typically allocates each protagonist what I shall call a 'décor leitmotif', that is, stylistic patterns that repeat and accompany a specific character, indicating their presence, enriching diegetic events, and offering insights into character psychology. The mise-en-scène of objects in *Madame Bovary*, for instance, engenders a discourse that exceeds the diegesis, allowing for a metavisual commentary on the dangers dreaming poses to Emma's happiness and sanity. Minnellian dreams derive from the imperative urge to make happiness happen – against all reason and all odds – and

this ardent desire or 'fervency', to borrow from MacKinnon, materialises in the heroes' individualised décors. *Madame Bovary* makes evident how the persona of its dreamer-heroine is formed in relation to the décor, which dramatises matters of identity and class. To Emma, artifice becomes authenticity. In *The Pirate* (1948), the décor likewise interweaves oneiric voyages and real journeys, rendering ordinary events fantastic. 'I realise that there's a practical world and a dream world. I know which is which. I shan't mix them', Manuela (Judy Garland) innocently states at the beginning of the film. Predictably, however, she cannot help but imagine the thrilling adventures of Macoco, the fearless pirate, and picture herself beside him. Her dreams are set against balconies and windows, a décor leitmotif which creates a proscenium arch over her, doubly signalling the make-believe and her longing for a more exciting elsewhere. Tellingly, it is from her balcony that she watches, smitten, as Serafin (Gene Kelly), pretending to be Macoco, performs a bold ballet to woo her. A dissolve on a medium close-up of Manuela in between window shutters indicates the passage from reality to imagination. Minnelli's roving camera then stresses the virtuosic choreography of the dance displaying the pirate's masculine prowess as the colour red floods the screen, replacing the yellowish overtones of daily existence. As the depiction of Manuela and Emma indicates, Minnellian characters repeatedly fail to maintain a clear



separation between the actual and the virtual, so that routine actions, such as hunting in *Home from the Hill*, choosing new drapes for a psychiatric clinic in *The Cobweb* (1955), or cooking in a moving vehicle in *The Long, Long Trailer* (1953) acquire a somewhat surreal dimension.

Contrasting décor leitmotifs advance the narrative by reflecting the collision of irreconcilable lives and loves, as in the series of Daisy-Melinda's (Barbra Streisand) flashbacks in the musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970). The film tells the story of Daisy who, in a hypnotherapy session with psychiatrist Chabot (Yves Montand), recalls her supposed past life as Lady Melinda Tentrees, a nineteenth-century coquette wrongly executed for espionage and treason. The disconcerting shot / reverse shots situate her in the past (commenting on her own life) and place the psychoanalyst in the present. Although temporally and physically unsynchronised, he gets lost in Melinda's dream and falls for her. Stressing the impossibility of Chabot's *amour fou* is the fact that the couple never sings together and their décors never coincide: at one point, Chabot's formal office is opposed to the sumptuousness of the Brighton Pavilion where Melinda dines. At the other extreme, the coincidence of décors can also add a richer dimension to the diegesis. In *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963), widower and radio station executive Tom (Glenn Ford) meets and courts sophisticated fashion designer Rita (Dina Merrill). His son, Eddie (Ron Howard), however, is not fond of Rita but has taken a liking to their new neighbour, Elizabeth (Shirley Jones). Tom eventually proposes to Rita but abruptly changes his mind in the film's coda. Rita is a lonely, independent woman whose last shot in the film consists of her being unceremoniously left by Tom over the phone. She is lying in bed with her poodle, in a room featuring the same colour scheme as Eddie's and Elizabeth's homes, implying that perhaps they were not that different after all.

In Minnelli, each character is one with their own décor, and the problems arise only when one's décor collides with or tries to metamorphose into someone else's. João Bénard da Costa comments that *Gigi* (Leslie Caron), in the eponymous 1958 film, decides to convert herself to the décor (with the appropriate dress) and performs so perfectly at Maxim's that Gaston (Louis Jourdan) cannot stand it and rejects her along



with the décor (1987: 382). Conversely, a similar action in the comedy *Designing Woman* (1957) has the opposite effect: 'I figured if I put on my new suit maybe I could join the club. I couldn't. I guess I didn't speak the language', regrets Mike Hagen (Gregory Peck). Successful social interaction involves a seamless embodied performance in which one's décor is not erased; rather, self and environment are in tune and come together in organic synchronicity. Achieving such a balance remains, for the most part, utopian in Minnelli. The ineptitude of the heroes to adapt to their surroundings, especially in dinner party sequences, is recurrent and crystallises the pervasive social maladjustment of non-conformist characters that runs through his work. The sanity and survival of the heroes therefore depends on the careful protection of their personal environment (their dream and their décor) from outside disturbances. This explains why Minnellian characters are constantly rearranging the performance space. In *Designing Woman*, the first thing Marilla (Lauren Bacall) does after entering her new husband's home is to move the furniture around, immediately imposing her décor on his. Tom (John Kerr), in *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), comments that he put drapes on his room's window because he 'tried to

make it look more like a home'. In this sense, the dissymmetry between reality and oneirism, as well as between one's dream and the dream of the other, is mirrored in the fight of décor against décor.

The arresting effect of forcing décor leitmotifs together is apparent in Ginny's impromptu visit to Miss French. In that empty classroom, Ginny's monologic interaction and her fidgeting and fumbling at things suffuse the frame with movement, even while the camera remains stationary. She looks radically misplaced, a character out of time and place who never experiences life as the other characters do; a strange creature that seems to have just landed in a foreign, hostile environment that systematically refuses to accommodate her. As Jean-Loup Bourget states, 'the Shirley MacLaine character, who seems to come out of a musical, should never meet Martha Hyer's' (2009: 66). The two décors – bright colours and movement; muted hues and stillness – are so completely opposed that they violently clash. After the initial shock, however, Ginny's dynamic décor slowly encroaches on the teacher's and takes over the scene, so that she leaves the classroom believing that her fears were unfounded and that she and Dave can have a future together. When the dream and

ordinary life mix, two antagonistic worlds merge and transcend one another, transforming the cinematic world in such a way that the mise-en-scène produces 'an overall impression of unreality' (Elsaesser [1969–1970] 1981: 21). In that classroom, the earnestness of Ginny's dream pushes against Miss French's determination not to dream. The two poles engender an alternative realm – the space of utopia.

Utopia as death

Richard Dyer postulates that the film musical only shows utopia, a utopia that is implicit in the narrative as well as in the numbers, both of which are usually removed 'in time and space [...] to places [...] where it can be believed [...] that song and dance are "in the air"' (1981: 187–88). Yet, if we define utopia, with Louis Marin, as 'the name of the "neutral" [...], the gap between [...] two continents' (1993: 411), then its connotations are no longer entirely positive or mystical. *Brigadoon* constitutes a useful case study of utopia's peculiar contours in the Minnellian canon for the way it dissociates between 'two continents', delineating a dark, liminal quality in the idealised realm.

The film opens with a low-contrast establishing shot that gradually cranes out through the mist covering vast Scottish

moors. Following a dissolve, the mist starts to clear and a downwards movement to the right reveals two wandering hunters. Contrary to what would be expected, the camera does not stay with them; instead, the image again dissolves into a shot of the scenic landscape. Movement fills the frame as a flock of birds takes flight. Gliding to the right, the camera stops briefly before an ancient-looking bridge – a mythical, magical bridge that cannot be crossed without punishment. This is the longest shot in the opening sequence and sets an ominous tone for the film given the pervasively gothic connotations of bridges, familiar from such films as Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).² Next, the camera slowly cranes up to reveal a stream of water running underneath it, its surface reflecting the sunlight now spraying through the trees. The three following shots move in on grazing cows, tree branches, a town square, and lastly a house. The image then cuts to a series of shots of people waking up. The gradual clearing of the mist and Minnelli's characteristically elegant mobile camera, inspired by Max Ophüls' 'dancing' camera movements (Minnelli 1974: 122), give us the feeling of witnessing the awakening of the village itself, not just its inhabitants. These opening shots encapsulate the utopian oneirism of a film which revolves around the mysteries of time, space, love, and death – core preoccupations of Minnelli's cinema.

The film has been criticised mainly for its exaggerated artificiality. Nonetheless, the fact that it was shot in a studio set and is deliberately artificial, unreal (or surreal) seems to me to reinforce the believability of the magical dreamland, the dystopian reverie the characters enter almost by chance. The village is a world of décor, façade, and colour; verisimilitude would have detracted from the authenticity of the dream. The chromatic organisation of the sets accentuates the dreamlike atmosphere of the Highlands, chiefly due to the ubiquity of yellows, browns, and greens. *Brigadoon*'s studio look therefore suits the depiction of an imaginary place by paradoxically emphasising the undeniable impossibility of its existence. Indeed, as Tommy (Gene Kelly) and Jeff (Van Johnson) will learn after chancing upon unmapped Brigadoon while on a



hunting trip in Scotland, it is no ordinary day, but the one day out of every century in which the mysterious village comes back to life. In an unexpected reversal of the usual protagonists in a Faustian pact, with God replacing the devil, Brigadoon's enchantment is the result of a deal struck between God and the village's minister in 1754, only two days (or two centuries) before the story begins. At the minister's behest, the spell was cast to protect the village from the outside world, with the caveat that none of the inhabitants leave the village or else it would vanish forever into oblivion, taking everyone with it. The villagers must therefore protect themselves at all cost and destroy (meaning 'to harm' or 'kill') whoever tries to break Brigadoon's law. At first sight, Brigadoon is a welcoming and harmonious rural community – a safe haven of peaceful heathery fields. Yet, as the action progresses, a closer look detects the extraordinary precariousness of its equilibrium and uncovers Brigadoon's ultimate paradox: that the ideal and its underside, the dream and the nightmare, are inseparable and inescapable. The village is, in essence, a material representation of Bentham's panopticon prison: a closed space where people are under permanent surveillance. Harry (Hugh Laing), the man who eventually tries to escape the nightmarish paradise, revealingly describes Brigadoon as 'the dimensions of [his] jail'. For if Brigadoon appears to be, on the one hand, a world to escape into, on the other it is a cursed place, closer to Giovanni Piranesi's 'dream prisons' than to Busby Berkeley.

Tommy soon falls in love with Fiona (Cyd Charisse) and considers staying in Brigadoon. Caught in Tommy's dream, the sceptical Jeff, however, never loses sight of what is real and what belongs in that dream-jail. Significantly, it is him who ends up killing Harry, mistaking him for a grouse, which proves he never forgot that hunting was the reason he was in Scotland. The violence of the chase which leads to Harry's tragic death is reminiscent of the boar hunt in *Home from the Hill* and the horse chase sequence in *Undercurrent* (1946). Minnelli's unchained camera partakes in the action, directly involving the audience in the drama with its roving crane shots through the trees and over the characters as the villagers try to prevent Harry from leaving. It is only after Harry's accidental shooting that the camera finally stops. In front of a



tree, in the middle of the frame, Harry lies dead as the villagers gather around, silent, torches in hand. For the remainder of the sequence, the camera is static and kept at a distance from the action, as if to abstain itself from commenting on the images, leaving that role to the spectator. It eschews commonplace melodramatic effects by not moving in on Harry's father, present at the scene, or on any of the other characters.³ Minnelli opts for a visually neutral, but politically relevant vantage point: Harry's arbitrary death and the villagers' unphased reaction expose Brigadoon as a macabre society that unwillingly destroys itself under the pretence of shielding itself from the perversities of contemporaneity.

François Guérif relates Minnelli's oneirism with the social world, writing that the dream 'corresponds to a personal reality [...] whereas reality might represent a social imaginary' (1984: 16). This is clear in the representation of Brigadoon as cut-off from the world for its own protection to preclude its contamination via social, scientific, and technological progress. The nonconformity to society's rules, as noted, ends in tragedy for Harry, who can no longer stand that transcendental fantasy and is devoured by it. Broken-hearted after the woman he loves marries someone else, he needed to leave to live again, but Brigadoon could not let him. Brigadoon is thus



saved by death, but is also doomed by it. The central themes of isolation and death, and the narrative's direct likening of God and the devil (with the former facilitating a pact that effectively requires human sacrifice), strengthen the gothic overtones of a film that is not about the survival of the fittest but of the most obedient, the most subservient to the dominant power structures.

After Tommy's decision to leave Brigadoon, Minnelli introduces us to noisy New York City through a high-angle shot which moves downwards and dissolves into a crowded bar. The bar's overwhelming cacophony and the lack of space for bodies to move freely without brushing or colliding signals a distance to Scotland that is more than geographical. The camera tracks slowly across the packed space, allowing

us to eavesdrop on numerous bits of random conversations. To further highlight Tommy's unbelonging, this sequence also differs from the rest of the film in that it does not have its own musical score, borrowing it instead from the bewitched village as Tommy recollects excerpts of three songs he heard there ('Heather on the Hill', 'Waitin' for My Dearie', and 'Go Home with Bonnie Jean'). New York appears just as claustrophobic to Tommy as Brigadoon was to Harry. The sequence



demonstrates the dystopia of the real world (through Tommy's eyes), whereas Brigadoon reveals the dystopia of the imaginary realm (which Tommy, devoted to the dream, cannot see). The denouement in Scotland reinforces Brigadoon's dystopian uncanniness when Tommy wishes back the village and it resurrects again from the mist, ghostlier than ever. Thus, the village that comes out of the fog one day every one hundred years can apparently be conjured at will, through the sheer transformative power of love. Yet the spell is not broken, unlike in traditional fairy tales, and fantasy wins over reason. The final reappearance of Brigadoon corresponds to the summoning of the Minnellian utopia, according to which an ideal space and time is in fact the absence of a real space and of chronological time. Happiness means erasure.

Bellour claims that *Brigadoon* contains, 'in its principle and its mythical scenario [...] a *panic* of which the whole [Minnellian] oeuvre is more or less made' (2009: 405). This panic subverts the apolitical light-heartedness typically attributed to film musicals in foregrounding escapism to criticise the present state of society. Bourget explains this apparent paradox, observing that a utopia 'is not escapist in the derogatory sense of the word; rather it calls the viewer's attention to the fact that his own society is far removed from such an



ideal condition' (1973: 193). Minnelli first signalled this in the musical genre and expanded it afterwards to his melodramas and comedies, positing that utopia's immanence to reality serves to underline oppressive structures that stifle creativity, freedom, and happiness. As Edward Rothstein reminds us, in 'the monotonous world of utopias [...] virtue and horror run together' (2003: 4). The Minnellian mise-en-scène captures the struggles of this co-existence and aligns oneirism with fragmentation and fear, positioning dreaming as acutely dystopian. In this way, utopia proves an effective vehicle for an elegant attack on societal conventions and on a superficially picture-perfect America that shuns difference and sensitive, strong-willed individuals.

Drawing on the mise-en-scène to construct and convey a socio-political critique is a defining trait of Minnelli's work, in which the surface possesses a powerful depth. Martin Scorsese joins Bourget, Britton, Elsaesser, Gallafent, McElhaney, Pye, Wood, and other attentive film scholars and critics who have analysed this central yet underrated element of Minnelli's films – the social consciousness that runs surreptitiously through his cinema. In the British documentary *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*, the American filmmaker places Minnelli among the

'smuggler directors', whose films combine style with a hidden subversive discourse offering a biting reflection on social issues (Scorsese and Wilson 1995). Going back to *Brigadoon*, a compact work on the human condition in modern societies emerges, as Minnelli depicts the whole world as a prison and the individual as unable to be truly free, having to forsake life in order to live. Tommy's failure to carry on with his quotidian life, seeking temporal-spatial erasure, culminates in the choice of death over life.

His re-entering the strange village at the end of the film is strikingly reminiscent of Michel (Gérard Philipe) opening the forbidden door to rejoin his beloved, Juliette (Suzanne Cloutier), in the Land of Oblivion in Marcel Carné's *Juliette ou la clef des songes* (1951). In this Brigadoon-like realm, all the villagers have lost their memory and are consequently protected from the corruptive perils of remembering. Michel first accesses *le pays de l'oubli* in a dream while spending the night in prison for stealing from his employer in order to take the titular Juliette, a customer and the woman he is in love with, on a romantic weekend. In Oblivion, however, Juliette does not remember Michel and ends up marrying someone else. When Michel awakes to find his love is also unrequited outside the dream, he decides that the only pathway to happiness

is eternal forgetting. The crossing of the final threshold at the end of Carné's film is more overtly telling of suicide than *Brigadoon*'s, in that the street door Michel opens and which would supposedly take him back to the amnesic, disenchanted village and to Juliette bears the ominous warning: 'No trespassing. Danger'. The narrative overlap with the ending



of *Brigadoon* is nevertheless too obvious not to consider the darker imagery and underlying message of a film that, for all its wonders, 'offers as a solution, a disappearance' (Douchet 2004: 60). Blessings and curses, happiness and tragedy, appear as the two sides of the same coin. Tone likewise connects the endings of the two films. *Juliette*'s final scene, in which Michel's face is gradually bathed in intense white light as he carefully opens the door, tonally matches the ending of *Brigadoon*. The French director hides the world beyond the door, reducing it to light and to Juliette's acousmatic voice whispering to Michel. All the while, Carné focuses the viewer's attention on the hero's face by framing it in a tight close-up that annuls the surrounding space. Minnelli, in turn, refuses the emotional engagement which the prototypical close-up of the protagonist couple's embrace would elicit, opting instead for an unusual point of view – an extreme long shot that reduces *Brigadoon* to mist and the reunited couple to uncanny expressionist figures, moving slowly and theatrically towards each

other, arms outstretched. Tommy's return to Scotland means that, like Michel, he has chosen to alienate himself forever from society and renounce his everyday world so that he can remain, literally, with the girl of his dreams. In this sense, narrative resolution lies in the imagination or, more accurately, in death.

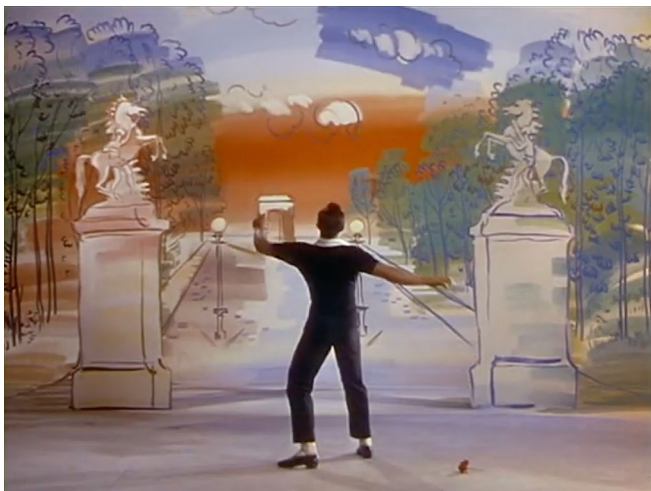


The Minnellian *homo aestheticus*

Referring to the work of Howard Hawks, Peter Wollen writes that his films exhibit the same thematic preoccupations, motifs, style, and tempo. He believes that we can therefore identify 'a *homo hawksianus*, the protagonist of Hawksian values in the problematic Hawksian world' (1969: 81). Drawing on Wollen, I suggest that in Minnelli's films we can identify a *homo minnellianus* – a *homo aestheticus* possessed of an idea, an obsession, and invariably haunted by the lack of something, by an imposing void, an overwhelming absence. Tommy, Ginny, and Emma Bovary, for instance, exemplify the fateful hold such obsessive yearnings can have on one's mind and actions. One way of coping is via creativity, a point underscored by Minnelli's prolific portrayal of artists across genres: eighteen of his thirty-four films centre on painters, writers, actors, filmmakers, and designers who find in art a way to convey their utopian longings and, in the process, reveal their true selves, hidden behind workaday routine. Whenever the script does not feature characters directly associated with the arts, Minnelli builds them so as to disclose a prominent and potentially dangerous sensitivity that inevitably collides with their mundane lives.

Minnelli's heroes are profoundly dissatisfied with middle-class life and bourgeois values, manifesting 'a need to reject all forms of society' (Douchet 2004: 59). Different iterations of this desire recur in Minnelli's cinema. As in *Brigadoon*, disappearance from the community is Manuela's answer to her dreary reality in *The Pirate*, which offers masquerading as the solution for happiness. She takes refuge in the fantastic world of the theatre company, 'choos[ing] the imaginary over reality' and 'enchant[ing] the real by travesty or ignoring it' (d'Almones 2005: 101), as epitomised in the 'Be a Clown' number – that joyous ode to make-believe – that closes the film. *The Sandpiper* (1965), in turn, centres on a mother and son voluntarily alienated from urban life in order to protect themselves from it. A typical form of disappearance, then, concerns the characters' hopeless immersion in the cinematic dream-image and their imperative need to live *within* that image, forever denying reality.⁴ In this respect, and in keeping with their artistic proclivities, Minnellian protagonists are close to

Marguerite Yourcenar's Wang-Fô (from *Oriental Tales*, 1938), the painter who saves himself by disappearing into the depths of his picture. This happens figuratively in *Brigadoon* and literally in *An American in Paris* (1951), in which Jerry (Gene Kelly) in a daydreaming episode, enters one of his drawings. Emerging in sharp contrast to the oneiric, the public sphere (the space where one's décor meets the décors of others) is presented as fundamentally futile, damaged, and corrupted. The world of actuality lacks the wondrous textures and hues



of the utopia: the dream has depth, while the real 'is mere appearance' (Bourget 2009: 77–78).

The inability or unwillingness to conform to the social domain determines the characters' perseverance never to give up their dreams. In *Some Came Running*, it is Ginny's unwavering ability to dream, paired with a captivatingly pathetic naïveté, that allows her to transcend social barriers and prompts her to seek out Miss French. 'I was so scared! You don't know how scared I was, 'cause I know you could take him away from me if you want to', she admits. But she fails to notice the immense gap separating her dream from Miss French's. This blindness is the reason Minnellian characters stand out as representatives of a particular type of paroxysm of existence: they are always too much and pursue their aspirations recklessly, their actions marked by an overwhelming excess which bestows upon them a kind of supernatural aura. Whether they are suffering or celebrating, they appear to be 'a little more than human beings actually are, or can be' (Galling 1964: 133). Throughout *Some Came Running*, the camera discloses Ginny's impossibly beguiling gullibility and blatant displacement, alternately placing her at the margins of the frame (and the community) or preventing her from blending



to her surroundings as she navigates the unyielding boundaries between Dave's middle-class life and her lower-class background. Significantly, Dave fails to notice her on different occasions. Unsurprisingly, their sudden wedding is intensely dystopian, with every ritual broken or subverted, from vows left unsaid to Ginny's final gesture of love – taking a bullet meant for Dave – an act which appears less heroic than misguided. Her death in her white bridal dress in the middle of a busy fairground at night discloses a bitterly sarcastic commentary on the impossibility of love. Ginny's sacrifice exposes as well conservative middle-class morality, which crushes the dynamic forces that challenge established conventions and institutions, including marriage. Ginny's campy, colourful presence breathes life into the film, and yet – Minnelli's camera tells us – there is no space for her to exist, her divergence from the norm too evident, too distracting, too excessive.

Ginny's untimely death at the film's denouement calls attention to another singularity of Minnelli's cinema: where available, the conservative, formulaic 'happy ending' is only happy insofar as it represents a compromise between utopia and its actual possibilities in the real world. This compromise can be perceived even in Minnelli's most optimistic musicals.



An American in Paris provides a striking example of a highly unlikely happy finale. Most of the film, in fact, is about mismatches with 'only a small portion of the text [...] dedicated to [...] the Kelly / Caron romance' (Altman 2010: 20–21). Moreover, the vibrant final ballet does not resolve narrative problems because Jerry does not get the girl by the end of the dance. It is a dance of loss – a dream of loss – and the film



ends on a somewhat forced note. The portentous ballet, which sees the progressive shift of utopia into its opposite, is thus overtly at odds with classical Hollywood musical comedies, and the abrupt delivery of the customary happy ending, with a close-up of the protagonist couple's passionate embrace filling the screen, is thoroughly rushed – an 'emergency exit', in Douglas Sirk's phrase (Wood 2003: 62). The term aptly defines a clichéd epilogue, 'an imposed conclusion that arrives [...] with little more than coincidental narrative motivation, and whose major role is to mask the fissures of the unresolved problem text that has preceded it' (Bruzzi 2012: 9). The implausibility of the final twist does seem like an attempt at masking diegetic 'fissures'. Furthermore, paired with the fact that it quickly follows Jerry's rhythmic and chromatic confabulations to the chords of Gershwin's tone poem, it raises the question of whether he ever awoke from his daydream. Even *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) ends with the feeling that St. Louis might not be as utopian as the Technicolor characters paint it.

After much anxiety around a promotion that would involve moving the whole family to New York, Lon Smith (Leon Ames) at long last decides to pass on the prestigious position and stay put, thus giving up his professional aspirations. His assertive 'We're gonna stay here till we rot' articulates a critique of postcard American family life and exposes the entropy that characterises the protagonists' humdrum lives,



reinforcing an ideology that regards change and modernity as a threat to proper American family values. Robin Wood notes how the film's tensions remain unresolved and describes the superficially happy ending as 'a considerable let-down' (2006: 205). Indeed, the camera consistently displays myriad subversive, uncanny references that taint the white-picket-fence image of the Smiths, from canted angles to expressionist lighting and outbursts of childhood violence. These make the happy ending, at the very least, ambivalent – if not straightforwardly satirical.

The *homo minnellianus*, we can conclude, is intrinsically defined by failure. Their systematic failure to fit in, achieve their goals, and reach a blissful realm where they can seclude themselves from oppressive communal environments vividly foregrounds the disheartening experience of 'those who feel out of kilter with their environment' (MacKinnon 2000: 44), suggesting that the utopia the characters yearn for is a 'space [that] belongs to the underprivileged' – to those who have

faced discrimination and whose voices have been ignored or silenced. In this sense, Minnelli's paradoxically dystopian utopias become political: truly living lies beyond dominant social structures and values. Utopia requires the characters to repress their individual selves in favour of a community at odds with their will and their inability to do so posits social interaction as perilous, for it may lead to the corruption and destruction of the dream. In this context, the few heroes who succeed in existing within utopia, namely Ginny and Tommy, pay the price with their lives. Utopia is never a protected realm free from the constraints of society, but rather an unsettling and menaced elsewhere-elsewhen, its peace continually disrupted. Minnelli places his heroes in an inadequate, precarious environment and fills them with an oneiric utopianism never to be fulfilled *in toto*. If, in some cases, the characters ultimately achieve happiness it is because they settle for less than what they had hoped for: contentment replaces happiness. As Flaubert's voice-off effectively sums up in *Madame Bovary*: 'One kind of dream, another kind of life.'

Minnelli's idea

Serge Daney claims that bad cineastes have no ideas and good cineastes have too many. But 'the great cineastes (especially the inventors) have just one idea' ([1983] 1986: 41). According to Deleuze, Minnelli's '*idée fixe*' is that the dream 'concerns, above all, those who do not dream' and that, by correlation, 'each of us is more or less a victim of the dream of others' ([1987] 1998: 138). Deleuze hereby highlights the trail of devastation and sorrow the dream, and the dreamer, leave in their wake. I would add an important caveat, though – that the first and most hopeless victims of the dream are the dreamers themselves. Minnelli created a cinematic universe where to kill the dream is to kill the dreamer – not the other who was caught in it. Philippe Azoury helpfully complements Deleuze's point by clarifying what Minnelli's dream is about. Given his 'genuinely depressive and wounded cinema', Azoury asks 'how the image of Vincente Minnelli as a colourful apostle of the fake, a blazing colourist, and a flamboyant mannerist has persisted for so long, like a misunderstanding', concluding that it is because 'colour and love, darkness and pain, express in his

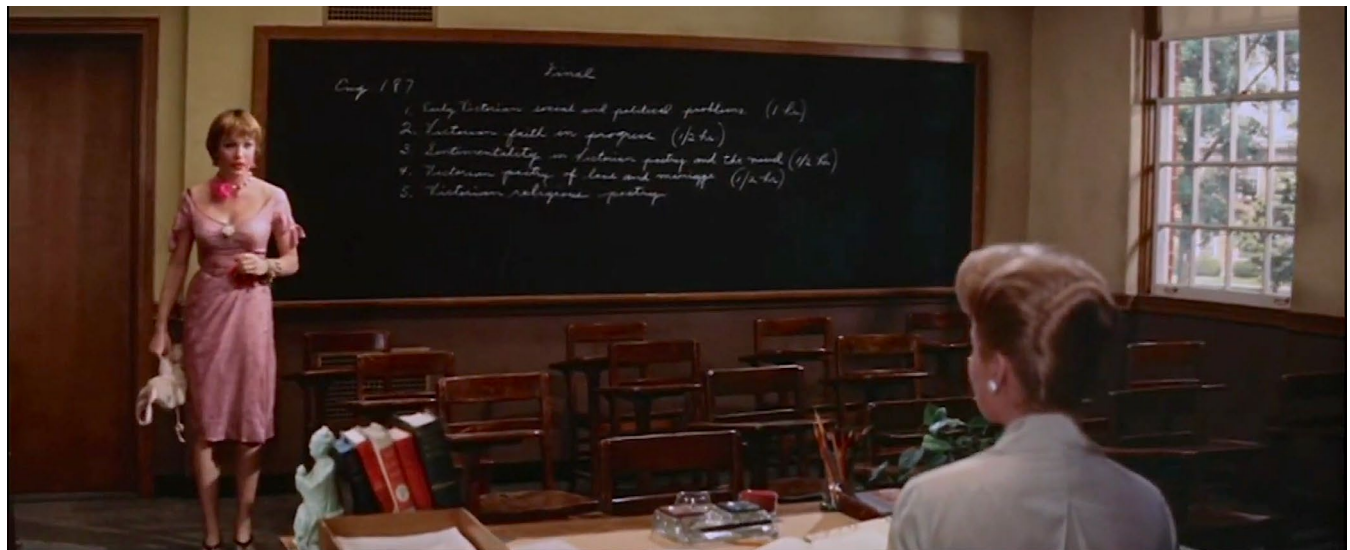
work the same idea about love as illusion' (2005). His dream, then, is about failure, about the impossibility of love outside utopia, and is therefore irreparably disenchanted. In the end, Minnelli warns us, dreams are fundamentally dangerous.

Perkins notes that '[t]he director does not have to subvert the script in order to make a recognisably personal impact' ([1972] 1986: 76). Minnelli's work attests to this. In a cinematic way, he makes the moving images speak: his films hinge on an unsettling re-conceptualisation of the role of utopianism as materialised in the mise-en-scène and in the construction of wistful misfits through décor leitmotifs. Minnelli's canon coheres in its unapologetic privileging of film style, which brings forward an intergeneric aesthetic where the décor generates meaning; it is not a mere background to the action nor used simply to stress narrative aspects: style and substance are indivisible. Paradigmatic in this regard is that strained classroom encounter between Ginny and Miss French.

As soon as Ginny intrudes upon the schoolteacher's décor and sits down, a medium close-up frames her against the empty student chairs and the lower third of the long blackboard, devoid of writing. Further emphasising her learner status is a group of pencils in a cylindrical holder to the bottom right side of the screen. Miss French, in turn, remains throughout positioned against the window looking out onto a white scholarly building and green trees. The student and the teacher are cinematically defined and opposed. When Ginny stands up to leave, the camera moves and hesitates with her, as it has since she first walked in. It reveals her nervousness, her unease in that environment, in that décor. Miss French's framing, on the other hand, is as static as she is impassive. By the end of the scene, the camera slowly pans left until the framing matches that of the beginning. Only now the position of the two women is somewhat reversed. Ginny is framed against the sentences written on the blackboard and her 'knowledge' is in this way visually placed at the same level as the teacher's. Tellingly, the latter is now sitting while Ginny is standing. The power dynamics have changed and Ginny's status has been elevated to Miss French's. Two irreconcilable décors that should never have met are put into sharp counterpoint. Ginny brings her whole world into that classroom, with a bright pink flower around her neck and a worn-out bunny-shaped

purse in her hands. As the scene unfolds, her décor increasingly haunts Miss French's and finally ends up swallowing it. 'There is absolutely nothing between Mr Hirsh and myself', she resignedly assures Ginny. Miss French is afraid to dream

and, finding herself suddenly caught in Ginny's utopia, chooses to silence her reverie. This is the reason her counter shots have no movement: Minnelli's camera always privileges the dreamer.



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¹ All texts cited from the original French and Portuguese were translated by the author.

² Minnelli's aesthetic often displays gothic overtones, a connection highlighted and discussed by Andrew Britton ([1977] 2009), Robin Wood (1979), and Edward Gallafent (1990).

³ Joe McElhaney remarks upon Minnelli's conscious use of 'restraint' and a distant camera when handling certain scenes, which denies the viewer the expected proximity to the actors, but allows for his dynamic framing to emerge, as viewers take in more nuanced movements, subtle gestures, and the décor as actively contributing to the development of the plot. See McElhaney (2003).

⁴ The topic of disappearance or erasure of the self recurs throughout Minnelli's oeuvre. As an example, he paints the annihilation of the individual by education (*Gigi*), Hollywood (*Two Weeks in Another Town*), performance (*The Pirate*), mores and morals (*Tea and Sympathy*), war (*The Clock*), politics and Nazism (*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*), work (*The Bad and the Beautiful*), society (*The Sandpiper*, *Goodbye Charlie*), mental illness (*The Cobweb*, *Lust for Life*), marriage (*Undercurrent*), time (*The Band Wagon*, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, *A Matter of Time*), capitalism (*The Long, Long Trailer*), and love (*Brigadoon*, *Some Came Running*).

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Moments of Integration: A Close Analysis of *Odds Against Tomorrow*

In this audiovisual essay, I offer a close reading of a single overlooked film: the Harry Belafonte/Robert Ryan black-and-white 'anti-buddy' movie *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Robert Wise, 1959). Though sometimes remembered as a late-cycle film noir, and as a particular favourite of French director Jean-Pierre Melville, the film hasn't received the level of critical attention enjoyed by its postwar peers.

I find *Odds Against Tomorrow* compelling not so much for its noir trappings, exciting heist sequence or final, nihilistic message about the destructiveness of racial intolerance.

Instead, I find something quietly at work in its aesthetic unfolding. Specifically, I draw attention to the way *Odds Against Tomorrow's* mise-en-scène creates a sense of overlap between different moments in the film. I trace this development starting from the film's unique opening credits sequence, which is designed around a series of transparent, overlapping spaces which momentarily come into sync near the frame's centre. Later scenes unfold in kind: spaces are revisited, traversed by opposed characters in scenes with opposing visual and dramatic designs, only for the camera to seemingly find brief moments of convergence.

In many ways, this audiovisual essay is a follow up to my earlier work (2021) on the *Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958). Where I read that film's patterned use of the two-shot, which commits to a left-right framing for the black-white protagonists until flipping it by the film's end, as a kind of spatial (and racial) desegregation, I read *Odds Against Tomorrow's* use of the camera as suggestive of the possibility of racial integration in Civil Rights Era America – one that is, like the film's credits, expressed only as a fleeting possibility.

Taking cues from V.F. Perkins' 2005 essay 'Where is the World?', I go on to read the very ending of the film not only with respect to how it activates a set of images from prior scenes, and some from different films entirely, but also with respect to how it draws us into a different kind of world, in a way that transcends the limited horizon of its characters.

Lastly, this audiovisual essay hopes to demonstrate something special about the format for the purposes of close

analysis – namely, how an audiovisual essay can give shape not only to the film we see, but to the film we experience, to that mysterious conjunction of images seen in the present, overlaid with those retrieved from our memory of the past. At times with overlapping images, at other times with disparate moments brought together in split screen and freeze frame, I attempt to conjure the sense of overlap I find in *Odds Against Tomorrow* in a way only an audiovisual essay could.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1054108095>

HENRY ROWND

Henry Rownd is Professor of Humanities at Florida SouthWestern State College. His work has appeared in *Film Criticism*, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*. He received his PhD in Art History from Stanford University.

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TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Introduction

The following dossier of audiovisual essay assignments was originally intended for *The Cine-Files*, issue 16, building on issue 15's discussions of the scholarly video essay. But as it turns out, issue 15 is the final issue of *The Cine-Files*. Though *The Cine-Files* as a standalone journal is retiring, I'm delighted to see it enjoy an 'afterlife' through a merger of sorts with *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*. I am honoured to have joined the editorial board of *Movie* and excited to imagine how the heart of *The Cine-Files* will continue to beat there. We are still imagining the possibilities, but one likely outcome will see a *Cine-Files* influence in an increased presence of *Movie's* audiovisual essay materials.

In that spirit, I am pleased to introduce the following five reflections on teaching the audiovisual essay. Each contributor was asked to contextualise and share an audiovisual essay assignment, provide student example(s), and reflect on the value of the assignment. While the intention of the dossier was more practical than contemplative, I can nonetheless see how the broad questions that oriented [The Cine-Files issue 15](#) – focusing on the 'scholarly video essay', edited by Allison de Fren and myself – continue to reverberate.

The five assignments detailed in this dossier share an appreciation for experimentation as a preliminary step to

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constructing the audiovisual essay. Three of the contributors credit the 'Middlebury method' for its emphasis on experimentation and discovery. No doubt, the ludic, open-ended experiments modelled at the Middlebury Workshop, Scholarship in Sound and Image, have shaped the discourse and practice of the academic audiovisual essay in important ways, giving scholars permission to think and work as artists before they think and work as theoreticians.

Whether or not they reference the influence of Middlebury, it's clear from all the assignments that a two-stage process – first playing with the materials and second editing and shaping those results into an argument – is a standard practice for audiovisual work in the film studies classroom. In contrast to the other four assignments which require a video essay outcome, Lého Galibert-Lainé's assignment focuses solely on the preliminary experimentation. Developed during the pandemic, Galibert-Lainé's assignment conveys an interesting twist for the film studies classroom, asking students to temporarily abandon their screens and 'interpret' their digital materials in the physical world, relying on physical artefacts – using things like paper, paint, even their own embodied performance – to represent their concerns. While the resulting analogue experiments were later to be

incorporated into a video essay, that final product is not the focus of the assignment.

Though they also begin with experiments, the other four assignments detailed here put greater emphasis on the final video essay product. Focusing on voiceover narration, Allison de Fren's assignment enlists Aldous Huxley's definition of the 'essayistic' to encourage the transition from experiment to video essay, asking students to consider how their final work might span the three registers Huxley identifies: the personal / autobiographical, the factual / concrete, and the abstract / universal. Both Shane Denson and John Gibbs share open-ended video essay assignments that build on previous Middlebury-inspired exercises, and their reflections suggest that key to their assignments' success is the early exposure to videographic experimentation. Similarly, Steve Anderson's assignment begins with material exercises, detailing a '9 film frames' experiment as a parametric strategy that will ultimately help students construct a visual argument to be elaborated in their final essay.

TRACY COX-STANTON

Tracy Cox-Stanton is Professor of Cinema Studies at Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. She founded and edited the online journal *The Cine-Files* from 2012–2020 and joined *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* as an editor in 2024. She is a video essayist and writer whose work often examines questions of cinema's sensory capacities. Her most recent essays include an introduction to *Bodies and Things: Selected Writings* by Lesley Stern (caboose, forthcoming spring 2025) and an essay on cinema and affect in *The Magician in A Companion to Ingmar Bergman* (Wiley, 2025).

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Make It Real

Context of the Assignment

Having been invited to teach several online workshops during the successive lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, I designed the following exercise as an invitation for students to leave their desktops for a moment and free their eyeballs from the visual pressure of their blue light screens. The idea emerged from my own experiments with paper printing and water projections in my video essays *Forensickness* and *A Very Long Exposure Time*. Finding myself more and more eager to find ways to escape desktop fatigue in my work routines, I wanted to design an exercise that would both perform as media analysis and allow for a discussion about the deterioration of our collective physical and mental health during this period of intensified consumption of digital media.

The Assignment

This exercise is called 'Make it Real'. It is meant for you to leave your desktop. For this exercise, I ask you to invent, and experiment with, a way to transfer or "interpret" the online material that you have chosen to research into an offline form of media. You may employ techniques that you are already

familiar with, or explore new grounds, and you can use whatever you have at home or have an easy access to: paper print, drawing, textile, painting, projections, analog animation, vocal or body performance.... Feel free to try whatever comes to your mind. You may even explore different techniques one after the other: this exercise isn't about producing a finished work, it's all about experimentation!

Examples of Student Work

Anastasia Goncharova's Make it Real video experiment:
<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=RMq0yis84>

Reflection

The exercise was introduced by a screening and discussion session, in which I presented a selection of films and video essays that I thought could inspire the students' experiments. Some of the films I showed in that context (either in full or excerpts) were, in the chronological order of their making: *Über Song of Ceylon von Basil Wright* (Harun Farocki, 1975), *Les plages d'Agnès* (Agnès Varda, 2008), *Interface 2.0* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012), *Pourquoi je vais au cinéma* (Dim, 2016), *A Date with an Enfield* (Adam Butcher, 2017), *Watching the Detectives* (Chris Kennedy, 2017), *Newsreel 63 - The Train of Shadows* (Nika Autor, 2018), *Face à face dans la nuit* (Loïc Hobi, 2019), *Trace and Crossing, ON FREAK ORLANDO* (Johannes Binotto, 2020), *Painting #9* (Persona) (Ruth Baettig, 2021).

When I first taught this assignment during a video essay course at the Hochschule Luzern (Switzerland), it was one among several other exercises that were designed to help the students investigate a given online media of their choosing. The other exercises included documented online flânerie, in-depth textual descriptions, epistolary writing, desktop performances.... The students first spent one week exploring these different approaches to videographic research, then they had another full week to produce their final video essay. The analog experiments they had produced during that 'Make It Real' exercise didn't have to be implemented into their final video, unless they chose to. Many of these experiments haven't therefore been documented digitally.

I have since assigned this exercise in other courses, at the Merz Akademie in Stuttgart (Germany), the California Institute of the Arts (USA) and the École des *Beaux-Arts de Marseille* (France), with bachelor as well as master students, as a solo or as a group exercise. All in all, the range of media and techniques that I have seen students explore as a response to this exercise has been as varied as I had hoped. I saw them re-enact their chosen media with their bodies and voices; build up lightning or projection installations in their home spaces; visit outdoor environments that resembled the spaces depicted in their media of study; make interactive objects with paper, cardboards, collages....

The students who decided to implement the results of this exercise into their final videographic project then had to reflect on how to document their analog experiments in the form of an online video. The exercise then became an analog detour in the journey that led from the digital media they had chosen to research, to their final digital video. This is the case in the video published as a companion piece to this article, which is the final project made by Anastasiia Goncharova during a one week workshop conducted at the California Institute of the Arts in 2020. Having chosen to investigate an internet meme that used a photo taken in 2017 during Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Vladimir Putin, in which the former is seen refusing tea offered by the latter, Anastasiia Goncharova produced an articulated paper hand, with which she attempted to reproduce Salman's hand gesture of refusal. In her final video, her own hands are shown manipulating this paper puppet, while fragments from a letter she wrote to the unknown maker of this meme (the outcome of a different videographic exercise that week) are presented within the interface of an online automated translation app. The movements of the physical, material hands onscreen are as inexact in their attempt at translating the meaning of Salman's gesture, as the online app is in its linguistic approximations.

In the feedback I received about this exercise, I noted that many students commented on the relief they had felt when asked to turn off their online devices and stay disconnected for several hours in a row. But other students conversely asked if they could twist the exercise so that they would translate the original media into another format that remained within the

realm of the digital, for instance digital drawing, animation, or computer code. I accepted these requests and was sometimes amazed by the results, but it made me wonder. Did these students suffer so little from desktop exhaustion, that they wouldn't want to seize this opportunity to look away from their screens for a few hours? Were they simply too comfortable with their digital tools that they didn't want to abandon them, even for a day or two? Did they really have no interest in non-digital techniques? This led to discussions which left me with the impression that I perhaps had as much to learn from teaching this exercise as they had making it. While they could explore their own relationship to online media and materiality, I was led to reflect on the variety of experiences that students from diverse backgrounds and geographical areas entertained with the digital environment during these pandemic times - and the many different meanings that videographic exercises can take on depending on the context in which they are assigned.

LÉHO GALIBERT-LAÎNÉ

Lého Galibert-Lainé is a French filmmaker and researcher, working as tenured Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the American University of Paris. Their video essays and desktop documentaries, which have been selected at festivals such as IFFRotterdam, IDFA and FIDMarseille, explore the intersections between cinema and online media, with a particular interest in questions related to embodied spectatorship, gestures of appropriation, processes of knowledge production and mediated memory.

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Finding Your Voice

Context of the Assignment

This assignment was given in a Video Essay course that I teach to undergraduates – from a range of different majors and with a range of skills, many without any production experience – in the Media Arts & Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles. It was the second in a series of three video essay assignments, all focused on a single film of each student's choosing, which were intended to introduce students to the practice of videographic criticism. The assignment sequencing was inspired by the 'Middlebury method,' as described by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant in *The Videographic Essay* (2019).

When teaching video essays I have found that students invariably struggle not only with finding their creative and critical voices but also with hearing their actual voices when assignments call for a voiceover. It was for this reason that I designed an assignment specifically intended to encourage experimentation with vocal performance, narration, and narrator identity / subjectivity. To help students think about the relationship between all three, we screened Chris Marker's iconic essay film, *Sans Soleil* (1983) – in which Marker's ideas are expressed via the conceit of a nameless female narrator

reading excerpts of letters from a fictional cinematographer named Sandor Krasna – followed, a week later, by Richard Misek's essay film, *Rohmer in Paris* (2013). In tandem with the latter screening, they read Richard Misek's essay, "All I have to offer is myself": The Film-Maker as Narrator', in which he describes what he calls 'the slippery brilliance of the voice-over in *San Soleil*', and then reflects on his own voiceover in *Rohmer in Paris*, whose semi-fictional approach took inspiration from Marker's film, but in which, as he admits, 'I eventually became trapped in my narrative persona' (2020: 193).

This is a wonderful essay for a course module on voice-over / narration for a number of reasons. First, it introduces Aldous Huxley's three-poled frame of reference for the essayistic – the pole of the personal and/or autobiographical, the pole of the factual and/or concrete-particular, and the pole of the abstract and/or universal – which I incorporate in the assignment. Huxley believed that the 'most richly satisfying' essays' traverse all three poles, and I have found his frame of reference a helpful starting point for discussing how to engage different registers of meaning within essayistic work. Second, Misek's account of his process in creating his voice-over, and his self-perceived missteps, model for students the importance of trial and error, an iterative process of creation, and learning from one's mistakes. Third, in his consideration of the relationship between 'the constructed identity of the narrative "I" and the actual identity of the person saying "I"' Misek engages the more foundational 'question of how to communicate thought processes in film' (2020: 190).

For inspiration in creating video essays that include Huxley's first pole, I invited students to screen sample essays from the '*Once Upon A Screen: Screen Traumas and Cinephilic Hauntings*' video essay collection published in *Issue 15 of The Cine-Files* on the Scholarly Video Essay. The collection began as an invitation from Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer to the community of scholarly video essayists to use videographic practices to 'confront the most personal, intimidating, and visceral encounters with film' experienced during childhood. While each author narrates their own story, and each narrative is in the first person, the collection as a whole provides a range of different rhetorical approaches and styles. A few even hit all of Huxley's poles, for example Kevin B. Lee's *Explosive*

Paradox' and Jessica McGoff's '*My Mulholland*'. As a way of kickstarting a discussion on the vulnerability of using one's own voice, we screen Ian Garwood's video essay '*The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism*', which examines the role of voiceover in the academic video essay, while emphasizing the dearth of female voiceovers. This is followed by Barbara Zecchi's '*Empowering the Accent: an (accented) video essay*', which examines the problematics, possibilities, and strategies of accented voices in video essays, while drawing clever connections between Hamid Naficy's conception of 'accented cinema' and the practice of videographic criticism.

The Assignment

'Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, either and thither between the essay's three poles – from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the object datum to the inner experience.' How to find a single voice that can move between these poles?

– Aldous Huxley quoted in Richard Misek's 'All I Have to Offer is Myself'

In this assignment, you will experiment with voiceover and narration while exploring the rhetorical / critical movement between at least two of three Huxley's poles – the personal / subjective, the factual / objective, the abstract / universal / theoretical – one of which **must** be the first pole (personal, subjective, or autobiographical). In other words, as part of this assignment, you are going to speak from the personal experience or subjectivity of an 'I', whether or not that 'I' is you, and place it into relationship / dialogue with your media text to draw out something beyond the personal, of practical, critical, or universal significance.

In doing so, think about the relationship between the narrator you construct and the ideas you want to express. Think about the tone: is it informal, serious, humorous, etc.? Think about the vocal performance, including affect, pacing, inflection, etc. Think about the inscription of subjectivity (who is the narrator?). Think about the mode of address and the kind

of narrator / spectator relationship being set up (is the viewer being addressed as an audience member, a student, someone with whom you are close / intimate? Is the narration in the first, second, or third person or presented as a dialogue between two or more people?). Think about the narrative approach: is it direct, oblique, poetic, didactic, etc.?

Constraints

- Your video can be no shorter than 3 minutes and no longer than 5 minutes.
- No more than 10 seconds without dialogue within the scene or VO.

In-class Workshoping

There will be two in-class critique sessions:

- For the first session, you will write and record two different opening paragraph scripts, each representing a different approach to the voiceover (that is, a different narrative approach and a different approach to vocal performance).
- For the second session, you will present a draft of your final essay and receive peer feedback.

Creator Statement

Along with your video essay, you will hand in a 500-word Creator Statement in which you discuss your approach to this assignment and creative / critical process, explaining the reasons behind the choices that you made, including your narrative script and vocal performance, as well as what you were trying to express (did you do any background research? If so, how did it inform your project?). Describe what the narrator's relationship is with you, the video maker. You should also reflect on what went worked well and what was less effective.

The following elements will contribute to your assessment on this assignment:

- The project moves between the personal / subjective pole and the factual / objective and / or the abstract / universal

/ theoretical in a creative way that draws out something of greater significance about the media text (that is, something of practical, critical, or universal import).

- The VO / Narration seems well considered in terms of tone, performance, address, and delivery and enhances what is being analysed (extra points for doing something unexpected or out of the ordinary).
- The script is well-written and works in tandem with image, sound, and editing to produce understanding.
- The project abides by directions and follows constraints.

Examples of Student Work

Ada Rosen on *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=1kXQyo2Pr>

Patrick Pritchett on *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=An1vRaYUn>

Frannie DiBona on *Tampopo* (Juzo Itami, 1985)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=BV82sk9fD>

Reflection

In completing this assignment, while most students did not experiment with vocal performance to the extent that the prompt encouraged, the assignment did, as I had hoped, help students become more comfortable with voiceover. As the examples of student work that I provide here demonstrate, many students ended up commenting not only on their experience of a particular film, but on filmic spectatorship more generally. This was a surprising pattern, as was the lyrical quality of student work, both of which were, I think, an outcome of the requirement to traverse at least two of Huxley's poles. All in all, this was a productive assignment and, happily, many students continued using their own voices and experimenting with their narrative approach in subsequent projects.

ALLISON DE FREN

Allison de Fren is a media maker and scholar whose documentaries and audiovisual essays have been screened internationally. Her work often focuses on the intersection of gender, media, and technology, as well as the integration of film/media theory and practice. Her scholarship on videographic criticism includes the chapter "From the Essay Film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular" in the anthology *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, eds. Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson (2021) and co-editing with Tracy Cox-Stanton *Cine-Files Issue 15* on the scholarly video essay (Winter 2020). She is a Professor in the Media Arts & Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

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TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Videographic Experimentation as Theme and Medium

Context of the Assignment

When discussing my pedagogical practice, I often say, innocuously enough, that ‘I teach video essays’. The simplicity of the statement, however, belies a great deal of semantic and pragmatic complexity. Context matters, of course. Sometimes my statement is made casually, such as when I am discussing with colleagues who also do videographic work as part of their teaching and scholarship, while sometimes it is quite emphatic – for example, when my assertion is made in the context of a job application or tenure file, as evidence of my ‘innovative’ teaching philosophy. More subtly, the meaning of the statement ‘I teach video essays’ is complicated internally, depending on whether emphasis is placed on the verb or the predicate of the sentence: do I mean to emphasise the object of pedagogical attention, in which case the predicate ‘video essays’ carries the (implicit if not explicit) weight of emphasis? Or do I mean to emphasise the activity of teaching, in conjunction with which I employ video essays in one way or another? As an example of the former, I teach a course called ‘The Video Essay’, where video essays (and related videographic practices) are the explicit object of instruction – the thing that everyone in the classroom is focused on learning

about and producing. But I also employ video essays in other classes, where they might serve as vehicles for discussing a variety of other topics (e.g. as a means of foregrounding formal properties of visual media or for introducing a filmmaker, genre, or theorist), or where they are offered as possible assignments students can produce in lieu of more traditional written essays and research papers (as a means of demonstrating their knowledge of and critical engagement with the actual object of attention, e.g. a filmmaker, genre, or theorist). In the latter case, arguably, I am not so much teaching *video essays* as I am *teaching* (with) video essays.

In practice, this difference makes all the difference in the world. In fact, it is not just ‘a difference that makes a difference’ as Gregory Bateson famously defined *information*, but it concerns a higher-order difference – that of the *medium* within which such differences, or pieces of information, are articulated (Bateson: 1972).¹ The choice between emphasizing the object (teaching *video essays*) or the activity (*teaching* video essays) translates into a difference between thematizing the video essay as a medium or focusing on the information expressed therein. And this has practical consequences for the way I approach and evaluate video essays in various pedagogical contexts, including the types of videographic assignments that appear on my syllabi.

When I teach my class on ‘The Video Essay’, the focus is squarely on the medium, and the assignments accordingly aim to focus attention on the *mediality* of the video essay – its particular affordances for critical and creative expression by audiovisual means. The mediality of a medium, as I understand it, concerns the relation between a material substrate (the elements or ‘stuff’ it’s made of: sounds, images, text, etc.) and the aesthetic and communicative forms that are made possible through novel combinations of those basic elements.² To attend to a medium’s mediality accordingly means to attend to a set of relations and conditions of possibility, rather than (foremost) to ‘content.’ Formal experimentation is therefore called for, and in my teaching (in this mode) this takes the form of small, modular, and parametrically constrained exercises. Here, I follow the example of my own teachers – experimental filmmaker Shambhavi Kaul, with whom I learned video editing in the context of her ‘Experimental Film and Video’

class while I was a postdoc at Duke University, and Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, whose NEH-funded ‘Scholarship in Sound & Image’ workshop I attended in its first cohort at Middlebury College. In this mode, formal constraints provide the framework for creativity, inviting students to work around more or less arbitrary restrictions (no character dialogue is to be used, for example) and requirements (re-stage the narrative from the point of view of a supporting character) and to find novel solutions – in the process focusing on the medium itself and discovering what it can do under pressure.

What these exercises teach us, to modify Spinoza’s famous interrogation of the body, is that we still do not know what a video essay can do.³ We are constantly surprised at what the medium is capable of, what unknown capacities it reveals when subjected to discipline and constraint. This leads me, finally, to the question I have been building toward since the outset: When, under what circumstances, is it justified to do away with these constraints? Having discovered that the medium can do more than I could ever myself imagine, there is a temptation to refrain from disciplining it, from locking it down or artificially constricting imagination and experimentation on a still evolving form. When is a more open-ended form of experimentation called for?

One reasonable answer is that constraint-free experimentation is best reserved for *after* one has completed a rigorous regimen of parametric exercises. But, recalling my initial distinction between ‘teaching *video essays*’ and ‘*teaching* (with) video essays,’ is it ever justified to assign students the task, simply, of making a video essay about *x*, where *x* is a topic covered in an arbitrary class, and where one cannot assume students’ prior experience with making (or even studying) video essays? Is this not to betray everything I have said about mediality and simply to revert to ‘content’? Not, I contend, if *x* is a topic that emerges out of a careful consideration of mediality, in which case the free-form ‘video essay about *x*’ becomes every bit as self-reflexive as the constraint-driven exercise, and experimentation becomes both theme and medium of the video essay.

What this means, however, is that an open-ended video essay assignment will only make sense under highly constrained conditions. In my own teaching, these conditions

are met only rarely, for example in my ‘Media and Mediums’ class (basically, an introduction to media theory) and in my advanced seminar on ‘Post-Cinema.’ In the former, I allow students to submit a video essay (or other ‘critical media project’) in lieu of a research paper on a topic of their choice, with the understanding that it must demonstrate a critical engagement with (some of) the media-theoretical approaches discussed in class (which includes a significant emphasis on phenomenological and aesthetic approaches to visual and other media ranging from spoken and written language to photography, film, the telegraph, and computation). I require students to discuss their plans early on with me, so that I can intervene and offer guidance. But I don’t give detailed instructions up front, so as not to restrict their experimentation with both form and content.

The Assignment

‘If, in lieu of one of your papers, you plan to produce a video essay or other critical media project (e.g. podcast, website, app, or other type of project that engages critically with the themes and ideas of the course), you will need to outline your idea in writing and receive prior approval from the instructor. The project itself should be accompanied by a short, written statement outlining the significance and critical potential of the project with respect to the course and the theories and approaches we have explored.’

Examples of student work

1. [Frank No. Too](#) (2019) by Robert Abraham; created for ‘Introduction to Media’
2. [Slowness and Slow Cinema](#) (2017–2018) by Spencer Slovic; created for ‘Post-Cinema’ and subsequently published in [Film Matters](#).
3. [Frames](#) (2019) by Alex H. Rafi; created for ‘Post-Cinema’

Reflection

Sometimes, as in these varied examples, the experiment of the free-form video essay assignment goes very well. Other times,

it doesn’t. When it does, I feel like I learn as much as the student about the mediality of the video essay (as genre, as form, as medium), especially when this is self-reflexively also the theme of the piece, or at least of the experimental effort and process that gave rise to it.

Open-ended experimentation has worked well in ‘Media and Mediums’ and in ‘Post-Cinema.’ In the latter, we do in fact look at and discuss video essays throughout the course, since both popular and scholarly videographic criticism emerges alongside, and is in some ways inseparable from, the changes in visual forms and the underlying technologies of digital images – the overt topic of the class. Theoretical approaches to these transformations need, I believe, to be informed by some familiarity with the practical realities – techniques and technologies – that give rise to them. Weekly videographic exercises, relatively unconstrained save for the condition that they reflect on our readings and/or screenings, thus promote an awareness of post-cinematic mediality through hands on experimentation with non-linear digital editing platforms and related technologies. A balance between subject matter and form, or theme and medium, is therefore quasi built-in, and an open-ended final assignment builds naturally upon this ongoing self-reflexive theory-practice. Interestingly, though, I have found that my class dedicated to ‘The Video Essay’ requires a great deal more structure in the assignments – perhaps because we are focused on forms more than a shared subject matter. (Recent iterations of the course focus particularly on desktop videos focused on ‘troublesome topics’ related to online life – an idea I borrow from, and have collaborated on with, Allison de Fren. These are highly scaffolded assignments with milestones and components completed over the course of up to seven weeks.)

As the above examples of student work attest, removing constraints for open-ended videographic experimentation works best when medial experimentation is itself the theme, when the thematic context becomes its own constraint and mediality becomes the object of theoretical, practical, aesthetic, and technological investigation.

SHANE DENSON

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¹ In my book *Postnaturalism*, I expand on Bateson’s formula and argue that media can be understood as ‘the differences that make the differences that make a difference.’ 2014: 314.

² I am borrowing here from Niklas Luhmann, who defines mediality as ‘the operative deployment of the difference of medial substrate and form’ (1997: 195, my translation).

³ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, proposition 2. See also Deleuze 1990: 217–234.

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

A Fully-fledged Essay

Context of the assignment

This assignment is from a final year undergraduate module – or course, in American parlance – which I have delivered eight times in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. The assignment in question is the second assessment point on Videographic Criticism: prior to this, the students have completed four exercises inspired by the Middlebury model, from which they selected one – which they could improve in the light of class discussion – to submit for the first assessment.

The second assessment is a fully-fledged essay. After the tight parameters of the exercises, the guidance for the essay is deliberately broad, inviting a range of forms of essay-making and welcoming submissions of varying duration ('between three and ten minutes'), as appropriate to the approach employed. As well as engaging with the variety of work in the contemporary videographic field, the students' work is supported by guided peer feedback, both on their developing ideas and on a screening of work in progress. The submission deadline, and the final feedback session, are scheduled after the vacation that follows the term / semester in which most of the module is delivered, enabling maximum time for

developing what represents a significant piece of work.

The assignment also offers the alternative of a written essay for anyone who might have decided videographic work wasn't for them, though this has rarely been taken up. The module, and the assignment, found a natural home in the context of a set of degree programmes that have been carefully designed over many years to bring practice and critical / theoretical / historical thinking together, and elements of the brief draw on approaches to documenting practice and conducting close analysis that characterise other parts of the student experience.

The Assignment

FT3VC: Assessment 2: You should submit EITHER **A: an audiovisual essay** (with or without accompanying reflective documentation) OR **B: a written essay**.

A: Audiovisual essay

- The essay should be between three and ten minutes long.
- It does not have to take a particular form (the module has been deliberately designed to enable you to encounter a wide range of videographic approaches). It should contain analysis / an argument (though this does not have to be in the form of a voice-over).
- You also have the **option** of submitting an accompanying reflective written statement. Some of you will feel that your audiovisual essay speaks for itself. Others may wish to write an accompanying document (of up to 1500 words) which provides:
 - » An examination of the critical issues which inform the project
 - » A reflection on your critical and creative decision-making
 - » An analysis of one moment in the audiovisual essay to demonstrate the complexity of its argument, analysis, form and mode of address.

[If you are keen to create a video essay which explores **a topic** in film / television criticism, theory or history **across more**

than one film / television programme, this is possible but you must discuss your idea with John and have it approved before starting work on the project. For the most part, this question imagines that you will work on the film / programme you have been working with so far on the module.]

B: Written essay (4000 words)

Analyse a sequence from the film / television programme you have been working on in the module, making clear how decisions shape the sequence's effects, and discuss the relationship between the sequence and the film / episode as a whole.

Your essay should also include reflection on what you have learned about your film / programme as a result of creating the series of videographic exercises, and on how videographic approaches may have shaped your analysis and approach. What has videographic criticism taught you about close analysis?

Reflection

Students have responded to the flexibility of the assignment with a wide range of work, representing different points on the continuum between the explanatory and the poetic. This selection features two audiovisual essays which are more obviously poetic, and one which is emphatically explanatory while at the same time formally highly sophisticated:

- [Temporal Ghosts](#) by Enrique Saunders. This version of Enrique's essay was published in Tecmerin, following peer review and a little bit of reworking, though it is very similar to the version submitted on the module in 2018/19. (You can also see his exceptional videographic epigraph, submitted for assessment 1, [here](#).)
- [Hannibal – A Serial Art Exhibition](#) by Dara Bolaji. Dara's degree was combined honours in Art and Theatre, and she imaginatively drew on the form of the blog which Art students at Reading produce to support their studio projects and demonstrate the research that has underpinned their exhibited work. Further to her credit, Dara completed this project during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020.

- [The Act of Looking in Moonrise Kingdom](#) by Ellen Francis: Ellen's 2019 essay, representing the explanatory end of the continuum, is highly inventive and critically sophisticated, engaging in varied formal play highly appropriate to the subject and integral to the expression of its ideas.

Over several iterations of the module, I made various improvements: inflecting the weighting for each assessment point, and developing specific marking descriptors for both audiovisual essays and for the exercises. Of greatest relevance here, the first time the module was delivered everyone had to submit an accompanying written statement — thereafter, it became optional. This change was implemented because most of the work submitted had very effectively made its arguments without any need for supporting discussion. But it was also because the students had put so much energy into producing their arguments videographically that they had little motivation for producing a complementary written piece. The optional written statement remains for the benefit of anyone wishing to establish the formal or conceptual complexity of what they have achieved, or for makers working in the poetic traditions of the field where modes of address can be more akin to an artwork, and where further reflection or analysis might therefore be appropriate.

The module has been extremely well received by the students, and they have produced some wonderful work – choosing only three examples was a challenge. If one constructive criticism has recurred in end-of-module feedback, it has been to suggest that the encounter with videographic criticism should happen earlier in the degree programme, as students wished to deploy the skills the module helped them to develop in other parts of their studies. My colleagues and I responded to this when updating our portfolio and integrated the exercises into a module available to all students as they start the second year of their degree; this equips more students with videographic skills, and enables them to develop audiovisual essays on modules addressing a range of topics later in the programme.

JOHN GIBBS

John Gibbs is Professor of Film at the University of Reading. His publications include *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (2002), *Filmmakers' Choices* (2015, 2006) and, co-edited with Douglas Pye, *Style and Meaning* (2005) and *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (2017). His video essays have been published in *Alphaville*, *[in]Transition*, *Movie*, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* and *NECSUS*.

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames

Context of the Assignment

In 'Videographic Scholarship and/as Digital Humanities,' my contribution to issue 15 of *The Cine-Files*, devoted to The Scholarly Video Essay, I advocated adopting a multi-stage process of peer review for video essays that would align established post-production workflows with review strategies developed for evaluating and revising digital humanities projects. This argument was informed by my recent experience teaching a graduate course in Videographic Scholarship in the UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television, and in particular by the first assignment in the class titled 'Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames,' in which students present a visual prototype of their intended argument and receive feedback prior to beginning the writing or editing stages of their videos.

The Videographic Scholarship course was originally conceived as a graduate seminar limited to students in the MA or PhD programs in Cinema and Media Studies (CMS). Students from the MFA filmmaking program were not allowed to enroll because – as my initial logic had it – I didn't want my CMS students to feel intimidated if they still needed to acquire basic technical skills. I was also suspicious of MFA students who might be simply trying to fulfill their

'CMS requirement' by avoiding the work of critical writing required by virtually every other CMS graduate seminar. However, when the COVID pandemic drove classes online in Spring 2020, I expanded my Videographic Scholarship class to embrace both MFA and MA/PhD students for the first time. My initial trepidation turned out to be unfounded. The fundamentally hybrid nature of the video essay form allowed students with different skills and critical sensibilities to learn from each other in ways I hadn't observed before.

The assignment, 'Encoding a Visual Argument: 9 Film Frames,' has two parts. First, students are asked to read Stuart Hall's influential 1973 essay, 'Encoding/Decoding,' which marked an intervention in communication theory of the 1970s, arguing for a more nuanced and culturally embedded understanding of the way messages are sent and received in popular culture. In the essay, Hall presents three possible modes of 'decoded' response to ideological meanings that are 'encoded' into cultural texts such as television programs. These three modes – dominant, negotiated, oppositional – depend on the extent to which a viewer shares the cultural values, identity or experiences of the creator. In part, this

exercise is designed to underscore the challenges of conveying an intended message through visual means, but also to encourage sensitivity to diverse identities and perspectives of viewers. I find that Hall's essay is especially useful for students who have been 'correctly' trained in the critical vernacular of our field. Codified modes of expression, academically appropriate vocabulary, and recognizable theoretical models are designed, in part, to ensure the legibility and consistency of a written argument. By turning Hall's essay on the scholarly apparatus itself and reminding students of the potential for counter-readings – for example, queering – this essay helps students understand that their own work, especially when realised in the less rigidly codified form of videographic scholarship, may be met with resistant or negotiated readings among viewers.

To illustrate this principle, I use a sample 9-frame image grid from the 2013 feature film *The Lone Ranger* directed by Gore Verbinski. The image (Fig. 1) is deliberately ambiguous, presenting 9 frames from the film that all involve Native American iconography. Most images feature the film's co-lead actor, Johnny Depp, whose casting was criticised as



Fig. 1: A sample image grid from *The Lone Ranger* (Gore Verbinski, 2013) is used to illustrate the possibility of multiple, decoded meanings.

an example of ‘red-face’, in which a white actor performs as a Native American. The discourse around this case is complex and varied and I find that students bring a wide range of prior knowledge – as well as the kind of multiple subject positions and experiences emphasised by Hall – to both this film in particular and issues of cultural appropriation in general. As a result, students’ ‘decodings’ are often multiple and contradictory, with some perceiving a pointed critique of the genocide of Native Americans rarely seen in Hollywood and others finding a reprehensible perpetuation of stereotypes related to indigenous cultures.

For the second stage, students are asked to explore the website [9 Film Frames](https://9filmframes.tumblr.com) on their own and given one week to select a film/TV show on which to base their own collage. Students are asked to consider this not as a ‘project’ but as a kind of rapid prototype designed to identify strengths or weaknesses of an initial concept with minimal investment of time and technical effort. Completed image grids are presented the following week (without words) and the class collectively attempts to decode the intended meaning. In the course of this process, students may be made aware of the strengths or weaknesses of their intended argument, as well as any problematic issues or alternative readings. Students are encouraged to build on this exercise and the feedback they receive when conceiving their final video essay, but they are not required to stay with the same topic. Indeed, it is not infrequent, following this exercise, for students either to abandon their original topic altogether or significantly alter their project concept. In this case, students have the option of presenting an additional ‘prototype’ image grid or moving directly to work on their final project.

With just 10 weeks for the class, it is imperative to get students started quickly, and in practical terms, thinking about their final projects. Although expectations vary depending on students’ skill levels and topics, the basic deliverable of the class is a completed video essay (final picture edit with basic sound mix), usually 5–10 minutes in length, that presents an argument or analysis that would be recognizable in a graduate seminar in Cinema & Media Studies (CMS). Because the course is offered in CMS and opportunities to pursue more poetic or experimental forms of media making exist

in the Production MFA program, students in this class are encouraged to pursue more conventionally ‘scholarly’ goals – particularly those that take advantage of the unique affordances of the videographic form. No specific formal strategies are prescribed (voice-over, text, etc.) but a full range of historical and contemporary examples of videographic scholarship are presented in the screening portion of the class, accompanied by discussions that focus on what type of critical objective each formal strategy most effectively supports.

The Assignment

1. Read Stuart Hall’s essay, ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1973) and explore a variety of image grids found on the fan site *9 Film Frames*: <https://9filmframes.tumblr.com>.
2. Select a film or films (TV show or shows) and create an image grid modeled on *9 Film Frames* that expresses an argument or interpretation that will serve as a conceptual prototype for your final video essay. Think about ways to distill and clarify your intended argument without using words. What is your message? Who are you trying to reach? Assignments will be presented in class next week and we will attempt to decode your intended meaning.



Fig. 2: Sarah Nixon’s 9 Film Frames assignment based on Arnold’s *Fish Tank* (2009) highlights the use of third person perspective.

Reflection

Here are what I view as the advantages and disadvantages of this exercise:

Advantages

- Compels students to distill their argument to a readily communicable message.
- Erodes the dependence on text that some students bring to the class.
- Establishes a foundation for close visual analysis.
- Underscores the importance of cultural context and multiple viewpoints.
- Sharpens students’ attention to using media as evidence (rather than illustration) in support of a specific argument.

Disadvantages

- May disproportionately support arguments that highlight the formal properties of still frames (e.g., cinematography or production design).
- May inhibit students from pursuing abstract or theoretical topics that are not clearly visible in a film’s mise-en-scène.
- May steer students away from topics that require a temporal dimension, such as sound, editing, performance, etc.
- Starting with a fan website may encourage cinephilic celebrations of styles, genres or auteurs over critical analysis.

An example from my Videographic Scholarship class that shows how this exercise led to an effective video essay is Sarah Nixon’s treatment of *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009). In the 9 Film Frames exercise shown here (Fig. 2), Nixon selects numerous scenes in which the film’s protagonist is photographed from behind with an OTS (over-the-shoulder) framing that emphasises the distance of the character from the action of the scene. Because of the uniformity of the frames selected, the class had no trouble decoding the intended meaning. The grid was recognisable as being about how cinematography was used to depict a character and her (isolated, detached) relation to the world. Comparisons were made to the cinematography of *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and the



Fig. 3: Moving beyond the visual motif of over-the-shoulder shots, Sarah Nixon's video essay expanded to highlight instances of visual iconography for loneliness and isolation.

visual perspective of third-person video games, both of which were thought to encourage viewers to identify directly with the subjective experience of the character; however, it was also noted that the video game aesthetic, which was used to deliberate effect by Van Sant to create a not-so-subtle association between video games and violence, was not an intended aspect of this film.

In her final video essay [[link: 7:27](#)], Nixon sets up the basic context of the film within Arnold's body of work, stating, 'In this video essay we will dive into how Arnold uses cinematography techniques to communicate isolation and loneliness.' As the essay unfolds, Nixon analyzes multiple examples of the OTS shot and then shifts to discussion of a variety of symbolic, performative and narrative images (Fig. 3) that differently underscore themes of loneliness and isolation. Nixon also makes effective use of still frames, repetition and fast motion to provide context and opportunities for close analysis. In the end, this assignment appears to have served its purpose, helping the student refine the legibility of her intended argument and also to recognise the benefit of expanding beyond her initial concept. While the assignment may have helped to avoid an unintended association (a kind of negotiated reading) with 3rd person POV video games, it also allowed – and may have

encouraged – the analysis to remain within the domain of formalism, with the ultimate argument being essentially an appreciation of the effective use of the craft of cinematography in Arnold's film.

For future iterations of the class, this example suggests a couple of possible modifications to the 9 Film Frames assignment. Rather than privileging 'successful' communication (a dominant reading), perhaps students should be asked to imagine their own instances of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings within their chosen text. Alternatively, students could be challenged to create an image grid that explores potential complexities or contradictions arising from the tension between what is visible in the frame and what cannot be shown. Another variation might allow students to introduce an element of sound or text intended to reinforce (or complicate?) the intended meaning of their image grid. Ultimately, the value of this assignment may derive less from the specifics of the prompt and more from the use of rapid, conceptual prototyping to elicit early and multiple cycles of feedback and revision.

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AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

A Tale of Two Desktops: The First Czech Films in Parallel Worlds

What kind of object is a digitised analogue film? The so-called 'digital surrogates', or 'digital reproductions of pre-existing works' (Cameron 2021: 4), are infiltrating the online space in increasing numbers and higher and higher picture quality. Despite that, surprisingly little effort has been made to theorise these 'surrogates' as full-fledged material, historical, and aesthetic artefacts. Archivists and historians judge them according to their fidelity to the analogue originals (Fossati 2018), while digital media scholars see them as relatively homogenous and replaceable fragments surrendering to the logic of big data and algorithmic patterns (Parikka and Dvořák 2021). Can a practice-based audiovisual approach give these artefacts proper space – one that would account for their historically determined mixture of photochemical and digital elements while also emphasising their potential for change and variation?

Our audiovisual essay focuses on the earliest Czech films, shot between 1898 and 1911 by Jan Kříženecký and recently digitised by the National Film Archive in Prague. The NFA team led by Jeanne Pommeau aimed to use digital technology not to retouch or (over)stabilise the films but to approximate the current state of the preserved materials (Pommeau and Anger 2019). Thanks to this non-intrusive approach, we can

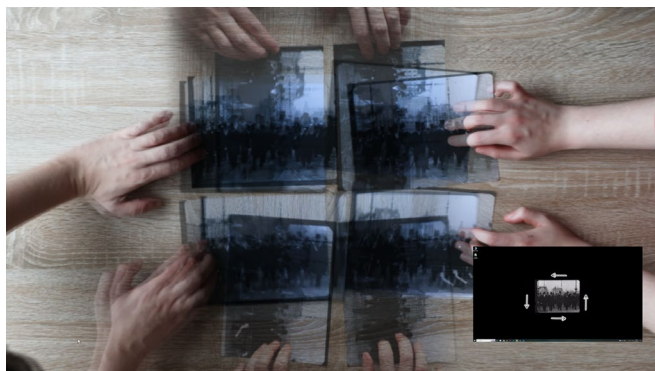


observe physical deformations that have appeared in the films due to ageing or technological dispositions of the equipment obtained from the Lumière brothers (nitrate prints and negatives and the Cinématographe apparatus). The digitised artefacts thus showcase both the original features of photochemical technology and the new potentialities of digital tools to make these features more visible – especially at the level of the individual frames – and distributable across a multitude of online platforms and software interfaces. But how can we take advantage of this disjointed existence to analyse the artefacts' aesthetic effects, or more precisely, the moments when material traces and gestures produce 'weird shapes' in the figurative image (Anger 2024)?

To examine the artefacts within the domains of their actual and potential circulation, we have employed a 'desktop documentary' format, which enables scholars to simulate the experience of browsing through the online landscape by

screen-capturing the computer or smartphone desktop (Kiss 2021; Anger and Lee 2023). Further, we 'doubled' this interface by orchestrating parallel operations with the film frames on a wooden desk (Binotto 2023). This doubling reflects the





fact that the seemingly immaterial digital ‘surrogates’ always have the capacity to re-enter the world outside the screen and again become physical and haptic in a traditional sense – in this case, via a printer. The two-desktop scheme then serves to investigate three of Kříženecký’s films – *Grand Consecration of the Emperor Franz I Bridge* (Slavnostní vysvěcení mostu císaře Františka I., 1901), *The First Day of the Spring Races of Prague* (První den jarních dostihů pražských, 1908), and *Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge* (Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu, 1908). More specifically, the analysis focuses on the aesthetic functions of distinctive material dispositions of the Lumière film equipment within the moving image – yellowish-orange colouration, marks of static electricity, and camera instability, respectively. This approach highlights the weird shapes surfacing in the films’ figurative content – a colour veil, electric horses, and a trembling black wave – underscoring the meaning-making role of accidents across both virtual and physical worlds.

As a result, our audiovisual essay marries the affordances of videographic criticism and archival practice by showcasing that a digitised analogue film is, first and foremost, a malleable and configurative object. Its aesthetic effects are not determined solely by its fidelity to the source material, nor to any artistic intent or represented ‘content’ behind it, but by its hybrid materiality, circulation, and appropriation across various spaces and media. A self-reflexive approach that foregrounds the subject-object dynamics of analysing moving images and sounds in today’s (post)digital reality (Denson



2019), combined with an understanding of the physical properties of film, video, and digital materials and apparatuses, can help us better grasp the unfinished character of archival audiovisual artefacts. Instead of being mere ruins of the past, ephemeral fragments like Kříženecký’s films reveal themselves as always-already open to speculative, yet materially grounded, reimagination.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
<https://youtu.be/uZ629gTCTDE>

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JIŘÍ ANGER, VERONIKA HANÁKOVÁ AND JIŘÍ ŽÁK

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Anger is the author of two monographs, two edited volumes, and numerous articles and videos in journals such as *Screen NECSUS*, *Film-Philosophy*, *The Moving Image*, *[in]Transition*, or *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. For the article ‘Trembling Meaning: Camera Instability and Gilbert Simondon’s Transduction in Czech Archival Film’, he won the *Film-Philosophy* Annual Article Award 2022. His most recent books are *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (Bloomsbury, Thinking Media series, 2024) and an edited volume on the digitization of the earliest Czech films at the National Film Archive in Prague (*Digitální Kříženecký: Nový život prvních českých filmů*; NFA, 2023).

VERONIKA HANÁKOVÁ

Veronika Hanáková focuses on the materiality, memory, and preservation of digital images and artefacts, particularly DVD features and interfaces. She is part of a grant project called Grassroots of Digital Europe: from Historic to Contemporary Cultures of Creative Computing. She has published articles and videos in journals such as *NECSUS*, *[in]Transition*, *Illuminace*, or *Tecmerin*. She is a guest editor of a special issue 'Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media' for *Illuminace* (no. 2/2024). Together with Jiří Anger, she curates the Audiovisual Essay section at the Marienbad Film Festival.

JIŘÍ ŽÁK

Jiří Žák is an artist based in Prague. In his audiovisual works, he often combines documentary, staged, and performative strategies to explore topics related to contemporary visual culture, local history, and postcolonial world order. He addresses the identity of post-communist countries and its deconstruction through non-western perspectives. Žák has researched the issue of Czech and Czechoslovak arms export to the Arabic-speaking countries on a long-term basis. Together with artist Matěj Pavlík, Žák prepared a chapter 'The Practice of Decolonization' within the two-year project Regeneration of Artyčok TV. Žák has presented his work at a number of independent galleries and institutions in the Czech Republic, and also internationally, e.g. at the Kiev Biennale 2021, the Warsaw Biennial 2018, Budapest Gallery or Biennale Matter of Art Prague 2020. He was part of Berlinale Talents 2024. He is a co-laureate of Jindřich Chalupecký Award 2020. In 2015, he became a holder of the EXIT Award. Besides his work for Artyčok TV, he teaches at Prague City University and The Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. Currently, he is a PhD student at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Brno University of Technology.

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AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

Making Fiction Flow

Drawing on audio archive materials generated for the 'Women's Work in British Film and Television 1933–1989' project, the videographic essay *Making Fiction Flow* makes visible and audible the work of script supervisor Penny Eyles. An interviewee for the project, Penny is one of the many women in below-the-line roles whose creative contribution to film production has been under-appreciated. This video is the result of a sustained and ongoing feminist conversation between film historian Melanie Bell, principal investigator on the 'Women's Work' project, and the film scholar and audiovisual essayist Catherine Grant about women's self-definitions of their labour and its representation in film history and the archive.

Source Material

Our videographic essay draws together Eyles's spoken testimony with wide-ranging moving-image extracts from British films produced between 1943 and 2012 whose continuity work and script supervision were carried out by women, including by Eyles. It is bookended by scenes from existing 'making of' footage, documenting two of the films on which she worked, and in which she features.



Eyles was interviewed by oral historian Sue Bradley in 2015 as part of the 'Women's Work' project alongside twenty-four other women in a range of production roles. The project used life story interviewing, a method which gives space for its subjects to speak at length, and with great complexity, about their personal and professional lives. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding the lives of marginalised groups and individuals whose accounts and experiences are often under-represented in, or completely absent from, official archives.

In the context of film production, oral testimony is one of the principal sources of evidence of women's work in below-the-line roles such as script supervision. This kind of work is especially vulnerable to historical loss. In the case of script supervision this is partly due to the role's function to ensure continuity across shots and scenes which, when performed successfully, is invisible to the audience. But it is also due to the gender of the workforce. A female-majority role, it represents what director Sally Potter describes as the 'invisible labour involved in cinema ... [which] [w]omen historically have usually done' and which has been under-valued in official accounts (Mayer 2009: 4). This audiovisual essay was an occasion to meet the challenge of making visible the invisible through a female-authored account of filmmaking (Williams 2013).

Video methodology

Our original plan was to use audio excerpts from several of the 'Women's Work' oral histories in our videographic collaboration. But we focused in on Eyles's account largely because of its vividness as well as for the ways in which it encapsulated many of the historical aspects of women's post-war educational and professional experiences that we wanted to revisit – and 'reactivate'. We wanted to do justice to the detail of her insights about what exactly a script supervisor does and how that appeared to be historically conceived as akin to the 'feminine' occupations of secretary, assistant and carer. As soon as we started to discuss this, and began to select from Eyles's account, memorable images from films of the period came to mind. For example, Melanie was prompted by Eyles's lively observation – that her mother would have preferred to drive generals around during the war to what she actually did: looking after her child – to recall the scene in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943) in which Deborah Kerr is chauffeur to Roger Livesey's army officer.

Our associative selection-method, conjuring narratively or informationally 'relevant' images from our mutual memory-archive of British post-war audiovisual culture, proved a very canny procedure for locating moving image material that could be utilised for our non-commercial scholarly and critical purposes, according to our understanding of Fair Dealing. In this way we aimed to avoid some of the issues that might be raised by different choices, such as using proprietary still images of actual film sets, historical personnel, or pieces of equipment, to match to Eyles's account. Our play with literal correspondence in much of our montage selection, inspired by Eyles's own playfulness and creativity, as well as by what we could draw on from the fictional figuration by British cinema and television of its production processes, generated the form the whole video eventually took. Interestingly, it also led to what appear to be some of the new findings of our work as we retrospectively reflect on this form. For example, Eyles doesn't mention *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* as a prompt for, or source of, her deeply personal family memories, but her use of that coinciding anecdote might remind us that it is



often hard to tell, in scholarly memory-work, what is first-order remembering and what is second order remembering, that is, remembering informed by previous acts of relating the world and its histories, many of which are cinematic or televisual.¹ Eyles's and our memories might thereby be found to be as much a post-cinematic and post-memory construct as phenomena of episodic memory recollection.²

The graphic use of the row of looped and separated shots in multiscreen arrangements, set beneath the full sequences playing above, emerged from Catherine's material handling and thinking through of the film scenes while she was editing

them around selected excerpts from Eyles's vocalisations of her working methods. Eyles conveyed her unique ways of seeing as a script supervisor, and the vast range of the labour involved, so richly and with such attention to multiform detail that a single screen approach to the montage seemed quite inadequate. The multiscreen arrangement, offered up as a puzzle for the viewer to visually decode, or watch comparatively if they wish, presents cinematic narrative linearity as complex simultaneity. It became the videographic *dispositif*, or device, by means of which the continuity 'girl's' difficult and creative work on the fictional flow of the film – the meticulousness of

her careful attention and of her practices of memory, timing, and noting – is virtually performed, and thus brought out of its historical and practical invisibility.³

Conclusion

Through Eyles's richly detailed spoken narrative, different aspects of the script supervisor's workday come alive, the numerous micro-decisions needed to make fiction flow, and the many protagonists involved in the process. Indeed, life story interviewing is uniquely well-positioned to bring other

people into the conversation, both work colleagues and family and friends, reminding us not only of the collaborative nature of filmmaking but how life choices – and chances – are shaped by contingent social realities. This audiovisual essay, with its performative as well as illustrative videographic *mise en scène* of Eyles's highly valuable account, stands as another building block in the gendered politics of visibility, the form itself uniquely placed to both visualise the invisible and, through the spoken word, to bring the 'texture of experience' to film history (Karpf 2015).

Watch and listen to the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1012108423>

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MELANIE BELL AND CATHERINE GRANT

MELANIE BELL

Melanie Bell is a film historian based at the University of Leeds. Her research draws together oral histories, archival records and screen "ephemera" to analyse the economic and creative contribution of women to film production through a feminist lens, opening up questions of collaboration, authorship and value. Her work has been published in *Screen*, the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and *Feminist Media Studies*, and she is the author of *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema* (2021).

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¹ Catherine had found this in making some of her earlier videographic adaptations of oral history material, for example, [Cinematic Organisms: Memories and Memorialisation](#) (2023a). This work was commissioned by the 'Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive' project, led by Annette Kuhn. See also Grant's reflection on this work and its findings [here](#).

² See Annette Kuhn (2011: 93) for discussion of oral history and memory work.

³ See Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin (2015) on Grant's frequent recourse to designing dispositifs like this in her video essays.

V.F. PERKINS

Understanding and Judging (Horror) Movies

This video essay started as a paper for the conference *Film as Film Today*, at the University of Warwick in 2018. It was one of my early attempts to develop an explicitly evaluative discussion of the horror genre. There is extensive writing that seeks to explain the appeal of horror – from Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) to Anna Bogutskaya's recently published *Feeding the Monster* (2024) – but less that attempts to distinguish more or less effective examples from the genre.

V.F. Perkins provides an approach that embraces evaluation alongside explanation. The subtitle of *Film as Film* (1972), *Understanding and Judging Movies* suggests that, for Perkins, the two activities are closely related and of near-equal importance. The original paper was partly an experiment. I wanted to see what would happen if I brought Perkins' insights 'into contact with some ostensibly un-Perkins films' and what that might mean for the evaluation of horror movies. What I found was that, while there are aspects of horror films to which Perkins' criteria do not straightforwardly apply, his approach remains versatile enough to recognise many significant achievements in the genre.

I have extended the experiment by developing the paper into a video essay. My approach remains investigative. I am not claiming that it is necessary, or even preferable, to adopt



Perkins' perspective when evaluating horror movies. I am interested in how Perkins' work might be useful in relation to horror, but also in the tensions and disjunctions between his critical approach and the genre. Part of my aim was to see if adapting my paper into a different critical medium – the video essay – would bring out different aspects of this encounter between Perkins and horror.

The essay starts by establishing that discussions of horror tend to prioritise explanation over evaluation, and introducing Perkins' perspective as a possible corrective. I also suggest parallels between explanatory approaches that characterise horror in terms of a balance between unpleasantness and containment (e.g. Carroll 1990, Pinedo 1997) and Perkins' emphasis on balance as an aesthetic criterion.

The titles of the next sections, 'Absurd' and 'Obscene', are derived from Perkins' remarks on aesthetic pitfalls avoided in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Part of the challenge in these sections is distinguishing between horror films that make purposeful use of qualities like disproportion and logical inconsistency, and those in which these qualities are failings. I discuss the death of Sara in *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977) and the head explosion in *Scanners* (David Cronenberg, 1981) as examples



of what seem, by Perkins' standards, to be negative tendencies, but are nonetheless valuable in the context of the two movies and, more broadly, the horror genre.

In the final section, titled 'Relationships (!)' after another of Perkins' comments on *Psycho*, I argue that despite subjecting Perkins' criteria to some strain, my examples also indicate the persistent relevance of his approach. The imbalances and disproportions I have noted are usually embedded in larger relationships that give them their own coherence: 'Balance can be suspended on one level, but perhaps offset by different forms of balance at other levels'. Perkins' work indicates the importance of such relationships, whether internal to a film or relating to wider frames of reference.

In adapting my paper, one challenge was the selection of material. I used examples from different styles, periods and international variants of horror, to keep the implicit definition of the genre as broad as possible. However, many of the clips also needed to be immediately recognisable as horror, which meant that violence and gore are perhaps over-represented. This resulted in further complications, such as the inclusion of a relatively large number of depictions of violence against women. I tried to address this, both through the structure of the essay (with the first sustained example, from *Hostel: Part 2*, explicitly framed as a retaliatory response to misogyny) and in the selection of clips, but it is an issue I will have to confront more directly in my subsequent work on horror.

Another challenge was timing. My remarks on several examples were longer than the examples themselves, so the two could not be straightforwardly combined. This required me to find ways to prolong some clips. Shots of Sara in the pit of wire in *Suspiria* are played forwards and backwards; the head explosion in *Scanners* is shown at three different speeds. Having to slow down some examples so that my analysis could ‘catch up’ prompted me to recall Perkins’ description of an important and difficult critical task: ‘to articulate in the medium of prose some aspects of what artists have made perfectly and precisely clear in the medium of film.’ (1990, 4) An advantage of the video essay format is that it is possible to collect many complex examples from films and display them directly. The accompanying challenge is to ensure that any commentary helps to highlight and clarify these examples, rather than expressing the same meanings less efficiently.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1057449151>

The video contains depictions of violence and nudity, and has been restricted to Mature audiences. To watch the video, you are required to log into Vimeo.

PETE FALCONER

Pete Falconer is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Television at the University of Bristol. He is interested in the forms and genres of popular cinema and the critical challenges that these can present. His first book, *The Afterlife of the Hollywood Western*, was published in 2020. He is currently developing his second book, on horror movies and aesthetic evaluation.

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AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

The Holes We Left Behind

The Holes We Left Behind is a videographic exploration of the film, *Breaking Away* (1979), made by the British film director Peter Yates. *Breaking Away* was shot on location in Bloomington, Indiana, and one of its narrative themes concerns the limestone industry of that area. In *The Holes We Left Behind*, I combine clips from *Breaking Away* with recently discovered archival videos that describe the life and work of a specific stoneworker who appears in the film. These videos, along with archival photographs of the Indiana limestone industry, amplify the film's limestone theme, while redirecting it in new historical and ecological directions.

The stone carver Harold Dugan Elgar was 70 years old when *Breaking Away* was shot, and he appears in a scene when the father of the film's protagonist, played by Paul Dooley, visits a limestone mill. Elgar was only supposed to have one line of dialogue, but when Dooley addressed him with the improvised line, 'Dugan, I thought you'd retired,' Elgar spontaneously responded, 'They won't let me retire' (Dawson 1980: 1). Inspired by this improvised encounter in the film, I wanted to learn more about Elgar. Searching the archives of Bloomington Community Access Television (BCAT), I discovered a videotaped interview with Elgar entitled, 'Harold Dugan Elgar: Master Stone Carver,' which was



shown in the 1970s on local access community television in Bloomington. Further discoveries in the BCAT archives followed: an appearance by Elgar at a conference sponsored by an Indiana University oral history project and a locally produced documentary on stone craftsmen. In addition to these archival videos, I worked with images from a recently released collection of photographs from the archives of the Indiana Limestone Company.¹

Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell write that videographic criticism involves seeing a film like *Breaking Away* as 'an archive of moving images and sounds' (Keathley & Mittell 2016, 2019). One result is that the film becomes newly permeable to other audiovisual archives. In the case of *The Holes We Left Behind*, archival videos and photographs extend and enrich the depiction of the limestone industry we see in *Breaking Away*, complicating the film's depiction of 'town and gown' tensions between local workers and university students, the labour involved in stonework, and the presence of Italian immigrants in the industry.

These archival reconfigurations shift *Breaking Away*'s centre of gravity to the topic of limestone, and that in turn facilitates an environmental analysis of the film. One method of environmental film studies examines a film's setting, and my environmental critique begins by asserting that the characters

in *Breaking Away* move through a limestone environment. One particular setting – the Indiana University Library – is a meeting place between *Breaking Away* and the BCAT archival material: it is both the site of a pivotal scene in the film, and a point of discussion in Elgar's account of the history of stone carving.

During the scene at the library, the father talks about his experience as a stone worker and lovingly touches a limestone bench. That moment of tactile reverie serves as a gateway into a geological perspective on Indiana limestone. The sequence that follows uses audio from a lecture on the ecological foundations of Indiana limestone found in the BCAT archives to explain the geological proximity between limestone deposits of the Mississippian period and fossil fuel deposits of the Pennsylvanian. This sequence is intended to bring a geological timescale to the film, and music was an important videographic tool in that regard. The music heard throughout *The Holes We Left Behind* was created by running cues from the *Breaking Away* soundtrack through a software tool for audio stretching called PaulStretch, which massively lengthened their duration while maintaining their pitch and timbre. Audio stretching transforms up-tempo orchestral passages into slowly evolving blocks of sound in a process that mirrors the vertiginous feeling of stretching one's temporal awareness to a geological scale.

At the culmination of the IU Library sequence, I assert that *Breaking Away* is an example of 'petrocinema'. Petrocinema is a term that has been used in environmental media studies to describe films that were sponsored by oil and gas companies, or that depict the oil industry, or that relate in significant ways to the consumer culture created by oil.² It is something of a provocation to assert that *Breaking Away* might fit in the same category as films like *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Giant* (1956), or *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), but playfully expanding the term points to the ways in which extractive industries have long overlapped and intersected. Note that the prefix petro- is derived from the Latin *petra*, meaning 'rock', and has been used to denote things made from or associated with rock (like petroglyph). Petrocinema is thus a useful framework for my argument that *Breaking Away* is a 'coming-of-age' story, not only in terms of the transition from adolescence to adulthood,

but also in its depiction of a transition from a limestone economy to a car culture reliant upon oil.

The Holes We Left Behind ends by returning to archival clips of Elgar from the BCAT archives. In the expanded audiovisual archive created by this videoessay, Elgar is not just a bit player who adds local colour, but a creator in his own right, with his own ideas about the duration of art and what gets 'left behind'. The improvised line of dialogue in his interaction

with Paul Dooley now feels like an assertion of his own creative agency. We see Elgar's hand touch his Pieta sculpture, the last of a series of tactile interactions that serve as transitions in the video essay, others being Dooley patting Elgar's leg, and touching the limestone bench. The fragile materiality of archival video has a distinctive poetic and evocative power in this shot that, for me, rivals and compliments the stunning 1970s colour cinematography of *Breaking Away*. These two

visual poetics coexist in the expanded audiovisual archive of *The Holes We Left Behind* and point beyond themselves to other temporalities and other archives, from the cemetery where Elgar's limestone grave marker sits, to the online video sharing platform where this video essay is housed and curated.

<https://vimeo.com/1099652055>

JACOB SMITH

Jacob Smith is Professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film and co-founder of the MA in Sound Arts and Industries at Northwestern University. He has written several books, most recently *Lightning Birds: An Aeroecology of the Airwaves* (University of Michigan Press, 2021) and *Bateson's Alphabet: The ABCs of Gregory Bateson's Ecology of Mind* (University of Michigan Press, 2024). He is currently writing a book on the history of new age music as a school of visionary art.

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¹ The Indiana University 'Building a Nation: Indiana Limestone Photograph Collection', <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/images/splash.htm?scope=images/VAC5094>

² On petrocinema, see Dahlquist & Vonderau (2021); LeMenager, (2014); Lifset & Black (2012). *Breaking Away* can also be viewed as what Priya Jaikumar and Lee Grieveson call an 'extractive film' (2024).

ARTICLES

In Search of a Film's Character

One might imagine that characterising films would be common and even necessary in film studies. However, with some exceptions in the field of film criticism, including within this journal (even if they were not labelled or offered as 'characterising'), we find it to be mostly absent or incidental to the discipline, and rarely an end in itself. Although many of the supervening perspectives and concerns in film studies – the formal, the narratological, the ideological, the cultural, the historical, the theoretical, the philosophical, the thematic, or even, simply, the presiding topic – illuminate films, and sometimes discern aspects of their character, the focus is principally elsewhere. Relatedly, our core activities in the discipline – analysis (of say a structure or the composition of an image), interpretation (of meaning), application (of an argument, a theory, or some topic or subject matter), evaluation (of a feature's worth), contextualisation (in terms of a genre, period, country, or culture), or simply explanation and information (about some matter arising) – are mostly too directed to manage the task, seeing a film through a design, an argument, a theme, a theory, or a culture. Characterisation requires more flexibility, an agile calling upon, and moving between, different concerns and methods, as required. And crucially with the priority of serving the illumination of a film's character.

This differs from, for example, standard approaches to film interpretation – thematic, theoretical, philosophical, cultural, or otherwise. While these tell us what a film might mean or what it is about, and this will bear on its character, they will not necessarily give a sense of its attributes, personality, attitude, behaviour, complexion, bearing, disposition, or temper. Our proposal is that characterising a film may be a valuable addition to the worthwhile activities of film study, disclosing important aspects of a film's nature and being.

Although characterising is rarely prioritised in film studies, it tends to be afforded more centrality in film reviewing. Here is a sample of how a range of film reviews, cited on the streaming site MUBI, characterise *Fallen Leaves* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2023) : 'deadpan': 'impassive'; 'slender'; 'slight'; 'bittersweet'; 'cool'; 'measured'; 'poignant'; 'amused'; 'absurdly laconic'; 'succinct perfection'; 'epically unfussy'; 'plainspoken melancholy'; 'formal sturdiness'; 'tenderly coaxes [the characters together]'; 'inflected with sadness'; 'not judgy; just jaded [at the limitations of men and alcohol]'; 'droll precision of Samuel Beckett'; 'modest and achingly sincere'; 'a quiet but persevering playfulness'; 'bone-dry yet filled with yearning'; 'endowed with the spirit of a fable'; 'unsentimental packaging and martini-dry wit'; 'crisp autumn breeze of a movie'; 'somehow suffuses every frame with feeling even if [the story] is so pared-back it is almost unfeeling'; 'the particular blend of formal rigour, narrative straightforwardness, and nimble playfulness'; '[not] complicated or dense, but deeply alert to sensory pleasures... which is what elevates it above the miserabilism latent in its scenario'; and 'There is no fluffy dreaminess here...[its] aesthetic realms are harsh and hardscrabble, gritty to the point where the textures are almost tangible. That solidity enhances the realism, imbues it with an incontrovertible quality that is also the source of its sobering beauty'.¹ Offering well-chosen adjectives is an important part of characterising ('deadpan', 'impassive'), but it also takes the form of explaining ('That solidity enhances the realism, imbues it with an incontrovertible quality which...'), framing a tension, an antithesis, or an apparent contradiction ('bone-dry yet filled with yearning'), calling on the character of other works or artists to compare or contrast ('droll precision of Samuel Beckett'), and positioning, seeking to distinguish what the film is from what

it is not ('not judgy; just jaded') or from what it might have been ('There is no fluffy dreaminess here...[its] aesthetic realms are harsh and hardscrabble').

We consider all these assessments of the character of *Fallen Leaves* helpfully apposite and taken together they provide a faithful and vivid impression of the film. That is no small achievement. Our experience has been that film studies can often be condescending towards, and dismissive of, film reviewing. Yet, in their need to portray a film succinctly in distilled formats to the non-specialist reader, film reviews can offer crisply insightful characterisations, and they can be efficiently thought-provoking.² However, there are limitations. Longer format criticism has the space for more thorough investigation: it can justify and support with more evidence; it can tease out the different relationships between characteristics, test the validity of widely accepted ones, or adjudicate between closely adjacent possibilities ('crisp' or 'brittle?'; 'delicate' or 'fragile?'); it can move away from a holistic encapsulation of the film to characterise particular moments, scenes, sequences, or patterns across a film, and offer a more complex and varied profile; it can examine the contribution of broader categories, genres, conventions, and traditions; it can draw on and engage with commentaries and scholarship from within the academy and elsewhere; and it can demonstrate more systematically through analysis how form and style may create, adjust, and transform the character of part and whole.

Another way of thinking of a film's characteristics is in terms of qualities where a quality would be, as our dictionary describes it, 'a distinguishing characteristic, property, or attribute; the basic character or nature of something; a trait or feature of personality' (Collins, 2000). Not *all* characterising is equivalent to, or best described as, identifying qualities – for example weighing up the relative importance of generic components or positioning in relation to other works to signify difference – but it is an important aspect of it. Our interest in ascribing characteristics partly stems from the work on 'aesthetic qualities' in the philosophy of criticism. Frank Sibley is the most cited and respected philosopher in this area, and he provided what is a list of examples of qualities which may be possessed by an artwork which included: unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, vivid, delicate,

trite, or sentimental (2006 [1962]:1). Most of these are evaluative qualities, which was Sibley's main interest, or as he called them 'aesthetic concepts'. Evaluative qualities can also bring out a moral dimension, for example, sincere, serious, or mature (or insincere, trivial, or immature).³ And characterising an artwork can often be like characterising a person especially when the ascriptions relate to its personality or attitude. Although ascribing evaluative qualities are an important part of characterising, we are also interested in a wider category which would include non-evaluative qualities. (Of all the adjectives in Sibley's original list, 'sombre' would be the closest to a non-evaluative quality).⁴

Qualities appear to be properties that are present in the work and, indeed, in the philosophical literature, another name for aesthetic qualities or aesthetic concepts is 'aesthetic properties'. Paradoxically, this draws attention to the fact that qualities are not obvious properties. Qualities cannot be straightforwardly and objectively pointed out in the way, in normal circumstances, a location can be pointed out, or an editing scheme, or a camera movement, or a composition, or a plot trajectory, or a physical body, or a sound, or a colour. This lack of concreteness may be the reason why we have been wary of emphasising them in our accounts of films. Indeed, for several aesthetic philosophers, for example, Mikel Dufrenne, Roman Ingarden, and Roger Scruton qualities are 'emergent', potentialities whose actuality is not predetermined and which are revealed and 'concretised' in the process of perception (Mitias 1988: 28; Chojna 2005: 225). According to Kendall Walton, qualities also depend on categories, genres, conventions, and traditions outside the work, and some qualities will only be perceived when the work is considered within these broader areas (2008 [1970]).⁵ At the same time, despite their indefinite status, Arnold Isenberg believed that qualities could declare themselves with the same immediacy as, for example, colours or physical configurations (1973: 36–52). A film may be original or derivative, supple or clunky, lucid or muddled, and any one of these characteristics may be experienced as more prominent or powerful than objects, places, figures, and dramatic action on the screen. (Isenberg discussed 'pretentiousness' in this regard [172–83].) Isenberg's understanding of the experience of qualities does not contradict the idea that

they may be emergent because although properties may not always present themselves immediately, when they do present themselves, they can do so with immediacy. Someone might not initially see a film as novel or banal, but should they come to see it this way the novelty or the banality could be as striking to them as more concrete features.⁶

The realm of character and quality overlaps with other aspects of filmic demeanour that, while not quite becoming prominent concerns, have been recognised in film studies, for example, tone (Pye 2014) and mood (Sinnerbrink 2012).⁷ Pye's work is particularly interested in tone as the attitude a film exhibits to its material and its audience, through its point of view structures, but tone can be more inclusively qualitative depending on how liberally one is defining it. Nevertheless, not every characteristic or quality is usefully described as tonal. Returning to our earlier list of adjectives used to characterise *Fallen Leaves*, some terms on the list – for instance

'slender' – are not designators of tone. And in addition to tone, we may wish to characterise other aspects of films such as performers/characters, compositions, narrative, or generic features. In his article advocating attention to a film's mood, a dimension he finds neglected in 'intellectualist or rationalist approaches to film narrative' (2012: 62), Robert Sinnerbrink describes, across various sequences, *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1920) as having a 'hypnotic' atmosphere, *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) as having a 'delicate' and 'melancholy' mood (157), and *Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) as offering 'romantic nostalgia' modulating into a 'darker' mood registering the 'pathos of loss' (160). However, although mood is part of a film's character, taken alone, as with tone, it is too circumscribing. A film may have a sombre or sullen mood, and this may be reflected in a dull colouration, where 'dull' characterises the film's colour palette but not its mood (and indeed 'dull', unlike 'sombre' or 'sullen', is not normally a description



of mood). This is no criticism of the work in these areas as it did not intend to be more expansive, yet because it operates in similar or overlapping territory, tone and mood may be received or understood to be more thoroughly characterising than they are.

Perhaps the most interesting overlap, given the amount of attention it has received, is with 'affect'. The word affect has been used variously and capaciously, but affects tend to refer to emotions, feelings, energies, or intensities. Many important characteristics are of that type, but some are not, or not best understood in that way, for example, those related to values, such as 'sentimental' or 'muddled', or those related to genres or categories such as 'naturalistic' or 'surrealistic', or those related to a work's constitution such as 'delicate' or 'brittle'. Furthermore, one aspect of the affective turn in film studies, via phenomenology, has been an interest not only in the affects of the film, but in the way the viewer is affected by the film. However, this distinction may become unhelpfully blurred and it can be useful not to collapse feelings exhibited by the film with those felt by the viewer. A film may be sad or cheerful, or express sad and cheerful things, but we have long known it is fallacious to believe that a viewer will be similarly emotionally affected (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949). In addition, many characteristics of a film, for example 'delicate', unlike 'sad' and 'cheerful', do not correspond to an equivalent emotional response (even though they may be affective in a range of unpredictable ways). Our suggested approach encourages us to make claims about the character of the film, which may be disputed, rather than presuming any kind of response, or indeed the character of any viewer. Moreover, we think the process of characterising should try, as far as possible, to avoid claims such as 'powerful', 'stirring', or 'inspiring' which appear like descriptions of the object but are in fact reports about the feelings of the subject.⁸

In this issue of *Movie*, we present two essays which are devoted to characterising, and addressing it as a practice. Andrew Klevan offers, partly self-consciously for methodological purposes, a qualitative portrayal of the film *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, 1977). Alex Clayton, in his essay, takes *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), a film that has received an array of characterisations and is most commonly associated with

'poetic realism' (itself a term that conjoins two characterisations). The essay uses the example of *L'Atalante* to explore and unpack four prospective attributions, demonstrating a method of specification that weighs adjacent and related terms in order to obtain a more precise and faithful characterisation. This introduction represents our early thinking around the matter of characterising films, and we hope to refine this thinking in future work to better understand and distinguish the enterprise.

ANDREW KLEVAN AND ALEX CLAYTON

ANDREW KLEVAN

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¹ The array of reviews is available here: <https://mubi.com/en/films/fallen-leaves-2023/critics-reviews>. Accessed 26.06.25

² Interestingly, although film studies is normally keen to distinguish itself from the film reviewing mode, it can sometimes slip into a pale imitation. Brief characterising terms are offered which are associated with the type and provenance of the work (genre, author, studio, mode), for example, 'uncanny', 'comical', 'noirish', 'quirky', 'gritty', 'sentimental', 'grotesque', and 'moving'. These are often received characterisations, offered typically as uncontentious designations of material rather than ventured and developed (or cited) as claims.

³ Michael Bell claims that this was an important feature of F.R. Leavis's literary criticism: 'Leavis's best criticism lies in the penetration and accuracy with which he defines moral or emotional quality in the work' (1988: 71).

⁴ Alan Goldman (1998) has devised potentially helpful sub-categories what he calls qualities (which we are thinking of as 'characterising terms') and his list gives a sense of range and type:

Broad evaluative qualities: 'beautiful, ugly, sublime, dreary'.

Formal qualities: 'balanced, graceful, concise, loosely woven'.

Emotion qualities: 'sad, angry, joyful, serene'

[...]

Behavioural qualities: 'sluggish, bouncy, jaunty'.

Representational qualities: 'realistic, distorted, true to life'.

Second order perceptual qualities: 'vivid, dull, muted, steely, mellow (said of colours or tones)'.

Historically related qualities: 'derivative, original, daring, bold, conservative' (17).

⁵ A striking example of qualities generated from a context outside the work is offered in the essay on *Rabid* in this issue.

⁶ Some of the material in this paragraph and the previous one repeats, with slightly different emphasis, Klevan on 'Aesthetic Qualities' (2018: 52–53).

⁷ Another overlap we would like to acknowledge is Lucy Fife Donaldson's work on texture in film (2014).

⁸ We recognise that such distinctions are not always cut and dried. And one might want to characterise a film as, say, 'eager to be inspiring'.

ARTICLES

Characterising *Rabid*

This essay attempts to show what a qualitative portrayal of a film might look like using the film *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, Canada, 1977) to exemplify. Although this type of portrayal will be possible for any film, and it is being proposed as a critical approach which could be used extensively, I had the sense that *Rabid* was an instance of a film where the approach would be particularly useful in accessing its aesthetic distinctiveness. There is little sustained commentary or analysis of the film (that I have found) although it is referred to, explicitly and implicitly, in the scholarly literature about its director David Cronenberg and about the horror film more generally. Much of this scholarship, while revealing about, for example, themes, tropes, contexts, and spectatorial engagement, mostly does not spend time specifying the film's range of qualities or when and how they occur. I hope therefore that attempting to fill this gap will conspicuously demonstrate the benefits of the approach.¹

Assessing a film through a qualitative lens means not prioritising the customary perspectives through which we, including myself, assess films in academia: for example, the formal, the narratological, the thematic, the ideological, the cultural, the historical, the spectatorial, the theoretical, the philosophical, or even, simply, the presiding topic. These

perspectives *will* play a part in helping to reveal the qualities of *Rabid*, but it is not the intention to formulate or orientate the account around or towards them (or any one of them). Instead, the essay is *dedicated* to identifying qualities or, what we might ordinarily call, characteristics of a film. By 'quality' I mean a characteristic, property, or attribute, or a trait or feature of personality. I do not mean something that is straightforwardly good for although a quality may sometimes be a good feature of a film, it need not be (it will depend on expression, placement, and conjunction). Concomitantly, an aim of the essay is to characterise, and show the benefit of characterising, a task which, surprisingly, given what it might reveal about a work's nature or being, is rarely undertaken in film studies as an end in itself. As well as identifying characteristics, the essay will show how they are creatively generated from techniques, composition, narrative, performance style, and other aspects of the film's presentation. It will be especially interested in characterising *Rabid* by recognising how it invokes, combines, and particularises various genres and stylistic modes.²

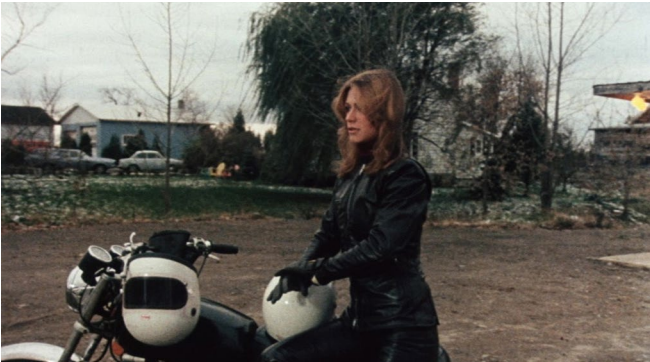
The film concerns a young woman Rose (Marilyn Chambers) who is involved in a terrible near fatal motorbike accident. She is taken to the nearest hospital, a plastic surgery clinic, where Dr Keloid (Howard Ryschpan) performs an experimental skin graft operation which is the only way of saving her life. This operation is successful in keeping Rose alive, but at a cost: she now desperately needs human blood to survive. Rose is therefore compelled to attack other people with a protruding proboscis, a mutation that has developed in her arm pit because of the skin graft operation. The proboscis stabs her victims, extracting blood from them, leaving her temporarily satiated and leaving them infected with rabies. The rabies spreads around the population and becomes a national crisis.

The opening scene of *Rabid*, which is also the beginning of the credit sequence, is thirty seconds long, and precedes the catastrophic road accident. A woman is perched on the side of a motorbike seat, at a roadside, dressed in shiny black jacket and trousers. The camera is behind her, a few metres away.³ It moves towards her, travels round her left-hand side, and shows her pulling on her black gloves. It comes to rest at

an angle to the side of her, far round enough to make her front and face visible (while the actor's name, Marilyn Chambers, appears in the open space beside her). Aside from adjusting her gloves, she sits quite stiffly upright with her head still,



looking out, tense, perhaps tightened by the cold. The camera also comes round enough to show some cars, buildings, trees, and grassy areas in the background, covered in clumps of icy snow, and to finally take in a man (Frank Moore) emerging



from the door of a red shack which might be a roadside café or a store or a small gasoline station. As he emerges, also in biker garb, she moves her head round a little, registering the noise of his exit, and the film cuts to show his head in close-up as he turns to look at her. The film then cuts back to its opening shot, viewing the woman once again from behind and at a distance. This now appears to be close to, or reflective of, the man's optical point of view. Another cut shows us her upper body close-up: she rubs her hands together for warmth, the cold wind ruffles her wavy blonde hair, her face is mildly apprehensive. And finally, the film cuts back to the face of the man who continues to look fondly across at her. All the way through the scene there is music on the soundtrack with a flute melody most prominent and violins and piano notes underneath. The scene finishes when it cuts, skipping some time, to a shot of them both on a motorbike, noisily roaring down a road, speeding towards the camera. The title of the film is displayed: *Rabid*.

This functional description of the film's opening does little to convey its qualitative aspect. The cinematographic 'look' is 1970s North American, on-location realism, apparently unenhanced, earthy, not glossy. The sky is off-white but not quite gloomy or bleak: it appears to be early morning or early evening but could be any grey time of the day. The location is unimpressive; although it is likely to be somewhere northern, it has a middle-of-nowhere wintry sparseness. The shack, with its ubiquitous red and white Coca-Cola painted facade and row of bulbs set into the porch roof, emitting yellow light, is devoid of specificity and interior life. This indistinct in-betweenness coupled with a woman made tremulous by the cold breeze creates an uneasy incipience. This tremulous quality is also within the texture of the music, the violins and piano producing a gently vibrating tremolo, beneath the melody. The melody itself, made by a flute, is plaintive and wistful; the singular minor notes are high in pitch, but not loud, creating an acute yet subdued lament, whilst they are also breathy and drawn-out, creating a regretful sigh.⁴ As the camera deliberately comes around the woman, from behind, it has that secretly encroaching quality, familiar from horror films. However, synthesised with this atmosphere and this music it is not menacing. She is approached and singled out by the

camera, but in a premonitory rather than predatory way, and although the movement is eerie, it is ruefully portending rather than spectral.⁵ Different components of the filmmaking combine to form amorphous atmospheric and mood related characteristics: the setting and the weather straightforwardly convey a brisk cold; when coupled with the music a wintry melancholy; and when coupled with the camera movement a chilly presaging.⁶ The camera movement is also observational, and perhaps even respectful: it curves around her side placidly to introduce her, hence the appearance of the actor's name, and then stops short, slightly to the side, keeping a little distance as if it were wanting to pay attention to her rather than intrude. The camera might also be establishing an alignment with her solitary position, perhaps even an affinity, and when it returns to view her from behind, for a second time, it conjoins with the man's affectionate gaze. As well as reflecting this gaze, this shot resembles an album cover – 1970s rock-country perhaps – distilling, and abstracting, a representative image. As the woman sits alone, her feathered cut hair touched by natural forces, looked on from a distance by the camera and the man, she is distinguished and discrete.

It worth acknowledging the basic yet important point, illustrated by this opening, that one scene or sequence need not only have one characteristic. This preparatory scene has a host of characteristics: for example, uneasily incipient, tremulous, plaintive, rueful, respectful, distilling, and more (or one could say it has a tremulous quality, it has a plaintive quality and so on).⁷ Even one feature, such as the movement of the camera, may have a few characteristics simultaneously. I emphasise this because we might be tempted to characterise too minimally, or reductively, accurately capturing something prevailing or supervening while overlooking variation. Indeed, the variety of characteristics exhibited in the opening, during only thirty seconds, across a similar tonal range, shows the qualitative density that can occur within a simple transitory scene. Parsing the characteristics is useful in instances such as the opening, where they are closely related, interlocking, and reinforcing, to discern the coherence.

Parsing is also useful in instances when characteristics are contrasting. For example, *Rabid* has proximate contrasting qualities which occur during Rose's moments of attack.

Shortly after Rose's operation, just after she first awakes, she is naked and shivering, and asks Lloyd (Roger Periard), a man who receives treatment at the clinic, to hold her. Although he expresses worry about the excessive intimacy ("this is really



weird"), he is unable to resist her urgent offer, and she sits up in bed, clings onto him, rocking to try to warm herself. She then grabs him even closer in a vice-like tightening at which point she stabs. This clasping of him is intensely forceful, yet it occurs within the context of a warming hug and, even more strikingly, it is followed, as they both fall back on the bed, by the fondling of his hair. Later, after attacking Dr Keloid in similar fashion in her hospital bed, Rose lovingly moves her hands through his hair while tearfully staring upwards. If her behaviour with Lloyd resembles a lover's post orgasmic appreciation, with Dr Keloid it resembles a mother with her precious child. Perhaps the strangest variation of all occurs in the barn before she attacks a cow. First, she pats it gently, with an almost childlike fascination, and then, after removing her coat, she more intently strokes its fur. She then drapes herself over the cow, her head resting on its back, her eyes closed,

in consoling preparation for the puncturing. In all these instances the hugging provides the ideal posture for the stab (because the proboscis is in the arm pit), but it also allows for the brutal invasions to take place during postures of affection. The hard, stabbing quality, breaking the surface, contrasts to a soft, stroking quality, moving tenderly across a surface.⁸ And the swiftness of the attacks, short and sharp, contrast to the leisurely doting. Following Rose's ferocious attack on Judy (Terri Hanauer) in the jacuzzi there is a shot of her in repose, her head seemingly resting peacefully on the naked bleeding body of her victim, with the slow-motion presentation adding to the dreaminess. The film presents contrasting characteristics and fuses them, and this fusion, achieved by Rose transitioning instinctively, is fluently rendered, and disarmingly so. Surrounding the severe with, or couching it in, the sensitive acutely captures the dual state of Rose's being



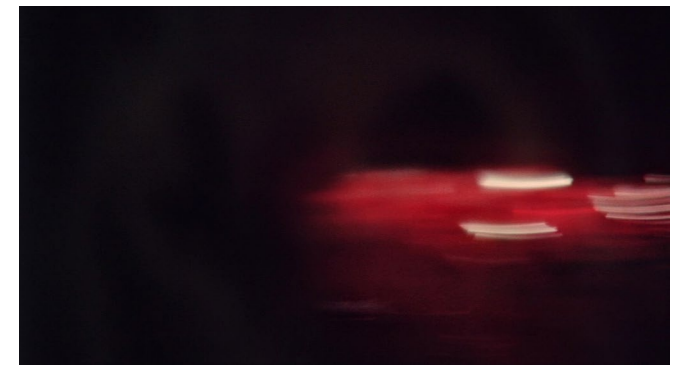
through the qualitative experience. And by modulating the damagingly freakish with the sympathetically commonplace, the film creates a disquieting poignancy which is more generally characteristic of it.⁹

The film also generates qualities by combining contrasting stylistic modes. When Rose prepares to embrace the cow in the barn, an electronic distorted screech agitates on the soundtrack with one brittle but echoing ping, like that of a radar, sounding at the exact moment of her lunging stab. This ping returns and repeats, in a pulsing manner, as she strokes the cow following the attack. The machine-made sounds inject an artificial disturbance into the on-location setting and other naturalistic aspects of the filmmaking reflecting Rose's injection of an artificial disturbance into the natural order.¹⁰ Similarly, generic traits of surrealism are grafted onto the surrounding ingrained naturalistic presentation. The surrealism is sporadic and fugacious rather than pervasively constituting the film world or sequentially and prolifically generating irrational connection. Rose's mutation is first revealed when Dr Keloid examines her: he raises her arm to show the offending area, a gash surrounded by puckered skin, less a wound than a new, permanent bodily form. A hole should not be there, hence the surrealist aspect, like the hole in the hand where the ants emerge in *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, Fr, 1929). Furthermore, the allusions uncomfortably and confusingly come together: the hole in the armpit alludes to the anus (puckered sphincter) and vagina (more slit than round) out of which, rather than into which, a hard penis rises and penetrates. Some of the components of this symbolism are patent, indeed embarrassingly reminiscent, and alongside the surrealistic mixing and transplanting, create a disconcerting exposure, and an indecent, shameless absurdity.¹¹ Moreover, the shots of the proboscis are fugitive, and seemingly unattached, like footage indelicately inserted; they puncture the film (like Rose's victims), and give an underground, experimental-film quality to the surrealism.¹² In this respect, apparently dissimilar modes – the surrealism and the naturalism – have characteristics in common: they are both unfinished in some respect, unvarnished, rough, or raw. From a methodological point of view, one could be forgiven for *only* offering symbolic interpretations of the imagery because of its salience, but that



would not necessarily convey or highlight the qualities arising from the surrealistic affront within the naturalistic frame of reference. This would be an example of the qualitative being lost to the semantic.¹³

Although the film can be flagrant, in symbolism and action – there is the occasional manic, even cartoon, behaviour especially by the zombies – it is often balanced by some compensatory suppressive tendency.¹⁴ Attitudinally, the provocation and absurdity of the image of the armpit is moderated by a clinical earnestness and a biological frankness (for example, through the close-up of the doctor's physical examination of the orifice). In the initial attacks, because the nature of Rose's mutation has not been established, it is not at all clear what is transpiring. Her underarm proboscis is only briefly shown, sometimes barely discernible: when she attacks the vagrant in the barn, there is only a split-second flash of some



glistening redness slicing through the darkness. Even when the actual act of penetration becomes more discernible, as when, in extreme close-up, we are very briefly shown the proboscis penetrating Dr Keloid's body, it is a momentary burst.

It is therefore the rapid insertion of the proboscis into the montage, rather than into the body, which conjures the piercing quality (along with the inference). The attacks are forceful and fierce, often accompanied by screamingly insistent music, but they are not prolonged. They are abrupt, snatched, with an impulse to then subdue (all that calm stroking).

Similarly, the use of blood, throughout the incidents involving Rose, is circumscribed. It is shown gathering around and dripping down her elbow after attacking Lloyd. Or dripping from behind the ear of a truck driver and down his neck, shown in such a way to emphasise its negligibility: just about visible to us in a wide medium shot, but missed by the policeman, and for a while by the truck driver himself until he senses a wound. Even the pooling of the blood in the hot tub, after a frenzied tussle, is a small patch, under the surface of the water, leaking blurrily into the side of the shot.



After Rose attacks the man in the adult cinema, and has left the building, the camera returns inside to pan along the row of seats, finding the victim with his head collapsed. The camera continues panning down through the dark to his hand, lit by the cinema screen, with one bored hole in the fleshy part of the thumb, and a line of blood, about an inch in length, trickling from it. The neat puncture wound and its trickle appear more contained and minimal, even somewhat anti-climactic, after the camera's drawn-out approach (its movement perhaps emphasising the need to seek out the wound, rather than build up to it). Although Rose's intent is literally blood thirsty, the presentation is far from blood soaked, with blood used indicatively rather than expansively; its presence is specific, rather than spattered or splattered, in keeping with the precise piercing nature of the attacks.¹⁵ This is partly enabled by the blood sucking being enacted by a hidden proboscis in an



armpit rather than the time-honoured biting mouth, smeared with blood, emerging from a victim's neck.¹⁶ Blood often emerges as a discharge to mark the completion of the attack and the end of a scene, and because it is associated with her satisfaction, it has a pleasurable quality of relief and closure. The line that drips down the lateral side of Rose's elbow, vivid and glistening, is a distilled external representation of the fresh blood now running through her veins and the moment of bliss immediately after shooting-up.¹⁷

The film assaults but then seems to want to suck back its horror – like the proboscis sucking its blood and then retracting into its cavity – to carry on as if everything had gone back to normal. This is also characteristic of its presentation of the wider world. The handling of the pandemic becomes part of the film's background, happening around the characters, normalised within the urban activity and the mundanely municipal (which itself has a little too easily taken on the appearance of a futuristic, dystopian policing regime). There is clearly a national emergency, and stress and dismay, but this is not a going plot concern for the film and the documentation of it is unaffected (albeit coldly unpleasant). Although Hart and Murray (Joe Silver) are trying to comprehend and survive the situation, this does not become a motivating narrative focus with, for example, protagonists discussing and deploying strategies to defeat the problem, as in a disaster movie, and the film ends with the crisis ongoing. As the crisis is absorbed into the everyday, the film's most brutal example of workaday indifference occurs in the closing moments. Rose is found by 'refuse' collectors in white hazmat suits and gas masks, in a dark, disused parking lot amongst leaves and bags of waste. She is yet another dead body littering the streets which must be cleared away. Her disposal is shown in slow motion and accompanied by a gruff electric noise containing a heartbeat, both creating a grave, inhuman distortion. The film shows her lying face up in the disposal unit, eyes open, her right arm outstretched through rigor mortis, glaringly and mordantly exposing the *other* arm pit as if to stress the unseen. As Rose is rolled over, face buried, to be subsumed into the waste of the unit, her individualised story disappears into the anonymous surrounding structures. The collector's jump onto the back of the unit before it drives away from the still camera,

receding into the world, is an indication of the ongoing routine behaviours of waste disposal, cruelly and ironically set against the finality of the film – the credits are rolling – and the counteracting sense of significance. In a bleak mirroring



of the opening scene, with the same music playing, Rose is singled out, but only for the viewer, like the sleigh amongst all the antique artifacts at the end of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, US, 1940). This is the film's own version of the convention of a concluding irony where a privileged viewpoint is offered to the viewer while it, and its significance, is hidden from others in the film. The closing moment is therefore assertive and assimilating, the terminal epitome of a characteristic tension across the film.

The film uses the unveil-veil and the burst-calm fluctuation of serial killer horror to create a sombre empathy. The concealing impulse is in keeping with the adolescent-style secrecy adopted by Rose in response to her mistreatment. Rose vomits violently after taking blood from the cow (revealing she can only survive on human blood), but she does so by reaching behind the cow, into the darkness, away from the

camera. This is as if she wanted, even in a barn with no company, to avoid embarrassment and the film wanted, even in a horror film which might gleefully have made this visible, to avoid the gross-out opportunity. When late in the film, Rose is finally discovered by Hart, sitting over the body of her girlfriend, seconds after attacking her, she first raises her arm to her mouth in shock and then, on realising that this gesture has revealed the proboscis in her armpit, quickly moves to cover it. Until this point, Rose's attacks have gone without notice by the other characters, hidden by the escalating consequences of the rabies, enhancing their secret status. Rose is like a child caught in the act, scrambling to hide the evidence, and she looks up at her fiancé with shame, her eyes betraying the sense that he will be deeply disappointed with her. It appears more important to the film to conceive of the attack, which it does not show, in terms of Rose's shame and disappointment, and



her infantilisation, rather than conceiving of it in terms of, say, the disgusting, the nasty, the creepy, the shocking, or the suspenseful (or any other stock characteristics of horror). The film's relative discretion, in respect to the horror moments related to Rose, sympathetically echoes its protagonist's character, or her character in relation to her endeavours. The sheepish aspect to the presentation, as if rushing to cover up, reflects Rose's half-understood need to be surreptitious.

True to the spirit of the opening scene, the film is mostly interested in, and most interesting when, attending to Rose and her vicinity. Although it is interspersed with scenes of Canada being taken over by rabid zombies, they have the status of surrounding interludes.¹⁸ Unlike the virus, the film mostly does not spread as it proceeds, and it is intensive rather than expansive. It does not desert her and move on, as it might have done, once her initiating purpose in the narrative is complete. On

the contrary, as the origin of the virus, everything comes back to Rose and is channelled through her. The film has a centripetal character, a character enhanced precisely by its resistance to centrifugal pulls. In generic terms the film stays closer to the solitary and estranged features of the vampire genre than it does to the roaming or multiplying features of the zombie genre or the disaster movie genre. The film's low budget also encourages localisation and restriction. The concentration on Rose's lonely experience, enhanced by not venturing too far for too long into the far-reaching, catastrophic consequences, happening somewhere out there, enhances the film's intimate character while also expressing dislocation.

This sympathetic alignment with Rose's afflicted experience brings *Rabid* close to the perspective often adopted by another genre: the female melodrama in particular the 'melodrama of the unknown woman'.¹⁹ This genre can be added

to the list of film categories to which the film is related: primarily, the horror sub-genres – vampire, zombie, body – but also medical drama, dystopian sci-fi, disaster movie, 1970s gloomy-naturalism, avant-garde surrealism, and grindhouse B-movie. The effect of categories, such as genre, on a film's character is analogous to the genetic and environmental influence on the makeup of a person or animal. A film's character is partly formed from internalising features of extrinsic categories, and the combinations and configurations that may arise are various. Switching analogy, the quantities of, and balance between, each ingredient in the recipe that makes up a film will be crucial to its flavour and consistency (and hence to any qualitative assessment). A criticism that could be legitimately levelled at *Rabid* is that the vampire aspect and the zombie aspect are not mixing well, even though the two genres are related, and this leads to inconsistency, a clash of tastes. The vampire aspect concerning Rose is finessed, but this is hampered by the zombie aspect which is coarse. A counter argument might be that the zombie aspect operates functionally as a backdrop to further focus and frame the narrative around Rose (and hence the ingredients *are* in balance despite a certain disharmony in the flavour sensation). The zombies are not the focus as they would be in a dedicated zombie film; the film isn't interested in the zombie as a figure in and of itself (for example, enacting reflections on humanity as do the films of George Romero). They are the marauding public manifestation of a dreadful contagion becoming more widespread, and thus set-off Rose's behaviour which is clandestine and singular.²⁰ Indeed, the film uses the device of blunt contrast at the traumatic moment of the story's inception when the noisy family in the van crash into Rose. The crude and stereotypical crashes into the refined and individualised, with the former further highlighting the latter, and with the effect exacerbated by the predictable and deterministic cross cutting between approaching van and motorbike. Late on in the film, in a shopping mall, a young man notices Rose and approaches to hit on her. After sitting next to her for a few moments, he gets up to get a light. He walks away from Rose and approaches a zombie who attacks him. Although the attack is shown in closeup, the film shows his walk away within a wide shot that also includes Rose



sitting on the bench, and it returns to this shot a couple more times. The moment is structured in terms of *her*: her viewing of it and, as the police officer runs past her, the action happening around and beyond her. Her correct posture,



remaining upright, twisting around on the spot as the police officer rushes to intervene, makes her the pivotal figure. Her reaction hints at some inchoate realisation of her own part in a crisis, but mostly registers dismay and bewilderment, as if what was happening was indeed *beyond* her. As the violence and mayhem escalates, its grossness only further emphasises the contrast with her restraint. Exiting the mall slightly against the grain of the panicking, fleeing crowds, there is a classic gag-like quality to the construction of the scene with the anonymous cause of the chaos leaving the scene in plain sight, but unnoticed. Rose has unwittingly found herself in a rogue zombie film; it is one she helped to make, but where she does not belong, watching the action as if she were not in it. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the zombie related disorder further concentrates *Rabid* by demarcating the qualities of its kernel.

The most important genre that affects the film's character, in terms of distinctly marking it out, is that of hard-core pornography (specifically 1970s American porno-chic). And yet it is the least obvious aspect partly because, although the film has a relationship to the genre which affects its behaviour, it does not resemble that genre, and it is not an instance of it, even a marginal instance. The film is tied to the genre most securely by the presence of its lead actor Marilyn Chambers who was a prominent pornographic film star in 1970s. She would unavoidably bring characteristics associated with her star persona, but the significance goes beyond indefinite nods, or winks. Whether a conscious strategy or not, the film draws on and is meaningfully infused with the association throughout, and the qualitative consequences of this thrust in the film are unexpectedly productive. When Hart kisses Rose after her operation he does so tenderly on her lips,





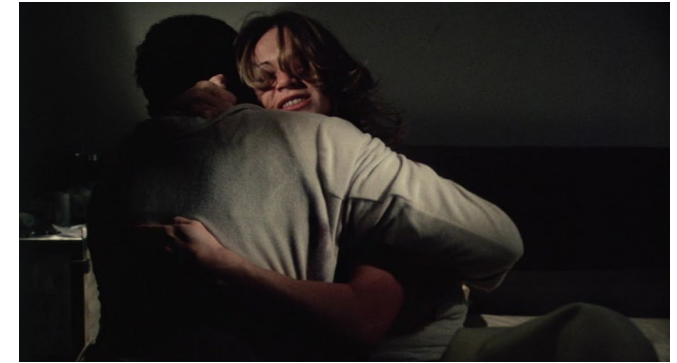
and the soft sensuality contrasts to the hard sexual action to which Chambers is accustomed (soft and hard again). There are sleeping beauty connotations as the woman is brought back to life from a state of dormant lovelessness. This cannot lift the curse on her though and if one standard critique of the pornographic genre is that it objectifies women, rather than granting them subjectivity, then Chambers once again takes on the role of someone with lost personhood. Nevertheless, Rose's sickness is also the condition of possibility for a revenge fantasy on her pornographic existence. This takes a similar form to a rape-revenge narrative – another horror movie sub-genre the film incorporates – where Rose/Chambers' proboscis grants her the power of the phallus and the serially penetrated becomes the serial penetrator. And during penetration she transmits a disease which leads to the visible deterioration of the body (prescient for a 1977 film). Crucially, the revenge trajectory is unannounced within the fiction and is not explicitly the driver of the narrative. Because of the unavoidable physiological impulses of Rose's condition, the vampiric aspect camouflages the revenge aspect.²¹ Allusive meaning often has a beguiling quality because of its placement in the artistic entity, and this is true of the pornographic allusions in *Rabid*. While I believe these allusions are well-formed and well-developed in the film, and therefore not nebulous or latent, they are implicit and tacit, and situated such that their reception, and their acknowledgement, cannot be taken for granted. That the appreciation of this allusive dimension might for some people be partly dependent on, or enhanced by, the knowledge or even the experience, itself covert, of the



external context concerning Chambers – more likely in the 1970s than now – enhances the there-not-there quality.

Rabid is a type of horror film which has a similar serial structure to a pornographic film, with set-piece scenes of horror (instead of sex), at regular intervals throughout, varied by personnel, placement, orchestration, and transgression.²² Moreover, some of Rose's horror scenes plainly mimic sex scenes. When she insists that Lloyd hug her on her hospital bed this insistency mirrors an eager invitation to sex, playing off the sexual voraciousness associated with Chambers. Sat in a lotus like position, she squeezes him aggressively and behaves as if she is experiencing an orgasm, groaning with sharp intakes of breath, clutching him firmly in place until fully satisfied. As they fall back into a reclining position, her body is still spasming, albeit more muted, and she settles into the post-coital stroking of his hair.²³ The sex/orgasmic analogy can be straightforwardly recognised, interpreted, and mapped (as I have done), but the reason for it, and situating of it, within a clinical context of sickness and a withholding about Rose's changed physicality, means the analogy has a disorienting quality. There is, once again, an incongruous transplanting as if Chambers' sexual persona had been mysteriously drawn into this environment from the unconscious and the repressed.²⁴

The link to actual pornography through the star provides these sorts of unexpected qualitative dimensions. In the barn scene, that high tingling note at the moment of her lunging stab substitutes for the penetration that is not shown. However, when the proboscis *is* shown during the attacks, it



is often in extreme, non-situated, and extracted close-ups, in some ways evoking, while distorting, in a hallucinogenic way, pornographic film syntax. One of the few times it is shown situated, albeit small and indistinct, is in the moment I have already discussed when Hart catches Rose just after stabbing her girlfriend. As the door opens, the viewer and Hart may see the red proboscis sticking out of her arm pit, and she rushes to cover it up, as if concealing her private parts. The film shows this most unembarrassed type of performer in distress at being exposed.

Throughout the film, Chambers' non-actorly manner or her ostensible lack of actorly technique gives a Bressonian 'model', undemonstrative, even unformed, quality to her performance. In the beginning of the shopping mall sequence, when the man first approaches Rose, he says, "Mind if I sit down," to which she replies, "I don't mind". She delivers the



reply softly and reticently, and shrugs nonchalantly, as if she is not very bothered either way. She's not going to stop him sitting there if he wants to (she puts the emphasis on the "I" rather than the "don't" which might express more enthusiasm). Her line is amusingly ironic because we know that she desperately needs the close company of men to feed upon and survive – so she certainly doesn't mind – but she exhibits no eagerness or strategic seductiveness. The amusement is extended by the implication that she only needs to be not hostile or refusing; an unruffled neutrality will be enough for the man's desirous behaviour to take its natural course. Her quiescent behavioural qualities are crucial to the meanings and tone of this moment, and in general Chambers' performance style is ideally suggestive of a sub-zombified state whilst also offering a 'realistic' rendition of the unsophisticated, North American young everywoman, or the 1970s

incarnation of the modestly beautiful, desirable yet unassuming, 'girl next door'.

At the same time, within an apparently unformed performance, Chambers produces complicating inflections. When she is questioned and inspected by Dr Keloid in her hospital bed, shortly before embracing him, she declares she is not in pain, and lies very still, only her mouth moving, which draws attention to, and intensifies, the ostensibly contradictory tears running down her face. Although her voice here has an ingenuous girlish texture, it also has a deliberate imperturbable insistence ("I feel strong, I feel very strong" she says). Overall, Chambers' guileless performance has just enough situational ease, and unaffected, unobtrusive finessing to avoid appearing stilted and the combination of these qualities is crucial in maintaining the film's strain of pathos. In *Rabid* we have the pornographic star who is nevertheless not, in mainstream terms, a star, nor a practised actor, and thus the film can draw on antithetical characteristics: innocent and experienced, ingenue and worldly, amateur and professional, anonymous and recognisable, gauche and seductive, soft and hard, human and dehumanised.²⁵

These antithetical suspensions relate to a pattern of inversion. One of David Cronenberg's well known concerns is troubling what we consider to be inside and outside the human body and this is true of *Rabid* where the phallus emerges from inside the body, an external organ reconceived as an internal one, and its transparent surface enables us to see, albeit momentarily, the streaming blood, extracted from outside, travelling inside.²⁶ The scene with the most inverted character is arguably the one where Rose visits an adult cinema and where the genre of pornographic film is literally present. In this scene the film makes the most of resituating its lead actor in the form of a reversal as Chambers is shown watching pornography rather than performing in it; she is in front of the screen rather than behind it. Here the inside/outside inversion occurs on a more structural level by troubling what is inside and outside the body of the film: Chambers is normally inside a pornographic film, not outside it (watching). The film never shows what is on the screen, only the activity in the audience, and although the soundtrack of the film being screened can be heard, it is oddly talky, devoid



of the staple moans and groans, removing the last vestige of arousal that the film might provide. The film's strict censoring of the pornography and its inflexible attention to the audience, especially Rose, underlines the turnaround and altered perspective.²⁷

The turnaround also has a drily humorous quality. Rose/Chambers has no doubt sensed, from her former, or alternative, life that this will be an ideal location to prey on men. And when a man, her future victim in the cinema, moves over to her she says, "I like seeing these movies, but men always bother me", a fittingly contorted in-joke. Indeed, in addition to the humour being dry, it could also be characterised as wry: twisted, askew, and warped (all characteristics of the scene). We do not see the attack on the man, only the aftermath, and the film cuts to outside the cinema's entrance, where Rose leaves with a breezy

contentment, as if she were a liberated independent woman attending an adult cinema, enjoying a film on her own terms, and departing unselfconsciously. The bravura quality to her behaviour is boldly enhanced by her wearing a large thick fur coat whilst it also carries different connotations: those of the 1970s 'Happy Hooker' wandering the red neon lit streets, visiting the adult cinema for a quick trick. And to be sure the punter's pleasure is brief indeed! As well as dry and wry, the humour can also be characterised as contrary and sly, and perhaps even arch in its knowing mischievousness. Yet at the same time, the perverse amusements are recessive, naturalised by the seedy realism and dampened by loneliness, displacement, and victimisation (with Rose's walk to the cinema accompanied by those downbeat and plaintive musical strains). Moreover, any superiority the humour might produce is nullified by the film's

sincere attachments to its main character, its transmutations, and its grindhouse world.²⁸

Such qualities relate specifically to matters of tone, or humour in the wider sense, the film's temper. Ascertaining proportion and interrelation where there is tonal mix is difficult and sets a challenge for characterisation. (For example, is a scene primarily, partially, or slightly humorous, where does the humour lie, and what is its nature?) It is challenging because the process is slippery with prominence shifting with perspective and mood during different viewings. It is also challenging because the elements can be stubbornly enmeshed. Matters are further complicated when the tonal character is created, as in this case, by extrinsic reference. In *Rabid*, through the presence of Chambers, the pornographic association is deep in its being. Therefore, although the film creates a variety of precise referential allusion, which *can* appear definite, there is also

in operation, what could be called, intertextual affect, a sub-conscious presence, drawing on external association, which is not explicit or specific. Moreover, because the film can rely on the association, and does not need to instigate the analogous regime itself, it can be true to its B-movie antecedents and be efficient, unencumbered, and unpretentious. Overall, in terms of genre, generic personae, and stylistic modes, the film is inclusive without appearing cluttered or cleverly referential; alchemic without asserting its imaginativeness; and reconceiving without evidently partaking in any innovative revisionism or intellectual reflexivity.²⁹

These are further characteristics to add to the list of the many that have been discovered over the course of investigating the film: for example, transpositional derangement taking place within an environment of disquieting poignancy, sombre empathy, and dislocated intimacy. And then there are the contrasting characteristics – hard and soft, fierce and subdued, assertive and assimilative, coarse and finessed, surreal and naturalistic – and those arising from the various ways they relate. In addition, there are those brought about by the generic amalgam especially those, direct and indirect, that the Chambers' persona brings to the mix. Different film features contribute to the construction of character ranging from local ones like a shot or a camera movement to more extensive ones like a pattern or a structure. The characterising enterprise may address a film in different ways, but in this version of the enterprise I have ranged across film and characteristics. Some of my appraisal may be mistaken, need refining, or supplementing, but I hope the purpose has been clear. In principle, a thoroughgoing characterisation offers a varied, detailed, and embracing portrayal of a film, reflecting and respecting its personality, in a way that is often difficult to achieve by way of our customary channels of inquiry.

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¹ Researching the film, I found that the scholarly literature, which was mostly about the horror film more generally, tended to have two main emphases. One was a concern with themes and tropes, for example, abjection, death-drive, the human/non-human intersection, or representation of cultural anxieties and sociological change. The second was a concern with spectatorial engagement and response, for example, effects and affects, suspense structure, or psychological/ psychoanalytical attachments (gendered or otherwise). This literature sometimes offers insights and interpretations which help to characterise *Rabid*, so I have extracted these for the notes, and where possible extended them into a more qualitative realm. As these notes largely form a parallel commentary, if preferred, so as not to break the flow of the main text, they can be read together at the end. Although largely unrelated to the discourse around *Rabid*, it should be acknowledged that contemporary work on affect in the horror film has offered a qualitative type of approach mainly focusing on sensation qualities (accompanied once again by an interest in spectatorial matters). See 'In Search of a Film's Character' (Clayton and Klevan 2025) in this issue for more preliminary context concerning a qualitative approach.

² Although it is hoped that the proposed approach will be demonstrated largely through the act of characterising the film there will also be some overt methodological highlighting along the way (especially in the first part of the essay).

³ Some production credits appear, by her side, on the right side of the screen.

- ⁴ The instruments sound as if they are produced by a synthesiser. This music is repeated through the film, and is a theme or leitmotif associated with Rose.
- ⁵ This is in keeping with the film rooting its horror in the consequences of the technological, medical, and biological (and the human occupation with them) rather than the supernatural.
- ⁶ Pam Cook describes Cronenberg as 'one of the great melancholics of modern cinema'. Cited in Creed (2000:99).
- ⁷ Some of these characteristics are distinct to the opening and some reoccur across the film. Also worth noting, just in case, I am not meaning to imply that the characteristics identified are unique to the film, for example 'portending' camera movements do appear in horror films; the interest rather is identifying them in *this* manifestation and configuration.
- ⁸ Murray Smith writes that the 'contrast between the "hard" and "soft" animates almost all of Cronenberg's work' (2000: 75).
- ⁹ This is an example of a generative chain: the merging of characteristics, for example soft and hard, creates more characteristics, for example 'disquieting poignancy'.
- ¹⁰ An oscillating and agitating piano, first surging in speed and volume, then fading, is also introduced, and is also probably electronic in origin. The film uses an electronic soundtrack in many parts of the film and although not unusual in horror films and other genres of the 1970s it has its own purpose. One is to evoke underlying forces or energies. The trembling effect reflects an unstable tremor and unnatural breach in the film's world while the recurrence of the sound of a heartbeat corresponds to the infected blood pumping around the film. Moreover, neither simply adds unnerving suspense. Regarding the matter of suspense, although Rose's attacks are presented as dramatic bursts, the film seems to be largely uninterested in creating tension around them. It is fascinated, rather than excited, by the form the attacks take and their contribution to a formal seriality.
- ¹¹ Mary B. Campbell writes of the 'transference and confusion of sexual characteristics, resulting in ominous parodies of the Androgyne... [Cronenberg] is tapping into another set of conventional images: the hermaphroditic and androgynous bodies of the grotesque tradition, with its graftings and fusions of species, its imaginary organs and proliferation of bodies and body parts. But, as he does with his exploitation of alchemical images and ideas, [he...] sidesteps the joyful, or at least playful, impulse of the tradition he invokes. The physiological freedoms of his bodies (liberated and liberating in the grotesque canon) signal a return to chaos, just as their sexual license does' (1984: 313–314). Note here how Campbell not only recognises the tradition, and its 'conventional images', but also the qualitative shift from 'playful' and 'liberating' to 'ominous[ly] parodic' and chaotic.

- ¹² Ernest Mathijs labels it a 'penis-like proboscis' (38). The proboscis itself has a metallic spike which emerges from the tip and creates the initial insertion. It appears for a split second in the attack on Dr Keloid, barely visible unless one steps through frame by frame. Only quite late in the film, during the attack in the adult cinema, is it more clearly noticeable. Although the spike fits as a continuation of an impaling and injecting protrusion, it is not made of living matter and therefore is fundamentally incompatible. This is another example of a fleeting, glinting surrealism.
- ¹³ Mathijs, highlighting trends and contexts, writes about 'a tendency towards realism' in the horror films of this period and contrasts it to the traditionally 'fantastic horror film' (2008: 42). He also later mentions, discussing the reception of *Rabid*, that in time it became 'almost regarded as underground avant-garde' (50). In an essay on the place of Cronenberg's films in film culture, Ian Conrich notes the 'rawness' of *Rabid* and links this to the low-budget manifestation of the body-horror: 'Dr Keloid's accidental development of a blood-hungry, armpit residing, protruding organ...[is] what Tom Hutchinson describes as "of the penny-dreadful kind"' (2000: 36–37). Meredyth Cole refers amusingly to the 'opening in the armpit that looks like an anus but could also be a low-budget vagina' (2017; my emphasis).
- ¹⁴ The cartoon aspects are infrequent, and although in one way they stick out for being crude, in another way they recede for offering less of interest. Later in the essay, I try to give an account of how the zombie moments may play their part in a scheme. Nevertheless, some aspects are arguably character flaws. It is worth investigating consistency or coherence of a film's character, as one might for any aspect of a film's style.
- ¹⁵ This contrasts with how Barbara Creed characterises 'the modern horror film' which 'often "plays" with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore' (1996: 46). The presentation of blood in *Rabid* is not characterised by saturation.
- ¹⁶ Strangely, however, as if nodding to the traditional gestures of a vampire, and in another disorientating transposition, Rose does occasionally have blood around her mouth (for example after vomiting from the cow's blood). Before entering the adult cinema, seemingly needing to make herself presentable, she wipes her mouth as if she were conscious of having blood on it (even though no blood is visible).
- ¹⁷ It is not unusual for some horror movies to strategically and conspicuously withhold, or to be more implicit than explicit, while sometimes giving the impression that they are more consistently explicit than they are. Even in films which are relatively explicit, one of the genre's fascinations is how extreme and transgressive events and imagery are regulated. The genre takes a matter that is intrinsic to all films, the relationship between what is shown and what is not shown, and makes it a more manifest concern, often confronting the viewer with it. This confrontation is intertwined with, and often as qualitatively interesting as, the confrontation afforded by the extremity itself.
- ¹⁸ Cole makes the case for *Rabid* exhibiting a 'Canadiana' (to rhyme with, while contrasting to, Americana) (2017). Cole, a Canadian herself and writing in a spirit of recognition, states, 'Canada is naturally the headland of the continent. The fears Cronenberg teases to the surface are as icy and cerebral as you would expect from someone ensconced in the North.' She characterises the 'Canadiana' personality as 'humbleness overriding an inherent menace' where the 'crux of Cronenberg's Canadian vision...[is] the uncanny aspect of people who are only slightly different from you, almost imperceptibly so'. Corresponding, Rose might be 'an especially Canadian killer...' (seemingly) innocuous and invisibly menacing'.
- ¹⁹ The melodrama of the unknown woman genre is conceived by Stanley Cavell (1996) in relation to a handful of Hollywood films from the late 1930s and 1940s: *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Gaslight* (1944), and the film from which the genre takes its name, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). The films are sympathetically aligned to a distinct female protagonist who finds herself separated from the ideological norms and expectations of their gender and culture. These unknown women are undeservedly unrecognised and unacknowledged, and this can lead to aberrant and exaggerated behaviour by them (which carries positive as well as negative ramifications). I am suggesting Rose is, among many other things, a variation on the figure of the 'unknown woman' in a horror context. See also note below regarding Linda Williams' work.
- ²⁰ I am grateful to Lucy Fife Donaldson for helping me draw out these contrasts.
- ²¹ I am not assuming that all female pornographic film actors want or need, to take revenge, or feel they should, simply that *Rabid* entertains the possibility. In this regard, Rose is related to the 'female victim-hero' that Carol Clover, in her study of gender in the horror film, discovers in slasher and rape-revenge films. *Rabid*, which she only mentions tangentially in passing, reinterprets and resituates Clover's figure which 'combine[s] the function of suffering victim and avenging hero' ([1992] 2015:17). She also notes that the 'female victim-hero' has some phallic tool like a knife, chainsaw, or power drill. She immediately adds in parentheses that 'the hero part [is] always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity'. In *Rabid*, the 'phallic tool' is fulfilled by the proboscis and the 'monstrosity' aspect is made explicit while the rape-revenge aspect is not. Another monstrous figure to which Rose is related is the 'monstrous-feminine', formulated by Barbara Creed: a manifestation of men's fear of women and their bodies with their 'object' peculiarities such as menstruation (1993). From such a fearful perspective, Rose's extraction of blood from others, with life-draining consequences, flowing into an orifice resembling genitalia rather than out of it, is a nightmarish reversal. Equally, from a fearless (or heroically avenging) perspective, it can be envisaged as a fantasy of compensation. See also endnote below on the 'two-sex model'.
- ²² Linda Williams compares the sex scenes in feature-length pornography to the musical numbers in the genre of the musical. She writes, 'To a great extent, in fact, the hard-core feature film is a kind of musical, with sexual number taking the place of musical number' ([1989] 1999:124).
- ²³ Williams in her essay 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess' links horror, female melodrama, and pornography as 'sensational body genres' where we see 'the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation and emotion...The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and melodrama's portrayal of weeping' (1991: 4). The gender aspect is important: '[I]n each of these genres the bodies of women...have functioned as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain.' The female melodrama commonly concerns the woman's role as wife, mother, or abandoned lover (roles which result in all manner of loss), but also sometimes 'a woman "afflicted" with a deadly or debilitating disease' (4). All of Williams' 'sensational body genres' contain 'ecstatic excesses' or 'bodily ecstasies' which 'could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body' and each 'hinges on the spectacle of a "sexually saturated" female body' (4,6). In a moment such as this, Chambers' pornographic persona enhances the sexual saturation. Williams identifies similarities across the three different genres, but *Rabid*, which she does not mention, is a remarkable conglomeration of those similarities in just the *one* film. In the scene where Rose attacks Dr. Keloid she orgasms, terrorises, and weeps. As both Williams' essay and mine refer to the same constellation of genres, it is a useful opportunity to note methodological contrast. Williams' essay contains vivid and illuminating characterisations of common generic features largely, although not exclusively, in the service of a wider, more theoretical argument (spectatorial identifications especially regarding gender). The concern with spectator response contrasts to the approach taken here as does the emphasis on characterising broad similarities across films rather than simultaneously characterising the specific film through differences (in, for example, personnel, presentation, execution, relation, emphasis).
- ²⁴ On one occasion, this transplanting arguably collapses into the ludicrous. The attack in the jacuzzi is set-up like a lesbian sex scene in a pornographic film: "do you mind if I get in with you", Rose's says seductively with a grin, "I've been lying in bed so long, my body aches all over". Rose is at her most conventionally sinister and villainous, and the film is at its most obviously suggestive, perfunctory, and parodic. (Might it be because this is Rose's only attack on a woman which is shown by the film – as distinct from the attack on her girlfriend which takes place off-screen – and its aberrance has caused problems for

coherence?) Nevertheless, aside from those comedy-horror films where the ludicrous is intrinsic, one aspect of even non-comic horror, like *Rabid*, is a courting or skirting of it to test boundaries (of propriety, of the body, of categories and so on).

- ²⁵ For a short while, simultaneously with her career in hard-core pornography, Chambers was the face on the box of Ivory Snow laundry detergent (an image that is available to view on the internet). Therefore, antithetical extremes were already part of the Marilyn Chambers' persona: clean and dirty. 'Unknown actors' is one of the key features of the low budget horror of the 1970s identified by Robin Wood for which he takes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) to be exemplary. Chambers complicates this with her known-unknown status. The other relevant characteristics he cites are 'low budget', 'raw, unpolished', 'non-bourgeois exploitation', 'Bad Taste', 'The Monster', which becomes 'indigenously [North] American', and 'traditional values negated' ([1986] 2003:79). All these are indeed basic features of *Rabid*.
- ²⁶ Regarding inversion, Clover contrasts 'sexual difference as we officially know it – the "two-sex" model, which construes male and female as "opposite" or *essentially* different from another' and which is a 'relatively modern construction' with the conception of 'an earlier world which construed the sexes as inside versus outside versions of a single genital/reproductive system.' She continues, 'It is not that the male body has a penis, a female body a vagina, and the one-sex body both. It is that penis and vagina are one and the same organ; if one happens to extrude and the other one to intrude (in an inside-out and upward extending fashion), they are physiologically identical [...]. So too body fluids: the genital fluid that in the coolness of the female is normally red and manifest as menses becomes, in the greater heat of the male, whitish and manifest as semen (and female orgasm, understood as analogous to male ejaculation, was thought necessary for conception).' Clover wittily adds however, 'Needless to say, the "one-sex" in question was essentially male, women being "inverted, and less perfect, men", possessed of "exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places"' (13–14). Clover concludes, 'Stories of werewolves, vampires and other undead, and possession (by incubus, succubus, dybbuk, Satan) are stories that stem from the one-sex era, and for all their updating, they still carry with them, a premodern sense of sexual difference. Horror may in fact be the premier repository of one-sex reasoning of our time' (15). *Rabid* plays with the 'one-sex' conception in the form of bodily inversions, intrusions, and extrusions, where the 'penis and vagina are one and the same organ', albeit transposed to the armpit, and where the woman gains rather than loses blood ('menses') at the same time as ejaculating a rabid fluid.
- ²⁷ The film is not beyond its own pornographic or sexploitation inclinations, showing its lead actress topless on a few occasions, with one moment at least, when Rose searches for clothes in a wardrobe,

difficult to justify as part of the story or scheme. In a cold turkey type scene Rose, desperate for sustenance, twists and squirms in a foetal position on the toilet floor of the apartment. She is wearing panties and a skimpy wet white t-shirt which sticks to her breasts making them visible. This is what we now consider to be an over-familiar form of costume for the beautiful young woman in horror films, tantalising eroticised *and* under threat, a perfect combination for juvenile male amusement. On the other hand, however, if this scene is considered within a context of reconceiving the public consumption of Chambers' sexualised body, complicating the titillating pleasure with the repelling abject, then it could be characterised differently: the established pornographic pleasures around the availability of her body are evoked but arguably hampered and even circumvented. Nor is the pain Rose exhibits necessarily playing into sado-masochistic pleasures, partly because it is internal rather than external (a pain within the body): Rose is not simply experiencing pain or being subjected to pain by another, she is very sick.

- ²⁸ Clover celebrates 'a kind of kinky creativity' in low-budget horror films of this era (20). She favourably contrasts them to more mainstream films for although they were 'harsh and awkward [... they] said it all, and in flatter terms, and on a shoestring' (20). I like the way 'flatter' here is used as a praiseworthy characteristic, as distinct from dull and lifeless, redeeming the uninflected or 'awkward' amateurishness which is also a characteristic of the films. Flat here may also refer to a pared-back presentation (despite violent episodes) which contrasts to a film which is elaborately, fulsomely, and expensively shaped. It may also relate to the relative reticence, muting, and modesty I have detected in *Rabid*.
- ²⁹ Films can, of course, be referentially allusive in all sorts of ways. To provide one starkly contrasting example, referential allusion in *Rabid* is not colourfully, slickly, and boisterously extrovert in the way it can be in Quentin Tarantino's films. This film's referential allusions are embedded in, and subdued by, its naturalism and pessimism. Relatedly, Tarantino's film style often has the quality of loquaciousness, like many of his films' characters, whereas Cronenberg's style is more tight-lipped.

ARTICLES

Encapsulating *L'Atalante*

This essay models an approach to film analysis that explores and auditions capsule characterisations, by which I mean standalone adjectives ventured to convey the prevailing character of a work. The idea is to unpack a chosen term, thinking through what it implies and entails as a critical designation, and test it against the evidence of the film. To help gauge for aptness, the term is contrasted with a range of synonyms and alternate descriptors. The aim is to develop precision in attributing character traits and obtain a better understanding of the film.

My case study is *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), partly because it has received an array of characterisations in the near century since release, yet remains surprisingly difficult to pin down. It is most commonly associated with 'poetic realism', itself a conjunction of two descriptors. 'Realism' is notoriously difficult to define since it is capacious. Nowadays 'realist' tends to invoke an art-historical category as distinct from 'realistic', which contains a more direct appeal to truthfulness or accuracy of depiction. However, the label of 'realism' has been used to refer to so many different movements, modes, styles and representational tendencies that it is a rather indeterminate attribution. Preceding it with 'poetic' is meant to help with that, naming a distinct mode of realism. However, that term is scarcely better, suffering as it does from the same problems

as 'theatrical' and 'cinematic' in its reliance on received (often narrow or hackneyed) ideas about a medium, i.e. the features and moods that are supposedly definitive of poetry. 'Poetic realism', then, is not necessarily going to be helpful as a characterising term. Although it does allude, in a roundabout way, to aspects of the film's character, and certainly responds to them, its function is principally as a critical tag, a way to locate a work within wider movements and groupings.

Dudley Andrew informs us that *L'Atalante* was not marketed as 'poetic realism', nor did this expression appear in artistic manifestos circulating at the time. Instead, it was formulated decades later by critics looking to connect various films of the period: '[A]djectives like "romantic", "moody", "pessimistic", cropped up. Understandably, poetic realism

became a concept to latch on to' (Andrew 1995: 12). What is curious, however, is that the list of adjectives given above seems only marginally or parenthetically applicable to Vigo's film. This begs the question as to what aspects of the film's character might have warranted *L'Atalante*'s status as 'the classic instance of "poetic realism"' (Durgnat 1990: 54). Perhaps the most useful clue lies in the near-oxymoronic construction of the term, which points to the film as an amalgam of conflicting impulses and divergent characteristics.

I consider four characteristics below, selecting terms used in critical commentary on the film that I felt would benefit from elaboration. Before proceeding, a synopsis may be helpful. The film follows newlywed Juliette (Dita Parlo) as she adjusts to married life aboard the barge *L'Atalante*,



captained by her husband Jean (Jean Dasté). The crew consists of an unnamed cabin boy (Louis Lefebvre) and a dishevelled and uncouth mariner, Père Jules (Michel Simon), whose obtrusive presence aboard the cramped vessel quickly starts to sour the honeymoon. Bored and frustrated by the monotony of barge life, tantalised by the promise of a wider world, and exasperated by Jean's lack of attention to her needs, Juliette longs to go ashore in Paris and have some fun. Eventually she sneaks off by herself, and Jean makes the impetuous decision to abandon her, something he quickly comes to regret. Finding his skipper in an uncooperative and rueful trance, Père Jules takes it upon himself to go ashore and search for Juliette.

Messy

When *L'Atalante* was first released, a representative of the *Agence d'Informations Cinématographiques* reported finding 'some beautiful, very human scenes here and there... drowned in a mishmash of absurdities and redundancies' (quoted in Salles Gomes 1972: 186). Admittedly, the version seen by this anonymous reviewer in 1934 would have been rather different to what we see today. The film that Vigo turned in – approximations of which have since been restored – was immediately and severely re-edited by Gaumont. It was even given a different title and a theme song was shoehorned in a desperate bid to inject some commercial appeal.¹ This hasty reassembly may partly account for the reviewer's critical mauling of the film as 'confused, incoherent, wilfully absurd, long, dull, and commercially worthless' (quoted in Salles Gomes 1972: 186). And yet, according to the foremost chronicler of *L'Atalante's* production history, 'even before the film was cut, it was not very well proportioned' and that Vigo's tendency to use improvisation and absorb momentary inspiration while shooting meant there was limited oversight of continuity and narrative consistency (Salles Gomes 1972: 182). Problems seem also to have arisen from the chaotic nature of the film's shoot. Reliant on fair weather for the many planned exterior scenes, it was supposed to begin in the summer of 1933 but didn't get underway until late November. P. E. Salles Gomes offers an indicative anecdote:

All the missing exterior transition shots were left until the end so that they could be done at the same time. But when the time came, there was so much snow that the only possible background was the sky; which explains the presence in the film of certain low-angled shots which do not seem to have any precise function. (Salles Gomes 1972: 174)

Our anonymous reviewer's abundance of complaints is perhaps encapsulated in the term 'mishmash'. A related term would be 'hotch-potch', but the original French is '*méli-mélo*', a kind of fruit salad. There are several related ways in which the term might apply. One is to characterise the film as being the product of a lack of skill or sophistication (as a fruit salad might be assembled). Another facet is to picture the film as a jumble of elements.

Raymond Durgnat invokes something like the latter sense, in more positive appraisal, when he characterises *L'Atalante* as a 'meld of modes and genres' (Durgnat 1990: 54). However, while 'mishmash' conjures the idea of a sloppy mixture, 'meld' suggests a composite. With its echoes of metalwork, it implies solidity, but also random elemental construction, an agglomeration. Unlike 'mishmash', which implies destructive pulping and the loss of definition, 'meld' conceives of combination and cluster as generative. Here is Durgnat's sketch of an early sequence in *L'Atalante* which contains numerous examples of what our anonymous reviewer might have cast as 'absurdities and redundancies', but which Durgnat sees as eclecticism:

Its opening features: a bourgeois procession, of comic silhouettes, like René Clair; a village street whose curving brick walls seem saturated with uncanny forces, like Feuillade; moody luminosities of silk and mist, lace and earth (L'Hérbier); canal compositions with the *sachlichkeit* angularity of Pabst; and a peasant sensuousness (and fertility symbolism) evoking the Russian (as distinct from Soviet) roots of Dovzhenko (a festoon of leaves, a field of bare earth, surging up against skylines). (Durgnat 1990: 54)

This virtuosic list emphasises the diversity of moods, implications, and styles as an accumulation, one thing next to another next to another, in bold juxtaposition, almost like patchwork – except that the emphasis is on duration, so it is not just an

assortment but a succession. The different 'modes and genres' are not so much combined as given one after another, without preparation or segue. This lurching quality is what leads Durgnat to describe *L'Atalante* in terms of 'stylistic volatility' (Durgnat 1990: 54). One moment the film is 'comic', the next 'uncanny'; 'angularity' gives way to 'sensuousness'; and so forth. The term 'volatility' implies unpredictability, but goes further to suggest that the film is almost out of control, reactive and unstable (perhaps thrillingly so).

All of this may start to explain how the critic Terrence Rafferty could respond to the 1990 restoration of the film (a version closer to what Vigo submitted to Gaumont) by saying that 'the best thing about this [new version] is that, for all the restorer's diligence, the film is still messy...' (Rafferty 1990: 138). On the face of it, such curious acclaim would seem to run counter to Monroe Beardsley's General Criterion Theory, which holds that certain characteristics must be considered 'primary criteria' in that they 'always contribute positively to the value of a work' (Beardsley 1962: 483, 485), or always negatively, in the case of primary negative criteria. An elaboration of the idea cites Paul Ziff:

Some good paintings are somewhat disorganized; they are good in spite of the fact that they are somewhat disorganized. But no painting is good because it is disorganized... (Ziff, quoted in Beardsley 1962: 486)

It is difficult to argue with that in the abstract, and it may seem to follow that Rafferty's celebration of *L'Atalante* being messy must be perverse or nonsensical. On the other hand, we might observe that 'disorganised' and 'messy', while synonyms, are not quite the same thing. For example, 'disorganised' tends to be directed towards the structural and systemic, while 'messy' tends to refer to more superficial disorganisation, affecting surface appearance. Moreover, 'disorganised' negates 'organised', whereas 'messy' can negate a range of antonyms, and can therefore mean 'not clean', 'not tidy', 'not straightforward' (as in a process), even 'not amicable' (as in a divorce). Perhaps the closest variant to 'disorganised' would be when 'messy' is used to mean 'not orderly' (as in a scattily arranged paragraph).

Both 'messy' and 'disorganised' carry the implication (or accusation) of carelessness, even if this is not where

Rafferty wishes to place the emphasis. To avoid this, we might consider an alternative term like 'scruffy' to characterise the way many sequences in *L'Atalante* are constructed. One advantage of 'scruffy' over 'messy' is that it is easier to grasp scruffiness as a style choice. While it is possible to be intentionally messy, that seems to entail a deliberate violation, whereas being scruffy in personal presentation may simply reflect a laissez-faire approach to appearance. Alternatively, we might consider a term like 'choppy' (with its nautical resonances) as a register of the film being both unsettled and rather rough-hewn, with the potential advantage over 'messy' and 'mishmash' of avoiding the implication that the film is uniformly slapdash. 'Choppy' has the additional benefit of conveying the film's somewhat lurching rhythm, exemplified most by its disregard for conventional continuity editing.

An example of both 'scruffy' and 'choppy' can be found in the early scene in which Juliette and Jean depart on the eponymous canal boat, just after their wedding. While disappointed villagers stand in attendance high on the riverbank, Jean is down at the water's edge, instructing Père Jules to prepare for launch. The film then cuts to Juliette, in her bridal gown and veil, looking exceedingly glum. This close up is surprising, since mere seconds earlier we saw her beaming with delight as the cabin boy presented her with a bunch of flowers.² There doesn't seem to be an obvious reason for such a sudden mood swing. This might lead us to wonder whether



it is Juliette or the film that is capricious here. The puzzle arises because, while Juliette's offscreen look is sustained in a slightly downwards angle, the film doesn't confirm what has prompted her sudden dismay. Initially it may seem that she is gazing, perhaps with impatience, towards the figures at shoreline. This is undermined, however, when the film cuts again, without any shift in her attention, to a shot of Jean, looking up at him against a sky background, suddenly up on deck and getting changed into his overalls. Normal practice with eyeline cutting would be to adjoin a shot of someone looking out of frame with another shot showing the consistent object of their attention. Instead, Jean seems momentarily to be in two places at once. The only reliable solution would be to re-interpret the shot of Juliette's offscreen gaze as a solemn gaze into space. At any rate, the scruffiness of the editing here seems to compel some interpretive guesswork.

It's not just the mismatched eyeline that makes the cut to Jean feel jarring. It also seems to play fast and loose with time. The duration of Juliette's close-up, no more than a couple of seconds, is patently an insufficient interval for Jean to have boarded the vessel and already laced his foot halfway through the trouser leg of his overalls. This could be construed as an (unorthodox) ellipsis were it not for the soundtrack, which is contradictory in its insistence on temporal continuity, giving an uninterrupted peal of church bells from the nearby village. There is another example seconds later. From the shot of Jean getting dressed, the film cuts to a brief (three second) group shot of the assembled wedding party, and then to a quick (two second) high angle shot of the cabin boy retrieving the mooring ropes, before returning to Jean – whom we find, a mere five seconds after he was beginning to change clothes in the sunshine, now fully dressed and inexplicably located in some darkened space below deck, presumably an engine room (a space that we have never seen before and never see again).

Little jolts and jumps like these are part of what gives the film its uneven texture. Quite possibly, this roughness and the violation of continuity 'rules' in this kind of sudden acceleration and ellipsis (an antecedent of the jump cut, perhaps) appealed to the French New Wave directors and critics who discovered Vigo's work in the 1950s. A factor in the choppi-ness here is the absence of devices that would have clarified

the relative positions of characters. For example, a master shot of the boat would have served as an anchor (no pun intended) for the scene. Alternatively, spatial contiguity could have been confirmed via the placement of objects that bridge shot and counter-shot, or over-the-shoulder shots, such as if the image of Jean on deck showed Juliette watching in the foreground. Instead, the sequence bounces from detail to detail and keeps geographical and temporal relations no more than approximate. Finally, a sense of unevenness results from the variable qualities of the image. The close-up of Juliette is luminous and crisp, using shallow focus to pick out her features, and classically composed, almost like a portrait. Moments later, however, a shot of Jean beckoning from the helm is markedly blurry, out of focus.

It is not necessarily clear, however, whether we should think of such features as errors. As mentioned above, it is possible to be intentionally messy, and certainly to embrace or accept (perhaps as a consequence of other choices) a scruffy or uneven aesthetic. Several years before making *L'Atalante*, Jean Vigo denounced what he saw as the contemporary regime of glamour (surrealistically evoked as the aim 'to liberate oneself from the two pairs of lips that take 3,000 meters to come together and almost as long to come unstuck') and derided 'the overly artistic subtlety of a pure cinema' (Vigo 2014 [1930]: 449). Perhaps avoiding the standard conventions of good aesthetic taste was an aim. On the other hand, the film was undoubtedly afflicted by the various troubles of production, and made messier still by an iterative history of restoration, some of which was forced to rely on abandoned and decaying footage, including outtakes. If such factors amplified the film's rough appearance, perhaps they went, after all, with the grain of its project – hence Rafferty's relief that the film was reconstituted with its messiness intact.

Unruly

While on paper he sounds like a narratively peripheral or supporting character, the figure of Père Jules is central to the character of *L'Atalante*. I suggested briefly above how the film's apparent capriciousness coincides with Juliette's trait of capriciousness (exemplified by her impetuous



decision to leave the boat alone for Paris). A similar kind of correlation might pertain to Père Jules. We might find his disorderly cabin, for example, crammed with objects that have taken his fancy over a lifetime on the high seas, and which fill Juliette with wonder, to strike an affinity with the film's bric-à-brac style, its own aesthetic of clutter and astonishment. David Baldwin finds similar overlap between the character of the film and the character played by Michel Simon, when he says that 'Père Jules, a character almost as anarchic and beast-like as Boudu the tramp in Renoir's film [...] is presented in scenes as rough-edged, abrupt, and unruly as himself' (Baldwin 1985: 23).

Baldwin is right to note the influence of *Boudu sauve des eaux* (Jean Renoir, 1932), made just a year or so earlier, in which Michel Simon plays a grubby and uncouth outsider, in that case an archetypal tramp. Simon's subsequent performance as the seadog Père Jules has some of the same mannerisms – shambling walk and mumbling speech – but is less straightforwardly a comedic turn. In Renoir's film, the 'anarchic' characteristics embodied by the figure disturb and expose the patterns and hypocrisies of Parisian bourgeois life as represented by Monsieur Lestingois (Charles Granval), but the contrivance of the encounter and the idealism of Renoir's film frame him as a comic image of liberty. Père Jules, by contrast, is far more disturbing figure, someone who keeps the severed hand of a pal or lover locked in a jar for posterity,

an ambiguous kind of grotesque. He is impish, like Boudu, but without being charming, selfish without being liberated, obstructive without being innocent. Despite his honorific as "Père" Jules, he has few good fatherly traits. Although he ultimately resolves the narrative problem by finding Juliette, he is for the most part less of an enabler and more of a disruptor and irritant.

Baldwin's characterisation of the film as 'unruly' is closely related to Rafferty's 'messy' but contains some additional dimensions. Like 'messy', 'unruly' suggests a state of disorder but implies impudence and obstinacy. Disobedient children may be called unruly if they show a dogged refusal to submit to rules. This might be a stronger way of accounting for the film's disregard for continuity and consistency, without necessarily seeing it as strategically or maturely subversive. Baldwin elaborates along these lines:

Vigo seems to have been almost incapable psychologically of placing the camera in the positions dictated by conventional film-making. Asymmetrical compositions, seemingly random but in fact quite logical high-angle shots, [and] the refusal to let the camera follow the characters as they wander out of the frame – these are some characteristic features of his style' (Baldwin 1985: 26)

If Baldwin attributes these features to the director's constitutional stubbornness, they seem also to portray the film's character as wayward. It would be easy to go too far here in the desire to applaud an *enfant terrible*. Many of the film's scenes contain relatively long takes that quite patiently attend to characters and their activities, like Juliette's domestic chores and moments when she is ruminating alone. These features don't seem random or wilfully unconventional, exactly. It might be better, then, to think of unruliness less in terms of rebellion and more in terms of sovereignty. The film may not always 'follow the characters as they wander', but quite often it does – exhibiting, perhaps, the selective curiosity and independence of a cat, rather than the dutiful adherence of a dog. (And of course, cats are unruly in this sense, famously unherdable, like the many cats that prowl and slumber aboard *L'Atalante*.)

To develop the distinction, it might be helpful to consider an instance where the film does decline to follow a departing character. It comes just after Jean has found Juliette in Jules's cabin combing the sailor's hair while he sits half-naked on the bed. The discovery has sent Jean into a jealous rage. He confronts Jules about the disorder and stink of his quarters, throws a cat across the room, barks at Juliette for being there, and orders Jules to tidy himself up, before storming off, out of frame. Up to now, the camera had been panning left and right with Jean as he stalked about the cabin, but now it stays with Jules and Juliette, and indeed begins to move slowly towards them. The skirmish seems to have ended, and Jean seems to have left the scene. Juliette sits down on Jules's bunk, giggling



like a schoolgirl, and Jules begins to lower his body to join her. It seems like the film is moving into a new phase. The *mise-en-scène* seems to anticipate the development of some newfound intimacy between Jules and Juliette in the aftermath of the scolding. The camera's dolly-in peers through the X-shape of a table's supporting legs, creating the sense of Jules's bunk as a private zone where conspiracy may resume.

At this point the film does several perplexing things in quick succession. First is the choice to cut before the moving camera has come to a standstill, a highly unconventional choice. Just as it seemed we were settling into a new scene, the film abruptly changes tack. What it cuts to, moreover, is a shot that is highly disorientating for several reasons. Marina

Warner describes it as an 'incomprehensible shot... from the other side of the bed, showing the old man lifting himself away from her as she lies there' (Warner 2015: 49). Aside from the fact that it cuts almost 180 degrees, and so takes a beat to adjust to, there are stark mismatches in posture (Juliette is lying flat on her back in the new shot, and Jules is holding himself over her), movement (Jules was moving towards her in the previous shot, and is now pulling himself up away from her) and expression (Jules was audibly guffawing prior to the cut, but now looks suddenly serious or perhaps embarrassed).³ Most 'incomprehensible' of all is what the shot appears to show, the aftermath of an instant of sexual contact between the young wife and the old seadog, seemingly

confirmed by the bashful way Jules withdraws. The suggestion is there just fleetingly; both the suddenness and the ickiness makes it difficult to process.

Indeed, there is no time to process, because suddenly Jean is back in the frame. The film cuts to a high angle, and in another violation of continuity Jules has now entirely vanished and an incensed Jean replaces him next to the bed, preparing to drag Juliette from the bunk. So Jean had not left the cabin after all? The fact of the jealous husband's departure seemed to follow from the fact that Jules and Juliette felt comfortable enough to share a giggle and become briefly intimate on the bed. It hardly seems possible that they either knew him to be present, or, given the scale of the cabin, that they could believe he had left when really he was hanging nearby. Rational motivation seems almost to disappear at this point; the scene seems almost to abstract the coordinates of a melodramatic love triangle.

If the film is being wilful in its abandonment of narrative consistency here, this may open up a further sense of 'unruly'. As Warner's 'incomprehensible' shot shows, along with the various oddities surrounding it, *L'Atalante* intermittently poses a challenge to understanding the reasons why people act as they do. We are given just enough information and intrigue to be in a position to speculate, and just enough obstacles to make speculation challenging. When disobedient children are said to be unruly, it means that they are fundamentally ungovernable. An attribution of 'unruly' may be more pertinent for *L'Atalante* in this sense, giving a name to the features that make it difficult to manage or master.

Lyrical

In his article on *L'Atalante*, Baldwin identifies a core tension in the film's style between what he calls the 'grotesque and the lyrical, an opposition registered in conflicting tendencies towards expansion and extreme compression' (Baldwin 1985: 22). Baldwin finds the 'grotesque mode' in Vigo 'marked by a sort of caricaturing of the face of reality, using elliptical editing, disorienting camera angles and shock effects to exaggerate some inherently bizarre action or circumstance' (Baldwin 1985: 22). (The grotesque and the unruly often



go hand-in-hand, as for example in the case of the 'unruly woman' [Kathleen Rowe 1995].) Baldwin understands this characteristic to be held in tension with a countering attribute, which he defines as the film's 'lyrical mode', 'characterized by the expansion of a particular action in order to lend the mood created by that action its maximum emotional expressiveness and force' (Baldwin 1985: 22).

The adjective 'lyrical' is frequently used to characterise *L'Atalante*. Marina Warner, for example, in her book on the film, refers to the 'lyrical shot of Juliette in her wedding dress walking up the barge against its direction of travel' (Warner 2015: 9–10). We might dwell here to consider what is meant by 'lyrical' here. The OED (2017) definition, 'having the qualities or characteristics of lyric poetry', is not especially helpful, since it simply outsources the question. Moreover, Jonathan Culler in *A Theory of the Lyric* argues that the 'most widespread current models [of what comprises lyric poetry] [have] serious disadvantages: the model of lyric as intense expression of the subjective experience of the poet does not fit a great many poems, whether ancient or modern' (Culler 2015: 349). Whether or not Culler is right about lyric poetry itself, the notion of 'intense expression' indicates one facet of what 'lyrical' is meant to convey. Later in her book, Warner returns to the shot of Juliette walking along the barge and describes it as depicting 'a spectral figure alone on the grey-black fuselage of the boat against the dark pooling water of the canal' (Warner 2015: 31). What might support 'lyrical' in this evocative description is not the mood conjured by phrases like 'spectral figure' and 'dark pooling water' (words like 'ghostly' or 'ominous' might fit here) but rather the intensity of that mood. In other words, 'lyrical' is a kind of meta-characteristic that indicates emotional volume rather than specifying the particular characteristics being intensified.

Although Warner doesn't mention it, Maurice Jaubert's accompanying scored music is crucial. The shot contains no diegetic sound other than the chugging sound of the barge – or, rather, an orchestral facsimile of it as rhythmic undercurrent. At the prow of the boat, Juliette, anxious on her wedding night, is not quite ready to submit to her groom's amorous attentions. She takes her leave from Jean and heads towards the stern. This is the context for Warner's emphasis on her being

'alone' and for the idea of momentary resistance captured in the phrase, 'against its [the boat's] direction of travel'. The wide shot of her walking along the fuselage, with its elevated tonal contrast between black and white, is broken briefly by a return cutaway to Jean, watching her from the prow. When the film returns to Juliette's journey, a new melodic phrase is introduced on wind instruments, offering a surge of hopefulness and yearning, just as a barge in the background of the shot passes by and fills the top half of the screen with smoke. I think the emotional intensity to which Warner responds when she calls this shot lyrical in fact emerges from the heightened contrast between portentous fatefulness and youthful longing. Meanwhile, the combination of billowing smoke and blossoming music help create the 'expansion' noted by Baldwin in his definition of the lyrical mode, together with the wideness of the shot, and the prolonged duration of Juliette's movement right along the boat. It is as if narrative time has been momentarily suspended to serve the elaboration of feeling.

Raymond Durgnat conveys this very idea when he writes that 'however "consequential" the film's narrative outline may read, it sees as a string of lyrical moments, of durations cut free from time' (Durgnat 1990: 55). The italicised distinction between how the film 'reads' (on paper, as a plot outline) and how it 'sees' (or envisions) is mapped here onto another contrast, one that recalls the ancient division between narrative and lyric verse, between relaying a chain of 'consequential' events and more freeform ruminations on experience.



On the other hand, the lyrical and the poetic are not to be conflated. Durgnat's 'string of *lyrical* moments' are not identical in nature to the following catalogue of what he calls 'funky poetic images':

two plumped pillows reeking of sensuality, a kitten jumping from a closet jammed with unwashed linen, Jean ducking his head under the oily river surface to "see" his bride' (Durgnat 55).

Part of what seems to distinguish the poetic from the lyrical here is dense imagistic compression, rather than song-like, melodious expansion.

As discussed in the introduction to this essay, 'poetic' has become something of a label in discussions of *L'Atalante*. When Durgnat refers to *L'Atalante* as 'the classic instance of "poetic realism"' (Durgnat 1990: 54), he retains the scare quotes around the term (while omitting them for other named movements such as Bolshevik montage): a recognition of its currency but also, perhaps, its insufficiency. As we saw earlier, Durgnat is keen to locate the film in relation to an array of other art-historical movements and tendencies, and so is not content to let it rest under a single classification. However, if 'lyrical' invokes lyric verse, we would expect it to at least speak to whatever is 'poetic' in 'poetic realism'.

Perhaps the most justifiable example of 'poetic realism' in the film would be the location-shot sequence marking the barge's arrival at the outskirts of Paris, in which Jean and the cabin boy winch open the watertight gates and haul the barge into the lock chamber. As Marina Warner notes, the images here 'recall the social realism of contemporary photography' (Warner 2015: 44), with its impetus to honour the work of industrial labourers. However, we might add more specifically that their remarkably luminous qualities, especially the way figures in motion are briefly silhouetted by sunlight, evokes a specifically Parisian tradition of 'social fantastic' street photography from Eugène Atget to Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as the more international 'poetic' mode of silent documentary. Indeed, it is like a fragment from a city symphony in its focus on the visual and rhythmic aspects of this everyday activity of navigating a boat through the locks, and, above all, in its diegetic silence: after an initial noise of water gushing

through the sluices, sound effects are omitted entirely, giving the images a somewhat free-floating, unmoored quality.

What might justify a term like 'lyrical' for this sequence would be the way that the realist imagery seems placed as an expression of Juliette's subjective experience: her joy at the boat's arrival in Paris, a place she has longed to visit her whole life. Indeed, the sequence has a song-like quality and is structured like a musical number, beginning with her emergence from the hatch into the early morning sunshine. A trumpet blare initially seems to sound an alarm as she pushes aside the cabin doors, its garish quality set against a cyclical tick-tock motif of individual notes on the xylophone, slightly trepidatious but with a hint of childlike expectancy. These xylophone

notes coordinate, in the next shot, with Jean's bounding motion up the quayside steps, and are joined by an ostinato rhythm of a suspenseful two-note piano motif as he traverses the sluice gates. This gives way, as he joins the cabin boy the other side of the walkway, to an accordion-led rendition of a bargeman's folk song (the same song with which we heard Jean, accompanied by his crew, including Père Jules on accordion, serenade Juliette earlier in the film, again as she emerged from the cabin). All these elements confer the dynamic images of lockside activity with a sense of new-day wonder channelled via Juliette, although, crucially, not necessarily limited to her field of vision or even the objects of her attention. She in fact seems much more taken with the skyline than with

the crew's labour. Yet her elation transfers to the film's character in this moment, as it shows the workers winching, tying, untying, hauling – most strikingly in the beautiful low-level shot, touched by early morning sunlight, in which we see the cabin boy bolt down the stone steps to help Jean shepherd the boat into the lock chamber. On the instant he emerges at the top of the steps, dashing to join the skipper with puppy-like enthusiasm, an accordion flurry attends his movement with a little shriek of delight.

If the 'poetic' and the 'realist' are allied in this moment, elsewhere they seem almost opposed. An example would be at the close of a sequence that Wendy Haslem describes as 'a juxtaposition of visually *poetic* shots that link the estranged





couple across disparate spaces as they dream of one another' (2006; italics added). As with the scene at the lockgates, diegetic sound is dropped for this sequence and a musical score takes prominence, making it feel like a tone poem rather than a narrative event as such. A bluesy waltz in strings and brass attends the images of the separated newlyweds as they writhe, stretch, and sink together in fantasised communion. Legato violins convey a sense of tender longing, while trombone slides carry erotic connotations, creating something of a languid, humid feel. The musical theme concludes with nightclub-style flourish, and Jean pulls himself into a sitting position on the bunk in his darkened cabin. Almost treading on the toes of the melodic resolution, however, on the instant

the music ceases, we hear the loud honk of a horn from a ship on the waters outside. This obtrusive noise carries over as a sound bridge into the next shot which exhibits a markedly different atmosphere. In the smoggy grey light of dawn, surrounded by cargo boats and industrial metal frames, bargemate and deckhand yell and bang for the skipper to join them on deck. Back to reality. Indeed, the relation between 'poetic' and 'realist' is starkly oppositional here, the transition from phantastic studio imagery to location realism having been marked as an interruption, a rude awakening.

Baldwin finds the lovemaking montage to be 'the most ambitious and best sustained... of all the lyrical sequences in the film' (Baldwin 1985: 25), and his elaboration of it shows again the kinship between the lyrical and the poetic:

Vigo illuminates the faces and bodies of the two actors through a kind of netting, so that they seem to be covered all over with black spots, as if they were suffering from some contagious disease. The arching of one back is echoed by the arching of another; the movement of one head wearily raising itself towards the camera is completed by its counterpart dropping back onto the pillow. The two characters seem to be groping towards one another, as if seeking some [...] fusion of being... (Baldwin 1985: 25).

Rhyming elements and syntactical counterparts, features one might expect from a certain kind of poetry, are conveyed by phrases like 'echoed by' and 'completed by'. Moreover, Baldwin finds the sequence filled with non-literal allusion, as indicated by his use of the conjunction '*as if*' ('as if they were suffering' / 'as if seeking...'). This '*as if*' characteristic – a quality of simile – might call for the term 'poetic', but it equally captures the sense of longing that seems habitually to accompany the 'lyrical', in its reaching to give expression to the unspoken.

Sensuous

Rather than characterising the above nocturnal montage as lyrical, Florian Deroo's account, in his recent book on *L'Atalante*, emphasises the erotics of touch, taking this sequence to exemplify the film's 'tactile' and 'sensuous' qualities (Deroo 2025: 81).



What 'sensuous' means here, I think, is a concerted attention to physical textures and attributes, and a vivid evocation of them, such that the film appeals to senses beyond sight and sound. The most familiar of these is touch. In 'What My Fingers Knew', Vivian Sobchack considers what it is to experience film sensuously (Sobchack 2000), but we might equally explore what features and aspects of character in a given film invite that kind of engagement. Not all films are equal in this regard. While *L'Atalante* is often categorised as 'realism', what that means in this particular case has only partly to do with filming in real locations or the like, and more to do with a certain kind of material vividness.

This seems to be roughly what François Truffaut means when he says, in a 1968 interview, that 'in terms of carnal realism, [Vigo] went further than anybody else'. Elsewhere he reiterates the idea: 'no one has filmed people's skin, human flesh, as bluntly as Vigo' (Truffaut 1985: 43). The suggestion is helpful. However, I think the adverb 'bluntly' (*crûment* in the original French, which can also be translated as 'crudely') is not quite right, or is limited, if we want to understand what it is about *L'Atalante* that might lead us to characterise as tactile and sensuous. Consider, for example, the scene after Jean has dipped his head into the Seine to test Juliette's contention that this is a way to have one's true love confirmed. They are now in their cabin. Jean remains topless. Juliette rubs his wet hair, calling him a 'silly one', and we see that she has hung a shirt over the stove for him. She takes it off and holds it to her chest



to feel the heat herself, then drapes it over her husband's chest, affectionately telling him "It's nice and warm". Moved by her gentleness, Jean stands and takes her in his arms. She runs her fingers up his arms and behind his bare shoulders. It's not just that the gestures are tender: the film is tender.

The tenderness partly comes from the use of long take and the fact that the camera has been placed a little above head height, from over Jean's shoulder, the angle a parent might have while fondly watching their child at the dinner table. It is close enough to dote on all the details of their interaction (the hair rub, Juliette's holding the warm shirt against herself, the draping of it on Jean's shoulders, the way he gently puts his arms under hers while embracing her) without the need for reverse-field cutting or conspicuous panning. This in turn allows the little adjustments made by the camera (for example, its slight movement to the left as Juliette goes past Jean and towards the stove) to convey attentiveness and care. What we see of the cabin is simple and restful (a jug on the table, a sugar jar on the shelf) and the view into the corner makes the scene feel cosy.

The characteristic of tenderness is what enables and encourages us to dwell on textural qualities and the materiality of bodies in space. This is assisted by, among other things, costuming choices. Juliette wears a striped T-shirt that is tucked in at the waist; the tightness around her midriff, when combined with the striped pattern, creates tangible fabric creases as she moves, visually registering every twist of her

torso and the motion of her shoulders as she reaches for the warmed shirt. Lighting is also crucial. As the pair embrace, for instance, the angle of key lighting amplifies the soft texture of Jean's bare back. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our capacity to engage in virtual touch is awakened when characters themselves reach out with their fingers, or absorb the warmth of something, or are moved to touch. Delicate gestures, such as the way Juliette's fingertips run up Jean's arms and round to the back of his shoulders, are especially powerful stimulants for this.

Moving beyond the haptic, we might also consider appeals to the olfactory system as part of what 'sensuous' might encompass. Truffaut once characterised *L'Atalante* as 'a film that smells like dirty feet', wondering aloud 'whether it would be an exaggeration to speak of Vigo's work as the cinema of smells' (Truffaut 1985: 43). Joining hands with this idea, we might recall from the previous section Durgnat's list of 'funkily poetic images', including 'two plumped pillows reeking of sensuality' (Durgnat 1990: 55).⁴ 'Funkily' may suggest something bold or offbeat, but the primary sense of 'funky', according to the OED (2017), is 'having a strong or offensive smell, esp. smelling of sweat or other bodily excretions'. Meanwhile, 'reeking of sensuality' also conjures an idea of the pungent, and is itself a pungent phrase. If the pillows of the conjugal bed are voluptuously 'plumped', we might expect them to exude the aroma of fresh linen, but instead they reek (with a euphemistic allusion to copulatory sweat), or at least the image reeks – but not of something negative. 'Sensuality' is perhaps the lascivious twin sister of 'sensuousness': it also entails an appeal to the senses, but with more of a view to erotic pleasure. 'Reeking' is thus given a positive spin, abandoning its usual implication of something foul-smelling. Like Truffaut's remark about unwashed feet, it locates the film's permissive spirit as an invitation to sniff and savour.

This summoning of virtual aromas may be exemplified by an early shot of Père Jules alone in his cabin (around 14 minutes into the film). He is leaning on his bunk, ornamented by the rostrum of a giant swordfish. He is keeping company with various cats. He says that he will fix them something to eat (implying that he and the cats will share a meal) and moves to tend a saucepan that is bubbling on the stove hob. The wisps





of steam that exude from the frothing pan (its vapour given body by a spotlight) are perhaps the closest one can get to the visualisation of an odour: fishy smells, no doubt, perhaps the starchy scent of river mussels, or boiled offcuts from yesterday's catch. The cabin boy steps into the cabin and says, "I'm here for your dirty wash". "My dirty wash?" Jules asks, and turns slightly, so that the fill light briefly picks out the tattered front of his overalls and his grubby face. The cabin boy then starts rifling, in the background, to unearth fetid rags from a nearby chest while Jules return to the pot, plucking through its hot contents with his unwashed fingers. Aside from the wafts of fishy smells, and despite a few fragile shafts of morning

sunshine creeping through the cabin's frosted window, the cabin feels stale and musty. One factor here is the placement of the camera at chest-level, giving prominence to black recesses and corners untouched by natural light. This airlessness contrasts starkly with a cut outside to the deck, where Juliette is underway with her wash. The camera shows her from above, spiritedly bundling sheets into a tub. Jean is whistling and walking around with bare feet while he unfurls a wire. After the steamy cabin, the atmosphere feels incomparably fresh, even if the foley sounds still locate it as an industrial setting. One can almost smell soap flakes in the morning breeze across the Seine, tinged by notes of petroleum and tar.

Conclusion

My discussion here has focused on four adjectives – 'messy', 'unruly', 'lyrical' and 'sensuous' – that have arisen in the critical literature on the film and has sought to explore and elaborate these as capsule characterisations. Of course, no single encapsulation, or even a handful of them, will 'capture' everything in or about a given film, and certainly not one as varied and mixed as *L'Atalante*. Many other characterising adjectives would be worth considering, and indeed the course of my discussion here has thrown up an array of adjacently pertinent terms. The point here is not so much to adjudicate and rank these descriptors but rather to use the process of weighing synonyms against the evidence of the film in order to better define what makes it distinctive.

Besides illuminating the individual film, this is also a good method for investigating terms and concepts. Testing attribution against a particular example helps deter reliance on hypothetical instances and the temptation to generalise. The essay has attempted to show how capsule terms can be broken open to see if they contain more specific ascriptions. J. L. Austin once voiced a wish that the field of aesthetics might 'forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy' (Austin 1956: 9). For *L'Atalante*, that might mean forgetting for a while about poetic realism and getting down instead to the tender and the scruffy.

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¹ An authoritative account of the film's production and early distribution history can be found in Salles Gomes: 1972.

² My analysis refers to the 2017 restoration, supervised by Bernard Eisenschitz, available on Criterion Bluray. After the initial studio mauling, there have been attempts to restore the film in 1940, 1949, 1990, 2001 and 2017. There are small but considerable differences between the three latest restorations. For example, the close-up of a beaming Juliette receiving the flowers is present in the 2017 but not the 2001 version (although we do have a more distant shot of her smiling, so the point still broadly pertains).

³ Although I'm not aware of any evidence for this, it wouldn't be surprising to learn that a shot, or perhaps an entire scene, is missing here, perhaps having been cut by an overly zealous censor. In the 2001 version, there is a brief cutaway to a cat between the shot under the table legs and the shot of Jules withdrawing. While this 'solves' the immediate continuity issues, it doesn't make the cut to Jules's withdrawal any less weird, and arguably makes it weirder by acknowledging an omission.

⁴ I think Durnat is referring to the shot of Juliette walking up in bed alone, immediately after the scene of embrace just discussed. These pillows are indeed appealingly plumped. The other prominent image of the pillows appears in the Criterion version when Juliette is exploring Paris, an unmotivated cutaway, sandwiched weirdly, and accompanied by lurid jazzy music, between a shot of Juliette disembarking a tram and a shot of her arriving at a jewellery store, an almost avant-garde insert reminding us of her reasons for pursuing pleasure alone. But there is only one white pillow in this shot, and it is crumpled and twisted, a sad register of dissatisfaction.

STUDENT ESSAYS

The poetics of auto-mobility in Ryūsuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car*

Motion and stasis are unstable categories in Ryūsuke Hamaguchi's Oscar-winning film *Drive My Car* (2021). The plot follows the central character Yūsuke Kafuku (Hidetoshi Nishijima) as he tries to process the sudden death of his wife Oto (Reika Kirishima) while directing a multilingual production of Anton Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*. A significant amount of this process of moving on occurs in Yūsuke's red Saab Turbo, as many sequences within the film are dedicated to the way this car becomes a vessel for navigating the emotional landscape as much as the physical one. In fact, various characters throughout the almost three hour long journey of the film are referred to as having broken out of a condition of inertia, equatable to a form of 'death', which – as Anne Hurault-Paupe writes in examining various states of motion in film – 'by definition means the absence of movement' (2014: 8).

Yoon-a (Park Yu-rim), the dancer-turned-actress playing Sonya, for instance, speaks of how her 'Body refused to dance' after the trauma of a miscarriage. It is Chekhov's words that were able to shake her out of this stasis, 'Moving [her] body that was stuck before', as she tells Yūsuke over dinner. This is accentuated by the fact that Yoon-a communicates through Korean sign language, which allows for this movement to be

understood both metaphorically and also in the physicality entailed in signing as a language of gestures. Talking about his wife, Yūsuke explains how she was 'Lethargic for years' after their daughter died of pneumonia, relying on the very physical act of her body moving during sex to be able to write stories for her screenplays again. 'Even so, I didn't move', confesses Misaki (Tōko Miura), Yūsuke's assigned chauffeur, reflecting on how she left her abusive mother under the debris of their collapsed house after managing to crawl out herself.

Yūsuke relates to Misaki's confession: 'You killed your mother and I killed my wife', he says to her on their last big cathartic car drive attempting to confront the weight of their grief by visiting the remnants of Misaki's old house in the fictional Kami-junitaki Village in Hokkaido. In fact, affirming Hurault-Paupe's quote (2014), which correlates death to inaction, Yūsuke also credits his inertia with ultimately killing his wife. However, as he confesses, this inertia involved him being in *motion* for an entire day, as he let the wheels of his car turn relentlessly, instead of having a difficult conversation with his wife upon her request that same morning: 'I had no plans that day, but kept on driving', he admits to Misaki. In this confession, what the film plays on is an important differentiation of the car as an automobile versus the concept of *auto-mobility* in its broader connotations. Composed of the Greek word 'autos' meaning self, and the Latin word 'mobilis' pertaining to *movement*, the etymological roots bring to mind a more expansive understanding of the word. Beyond merely describing the car as a 'self-moving' vehicle, as I will argue, what *Drive My Car* truly draws attention to is the notion of a movement of the self, both in the sense of self-evolution through change, as well as in having the capacity to *move* and *be moved* by others. Thus, though the car becomes a crucial factor in facilitating Yūsuke's character evolution in the course of the film, at this stage, in fearing change and seeking refuge in the safe-space of his car instead of confronting his wife, the automobile ironically poses a hindrance to his *auto-mobility*. More so than existing in the dichotomy between being a 'living room on wheels' (from a 1949 Ford brochure cited in Urry 2004: 30) and representing the idealisation of 'freedom' (Urry 2004: 28), as popularly mentioned in the literature on cars and motion, here the car transformed into a form of entrapment.

What becomes apparent in the film is that simply going *through the motions* is actually a condition of stasis and does not equate to *moving forward*. Moving forward is in turn very much idealised within the film and the subplot of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as a way of relieving the weight of personal grief and being able to find peace in navigating the obstacles of life. Indeed, a central motif within the film, both narratively and aesthetically, is the questioning of motion and stasis as antithetical concepts, which exist on opposite ends of a spectrum: moments that may seem *mobile* are actually conditions of being *stuck*, whereas other instances of apparent inertia are what Iain Borden might call truly 'automobile moments', in which 'we see ideas, personal change, movement and the unfolding journey all collapse into one' (2012: 99). As I will argue, in *Drive My Car* these moments of *auto-mobility* involve being moved internally through a focus on *e-motion* and the reverberations of voices in and between people and places. Throughout this transformative process, the reconfiguration of the self is dynamically mirrored by the reconfiguration of space in the film, particularly, though not limited to, the space of the automobile itself.

Fixed in motion

In an effort to subsume this non-dualistic approach to motion and fixity, Jörg Beckmann has proposed the concept of 'motility', which 'describes the mobile stages where people are physically, virtually or residually not quite at rest and not quite on the move' (2004: 85). In fact, the car is exemplary of this contradiction, as John Urry observes that 'although automobility is a system of mobility, it necessitates minimal movement once one is strapped into the driving seat' (2004: 30). In the first half of the film, it is particularly this sense of entrapment in his daily routine of going *through the motions*, which is emphasised in Yūsuke's character, as the film creates parallels between his own body and that of the car. Therefore, what is suggested in seeing the car as an 'extension of the driver's body' (Urry 2004: 31) is an attentiveness to how its spatial affordances engender a particular set of traits which both Urry (2004) and Borden (2012) emphatically tie to notions of discipline, implying a disconnect from and control over one's

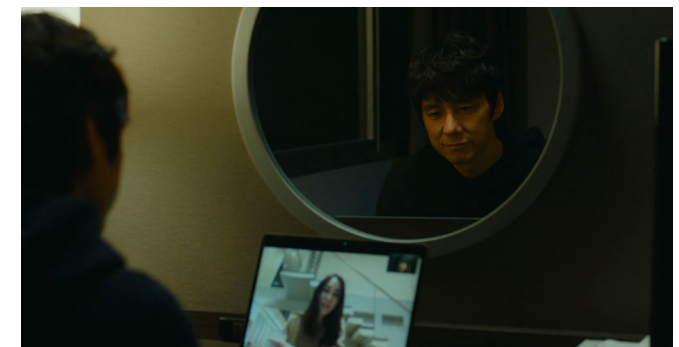
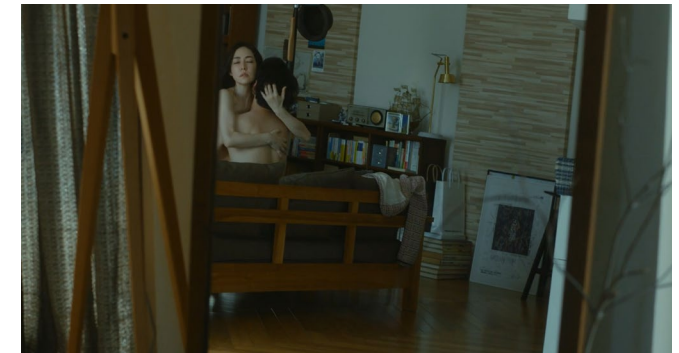
emotions. Being a good driver, in Borden's words, requires 'deep socio-psychological qualities of "independence" as well as "resourcefulness, calm behaviour under stressful conditions, [and] cold-bloodedness"' (2012: 61), which as character traits are not only applicable to Yūsuke in his driving, but additionally bleed over into his laconic style of directing, as well as into his relationship with his wife, Oto.

The interior layout of the car – a space which operates according to a 'complex and expanded field of vision' (Dibazar 2017: 315) – opens up the gaze, fracturing it like light across the rear- and side-view mirrors as well as windshield and windows. Within the setting of the car, Yūsuke's gaze being fractured through the rearview mirror cements the notion that the line between his body and that of the car have become blurred. However, when emulated outside of the car, this displacement of the gaze ironically formulates a visual regime of disconnection from reality. This is most notable in the scene in which he learns that his flight was cancelled and comes home

early only to find his wife having an affair. Simulating the spatial conditions of the car, in which the body of the driver is facing forward, the camera – taking Yūsuke's place – silently creeps up on the image of the affair, with the sound of it foreshadowing what Yūsuke is about to see in the reflection as he faces a sort of life-sized rearview mirror. A medium wide shot of him entrapped by the frame of the mirror, observing the affair without any overtly detectable perturbation creates the sense that he is encapsulated by the screens of a vehicle even in instances in which he is not actually driving, isolating him from the rest of the world.

Instead of intervening, he bottles up and quite literally drives away his emotions on his way to the airport hotel from where he later picks up a video call from his wife, pretending to be out of the country. The visual regime of disconnection is accentuated by the parallel created between Yūsuke's reflection in the computer screen during the video call and his reflection in the mirror above it. Both of these are once again

reminiscent of the spatial conditions of a car and its rear-view mirror. Though this is the first time since uncovering her betrayal that Yūsuke faces Oto, the automobile framing of this shot makes it impossible for their gazes to meet, establishing that he does not truly *face* her, neither practically nor metaphorically. As the camera placement denies immediate





access to his face, the layering of reflections reinforces a condition that keeps Yūsuke at an emotional distance. Though his body faces forward as a simulated driver, instead of moving toward Oto, the laptop screen and his white lies separating him from her emphasise his emotional immobility. In both of these scenes, the aforementioned qualities that make Yūsuke a good driver are the same ones that prevent him from interfering during the affair or from challenging his wife. Put in the language of automobility, he chooses in life to avoid obstacles instead of confronting them, which would entail a *crash*.

Strikingly, the only time in the film in which his movement is violently intercepted follows a couple of scenes later, when an actual car crash stops Yūsuke in his tracks. It forces him into a state of stasis in an attempt to break the cyclical loop of non-confrontation he has become accustomed to – akin to a perpetual state of being on autopilot. In fact, both his driving and his theatre practice as an actor and director are not only quite ritualistic in their nature, but they are also

deeply intertwined, as driving for Yūsuke is the medium through which he learns his lines. By repeatedly listening to his wife's voice on tape reciting the play he is currently performing (in this case *Uncle Vanya*), Yūsuke automates himself to be able to minutely respond to the precisely timed gaps in the tapes that are left for him to fill with his character's lines. As the wheels turn on the road alongside the tape of the cassette during Yūsuke's driving, it seems as though the recited text of the play relentlessly pushes forward in accordance with the motion of the car, leaving neither time nor space for considered self-reflection.

In fact, the car crash happens precisely after he stoically recites 'Yes, I do envy him a lot and his luck with women' – a line which in the play is directed by Vanya towards Astrov and in the film is mirrored in the dynamic between Yūsuke and Kōji Takatsuki (Masaki Okada), the young actor with whom his wife is having an affair. It is as if Yūsuke should be forced to reckon with this thought instead of *driving it away*



and passively accepting it. However, this crash ends up creating even greater parallels between Yūsuke and the body of the car, since he is later diagnosed with having a glaucoma in his left eye. Sharing a common blind spot in the driver-car assemblage of Yūsuke-as-automated and the car-as-anthropomorphised, this is a central motif, which is subtly referred to in a multitude of instances throughout the film. The medical

advice given to Yūsuke and Oto is that ‘Loss of vision in one eye is hard to detect because the other eye adapts. Which means that it doesn’t impact daily activities, and by the time one notices it, it’s often too late’. This forms a sort of metaphor for Yūsuke’s intense regret for having feared change so much that he has completely disassociated from his emotions. Only when he stands on the hilltop of Misaki’s formerly destroyed house does he notice what it is that could have saved his relationship with his wife two years after her death.

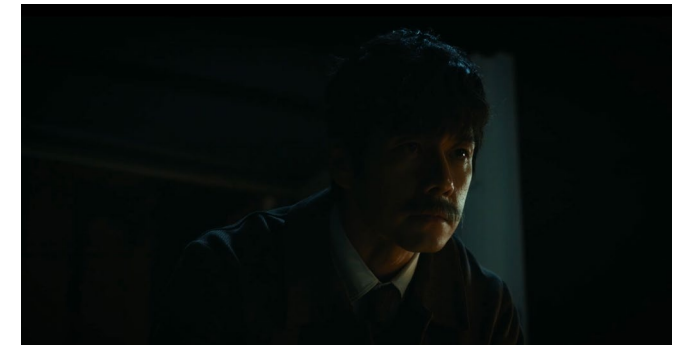
One of the scenes in which his inertia is most apparent is the moment that directly precipitates him finding his wife’s dead body in their apartment when, in his car, he listens to Sonya’s closing words in *Uncle Vanya*. This single frontal medium close-up shot, which rests on Yūsuke listening to this monologue, cocoons him in the car, once more evoking it as a form of cage. Though his eyes well up at Sonya’s words, instead of letting a tear out, he physically puts one in

his left eye, in the form of eye drops prescribed to him for his glaucoma. These drops lead an artificial tear to fall from his blind spot, imbuing Yūsuke’s experience of emotions with a mechanised quality, as his feelings are always mediated and tightly controlled. This strict frame of control is additionally entrenched by his multilingual approach on stage which does not leave space for deviation or spontaneity. The words of the play form a cage in themselves, due to the precision needed of an actor to adhere to the exact translations in their correct timing, which the audience reads along on the screen above the stage. This unswerving nature assures the emotional journey of all participants remains one which is set in its established ways.

Spaces of liminality

‘Chekhov is terrifying,’ Yūsuke tells Kōji on his decision to not play Vanya himself after Oto’s death, but instead cast his wife’s lover in the role: ‘When you say his lines, it drags out the real you. Don’t you feel it? I can’t bear that anymore. Which means I can no longer yield myself up to this role.’ Part of Yūsuke’s journey throughout the film is learning to fully commit to the journey the character of Vanya is going through, instead of, for example, running off stage a line too early in one of his performances shortly after his wife’s funeral. The scene in question was the same one he was reciting just preceding his car crash in which Vanya is being asked whether Yelena is faithful to the Professor. As he is saying the lines ‘I envy him a lot’ and ‘That woman’s fidelity is a lie through and through,’ Yūsuke feels the claustrophobia of the text, acting as a mirror to parts of his life he would rather deny, especially in the delivery of the latter sentence, during which he stops projecting his voice. Instead, he says this line to himself, recognising it as a private truth. Echoing Yoon-a’s quote from the start of this essay, Chekhov’s words indeed move his body, yet in doing so cut short the emotional journey, guiding him offstage so as to escape from facing these feelings. Once more, Yūsuke does not allow himself to cry and attempts to regain composure over his emotions through discipline and denial. Seeking refuge backstage during the performance, framed in a medium close-up shot,

most of his face is plunged in shadows except for his left side, where his eye catches the light with a glint and draws the viewers’ gaze to it as a focal point. Hence, it might be said that Chekhov’s words illuminated something in him which he was turning a blind eye to, urging him to confront an uncomfortable truth. In creating a parallel between this delicate moment of the negotiation of private and public moments on stage and the scene of his car crash, this is just one of a myriad of moments in which the theatre and the car are presented as analogous spatial formations. This is a parallel which Haruki Murakami himself had already drawn out in the short story this film is based on. In figuring of the self as a *place* you travel away from and return to, in the short story, Yūsuke therefore speaks of acting as a form of *auto-mobility*: ‘But the place you return to is always slightly different from the place you left. That’s the rule. It can never be exactly the same’ (Murakami 2018: 24).



As vehicles of transformation and places of transit, both cars and the theatre function as uniquely ‘liminal’ spaces, echoing Victor Turner’s meditation (1974) on Arnold van Gennep. Turner expands on what we might be able to consider ‘rites of passage’ beyond overtly ritualised ceremonies, creating a link between religion and the journey of being transformed by a work of art. The journey of driving in a car features as a uniquely apt ‘[t]ransition rite’ (ibid.: 57) for Hamaguchi’s characters, as it emblematises all the spatial and psychological qualities of ‘crossing [...] a threshold which separates two distinct areas’, precisely, as Turner writes, because the ‘passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a

parallel passage in space' (ibid.: 58). With this in mind, what becomes clear is that the true moment of *auto-mobility* – of an evolution of the self – for Yūsuke does not only happen in him making peace with the role of Vanya in returning to play that character and confronting those uncomfortable emotions. In particular, it is also actualised in transcending that character

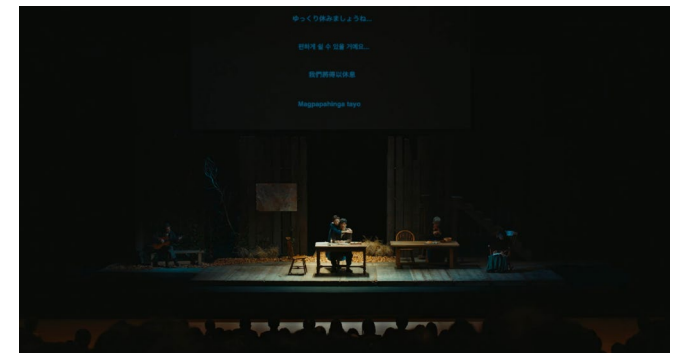


in his personal life and learning to play the role of Sonya, who comforts her uncle, and as previously mentioned, teaches him the importance of *moving on* as the key principle within both the film and its subplot of the play.

This is epitomised by the big moment of catharsis between him and Misaki on the hilltop in front of the remnants of her collapsed house and broken past. Instead of cutting the monologue short, Yūsuke is not only the one mirroring Sonya's words back to Misaki in an embrace, but furthermore allows himself to be visibly *moved* for the first time in the film, overtly externalising his emotions, as a single tear falls from his eye. He lets the pain of his vocal texture resonate in the space, creating room for a momentary loss of composure. By speaking it out into existence, Yūsuke sets his pain free rather than continuing to be weighed down by his misery. The full monologue is in fact a beacon of hope within the play, a plea that no matter how difficult life may be, the only way to actually find peace and be able to *rest*, is to *move on*: 'What can we do? We must live our lives. [...] And then at last, we shall rest. I believe it. I strongly believe it from the bottom of my heart. When that time comes, we shall rest.' In this sense, Chekhov's words resonate with the complicated dynamics of mobility and fixity and Beckmann's proposed notion of 'motility', in which 'one is never just "at rest" or solely "on the move"' (2004: 85), as these two conditions do not seem to exist irrespectively. This blurring of motion and stasis in which movement is exposed as a form of impasse is encompassed in the motifs of cyclicity that are repeatedly scattered throughout the film, such as the turning wheels of a car, the spools of magnetic audio tape on a cassette, or the spinning vinyl under the pin of a record player. It is only by breaking out of this trapped cyclicity, created between Yūsuke and Vanya, that he is truly able to return back to playing the character in the next scene, in which he is reliving this *auto-mobile* moment on stage with Yoon-a signing the words 'We shall rest' around his body as part of an embrace. Echoing Murakami's words from the short story as previously mentioned, he has therefore undergone a journey to return back to himself, albeit having transformed along the way.

There are particular affordances of the car as a dynamic space within the film, which facilitate this journey. Multiple reviews of the film reference this quasi-religious character of

the car, calling it a 'confession booth' on wheels (Brzeski 2021) or likening the striking red colour of the Saab to a Shinto shrine (Thomas 2022). Ironically, a lot of the affordances, which affectively create such an atmosphere, involve a slightly different framing of the same ones, which cemented Yūsuke's car as a cage, as previously analysed. Yet, they involve a notable





change of Yūsuke's sense perception within the car, as he is forced into its backseat for the first time, having to learn to abandon his 'cold-blooded' over-disciplined driver-subjectivity (Borden 2012: 61) for the sake of not only letting someone else into his physical and personal space, but additionally of learning to allow himself to be moved by them, as the imperative tone of the film's title *Drive My Car* suggests.

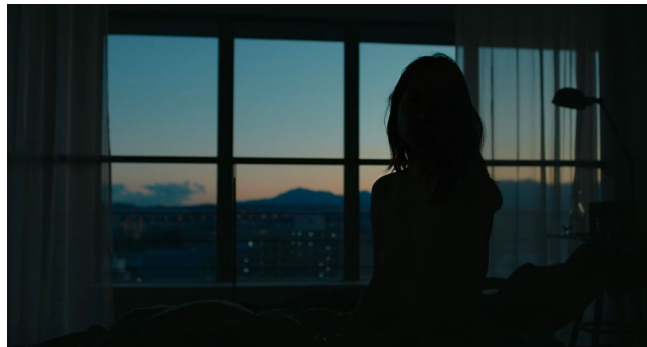
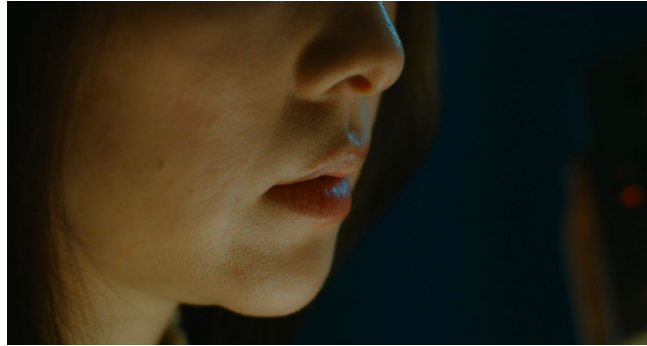
Analysing the driving kinaesthetics of the film, it becomes clear that Hiroshima as a transitional city for both of the main characters is far from a coincidental choice as the backdrop for their personal journey. Even though its weighted history is never directly addressed, there is a unique way in which the architectural space and rhythms of the city become internalised by Misaki and Yūsuke driving through its streets and motorways. This manifests itself in a particular focus on unhindered motion and forward movement, which serve as a reminder to strive for peace. Metaphorically, this is reminiscent of Sonya's cathartic final words, in which she urges both

herself and Vanya to move through and past their grief. Misaki explicitly addresses this philosophy when showing Yūsuke the city's waste incineration facility as they walk through its glass atrium, which has been designed in order to extend the 'Axis of Peace', architecturally connecting the three most important monuments in the city. As she explains, this allows the Axis to 'Continue on to the sea without being severed.' This is one of the few moments in the film in which we see them walking instead of driving, yet again there are direct links drawn to the spatial formation of driving, as their bodies both face forward in the same direction towards a common destination, which takes them away from the Atomic Bomb Dome as the centre of pain, towards the sea as a place that can still it. The effortlessness of unhindered motion facilitated through the Saab is incredibly pronounced throughout the entire film. With the exception of the aforementioned car crash, there are never any obstacles in the Saab's way, and the multiple high angle shots of it manoeuvring the cityscape illuminate the smoothness of



the car's pull towards relentless forward motion and reveal the camera's hypnotic attention. This is ultimately cited as the reason for choosing red as the colour of the car, as this distinguishes it against the otherwise predominantly grey and blue-tinted landscapes (Molloy 2023).

As important moments of connection happen in the tunnels of the motorways, their unique status as a 'vector' of movement instead of being a concrete place (Morse in Urry 2006: 6), allows for these tunnels to function as an emblem of liminality itself, accelerating the characters' transformative process. From within the car, the 'peculiarly hypnotic effect of pure movement, velocity and motion' (Borden 2012: 81), through which the outside world becomes distorted, emphasises that what the characters see through the car windows are not concrete objects, but rather the condition of motion as unhindered in itself. This creates the opposite effect than Hurault-Paupe's 'aesthetics of curiosity' (2014: 6), which she poses as being archetypal of the road movie, or Pedram Dibazar's analysis of Abbas Kiarostami's films, which 'join the everyday' (2017: 322). Especially in the latter case, the road functions as an unpredictable character, who will stop you in your tracks in ways 'over which no one seems to have control' (ibid.: 320) and demands an interaction. Instead, *Drive My Car* comes closer to van Gennepe's observation of liminal spaces in rites of passage, which rely on the 'physical separation of ritual subjects from the rest of society' (van Gennepe in Turner 1974: 58). The reflection is turned inwards towards the self, just as the car is relentlessly moving Misaki and Yūsuke forward.



The narrative structure of the film mirrors this forward drive as interruptions to the narrative flow are strategically avoided. Instead *Uncle Vanya* and Oto's story, used as subplots, intertwine with the main plot to perform the role that prolepses and flashbacks might. That being said, there is one singular flashback scene, which therefore stands out in the film, even though it is only four seconds long. This scene

consists of an almost imperceptible zoom in on Oto's back as she is reciting the text for *Uncle Vanya* onto a cassette recorder, jarringly intercut with an extreme close-up of her lips: 'I'm sure that the truth [...] isn't that frightening. What is most frightening, is not knowing it.' This is not the first time Oto and the unknown are enlaced. In fact, this is how the film first introduces us to the character in its very first scene, lingering on Oto's darkened silhouette set against multiple window frames while reciting one of her stories to Yūsuke. As it takes more than four minutes for the viewers to see her face for the first time, this establishes the recurring motif of Oto as an enigma, which for Yūsuke provokes the central question haunting him after her death: Did he ever really know his wife? This disconnect between the interiority and exteriority of a person is re-articulated in the aesthetics of the Saab, as its bold exterior contrasts with the scenes filmed within the car, which provide a much more subdued and dark background, cocooning the characters. This allows for the car's body to

serve as a metaphor for the enigma of the *Other*, which – as Misaki and Kōji attempt to teach Yūsuke – one must ultimately make peace with in order to be able to move on in life.

Voice as vector

In relation to Oto, both the aforementioned scenes evoke her un-graspability, bolstering an air of elusiveness and mystique that is suggested by the unveiling of her name's true meaning: pure 'Sound'. Especially as her voice becomes incorporated into the body of the car in the tapes Yūsuke relentlessly listens to every time he drives, though the viewers are technically aware of the source of this sound, she becomes somewhat of an 'acousmatic being' after Michel Chion's examination of the voice in cinema (1999: 20). Chion's pursuit is to truly pay analytic attention to the grain of vocal textures, which dress a film similarly to other aesthetic features, instead of merely viewing it as a 'vehicle for the verbal signifier' (Chion 1999: 1) and conflating it with speech. Both Chion and Charles Affron focus on the elusiveness of the voice (Chion 1999: 1) and the intense effects of presence it therefore harbours, both in the sense that it 'seems to fade away at the very moment it is produced' (Affron 1982: 105), as well as in its 'omnidirectionality' (Chion 1994: 33), dispersing 'like a gas' throughout the space (ibid.: 144) as it escapes the frame of the screen. Affron expands on Jacques Derrida's musings on the effects of presence that sound creates by emphasising that this even holds true for the 'reproduced voice', which for him is 'as generative of sound waves as the voice that is actually emitted in the present' (1982: 104). This aptly explains the omnipotent quality of Oto's voice in the car, at times superseding the bounds of the car-body and its diegetic sound, and reverberating in the ether. Chion's description of the 'acousmètre' as a voice that 'wander[s] along the surface [of the screen], at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle' (1994: 23) evokes Oto's restless soul post mortem haunting Yūsuke as he wrestles with her enigmatic nature. Through sound her presence is eerily felt, even as her voice undergoes a twofold process of disembodiment and alienation, as it is not only playback from a tape, but moreover – within the frame of *Uncle Vanya* – a reciting of words which are not her own.

This vocal aspect interacts interestingly with a self-imposed 'crisis of speech' (Affron 1982: 119) and a Bressonian process of automation, which is shown to be integral to Yūsuke's theatrical rehearsals in staging a multilingual play. Creating a scenario in which the actors cannot directly understand their scene partner's words, they are therefore forced to focus on their voice in isolation rather than as a 'vehicle' (Chion 1999: 1). Yūsuke explains to Kōji, who is struggling with this process, that this is essential for understanding what it means to truly listen to and 'Yield' oneself to another. As Chion ruminates on the importance of vocal texture and 'monotonous diction' in Robert Bresson's work, '[t]he Bressonian model speaks like we listen' (1999: 83). Thereby he is referring to the director's aversion to any form of externalisation of emotion through acting, which also includes an aversion to the theatrical voice resonating within the space. Speaking as listening, therefore, implies an inwardly centripetal movement of the voice

geared towards self-reflection. This is directly corroborated by the spatial configurations, as Yūsuke consciously closes the rehearsal space to induce this centripetal vocal movement and isolate the voice. Any time he is unhappy with his actors he fixes their bodies into a state of stasis around the rehearsal table, asking them to return to reciting the text, rather than allowing them to move freely through the space. Instead, Yūsuke seems to want his actors to focus on how they are being moved by the voices around them, precisely because their body is fixed. This notion further expands Beckmann's concept of 'motility' (2004), so as to draw attention to the movement of sound waves and affective *e-motion*.

The fixed body and averted gaze of the rehearsal space, as the actors are focused on connecting through their voice rather than through eye contact, is directly analogous to the embodied state of being in a car. As Dibazar (2017) notes, because of the displacement of gazes and forward facing

bodies, eye contact is not necessary for emotional connection within the passenger-driver assemblage of the car. Instead, these embodied conditions once more serve to isolate the voice and set it free within the space. The car therefore seems ideal for the endeavour of exploring voices – a central interest in Hamaguchi's cinematic practice (Kwon 2023). Michael Bull has analysed in depth the way in which people's experience of the car as conducive to personal freedom is directly intertwined with the soundscape and sound system of the car, reinstating it as a 'symbolic sanctuary' (2020: 371). This directly links back to Yūsuke jokingly reminiscing to Misaki about how Oto reconsidered marrying him, because her new name – Oto Kafuku – would translate to 'House of Gospel'. Posthumously, this analogy is made physically palpable through Oto's interpolation with the body of the red Saab and the words of Chekhov, which initially almost act as the car fuel, setting them into motion. Yet, Yūsuke's philosophy of acting does not seem to corroborate his understanding of people beyond the rehearsal table. In using a Bressonian *flattening* tactic of reducing his wife to the disembodied reciting of lines, it becomes clear that applying the same tactics of setting her *true* essence free by isolating her voice does not suffice as a key to her enigma. Yūsuke has to reckon with the fact that he has not himself truly learned what he is trying to teach his actors through his multilingual approach. Therefore, ironically his *blind spot* is realising that though Oto and him spoke the same language, he did not truly listen to her, which additionally means truly listening to himself, as Kōji points out to him: 'If you really want to look at someone, then your only option is to look at yourself squarely and deeply.'

Thus, voice in *Drive My Car* functions almost like a vector of movement in itself, parallel to the motorways and tunnels of unhindered motion in its infectious liminal character of being 'non-spatial' (Bull 2020: 361). Superseding the obstacles of the visual realm, sound waves are able to physically traverse skin barriers and turn bodies into chambers of reverberation. In this way the dichotomy between self and other is problematised, underlining Kōji's insight about how the other exists and resonates within the self. It can therefore be said that Hamaguchi places attention on the quality of voices within his film to demonstrate a



physical and emotional sense of *opening up*. This is especially felt in the scenes of Yūsuke and Misaki's last big cathartic drive to her old house, in which the tunnels they pass on the motorway initiate their mutual confessions about their grief. In one particular moment the camera is on the backseat of the car and the shot, which is similar to the initial shots of Yūsuke in his car discussed at the start of this essay, is able to frame both the relentless forward pull of the motorway through the windshield and Misaki's eyes in the rearview mirror. Once Yūsuke starts his confession, Misaki's eyes disappear from the rearview mirror as it is plunged into the darkness of the night. This displacement of the gaze has a confession-booth effect, for it emphasises how it is the voice which takes the characters on this transformative journey as a vector of unhindered motion.

In Hamaguchi's attempt to deconstruct listening as a practice, it is by no means a coincidence that Sonya's final guiding

words of both the play and the film, assuring Vanya that they will eventually 'Rest' and find peace, visually reverberate around Yūsuke on stage, as Yoon-a envelops him within the literal embrace of her language. The Korean sign language, as part of a 'corp-oral' culture of signing (Eleanor Leith in



Richardson 2017: 46), becomes the emblematic symbol of voice-as-motion. It echoes the idealisation of being *moved* by someone, which reverberates throughout the film. As Yoon-a quite literally draws a smile on Yūsuke's face to sign the line 'We shall rejoice, and with tender smiles on our faces', she allows Chekhov's words to genuinely set his body into motion, now that he is ready to process them. Strikingly, when Yoon-a signs the line 'We'll look back on our current sorrow', sorrow becomes spatial in this configuration, as both of them track it with their eyes and then physically leave it behind, through which Yoon-a's voice-in-movement parallels the transformative potential of the car.

Misaki and Yūsuke's journey towards creating space for emotional resonance also corresponds to the physical opening up of the space of the car over the course of the film. This reaches a pinnacle right after Kōji points out Yūsuke's *blind spot* to him, when Yūsuke once and for all moves to the front passenger seat of the car – as a first crucial step towards *auto-mobility* – and in silence offers a cigarette to Misaki. Loosening the single rule he had given her of 'No smoking in the car', his evolution of self – and the fact that he has not only *let someone* in his personal space, but moreover allowed himself to be changed by this – is further underscored through the physical opening of the car hood. In line with the symbolic imagery of the red Saab paralleling a Shinto shrine and being turned into a 'House of Gospel' through Oto's voice, the burning cigarettes Yūsuke and Misaki hold through the open hood of the car are reminiscent of incense sticks. As a form of symbolic purification to open up space for renewal and regeneration, from Hiroshima's waste incineration facility to the very fuel that moves the car forward, the act of burning is another recurring motif in the film, ridding the characters of the dead weight of grief they are harbouring and which is holding them back.

Susan Sontag has pointed out that silence is 'not an empty signifier', and importantly silence in the film also becomes a voice in itself (Olsson 2022: 64). On various occasions throughout the film, silence interacts with and influences the spatial dynamics of the car, creating a suffocating and claustrophobic feeling of discomfort. Misaki and Yūsuke initially combat this through playing Oto's tapes as a mediator of their





new-found intimacy within the space of the car. Eventually though, they stop feeling the need to play the tape, not only because they are opening up to each other, but also because they have become close enough to sit in comfortable silence.

Conclusion

Drive My Car is a film using the spatial configuration of the car as a vehicle of interrogation for an array of dichotomies, including, but not limited to, motion and stasis, and voice and silence. In accompanying Yūsuke's transformative journey, the red Saab undergoes multiple transformations itself throughout the course of the film, as it morphs from being a cage holding him hostage, to gradually opening up as a space, striking a fine balance between confronting him and Misaki with their grief and pushing them to move past it.

It also metamorphoses from acting as a symbol of Yūsuke's self – sharing a common blind spot and aversion to let anyone else in – to becoming a hollow version of his disembodied wife whose elusiveness Yūsuke is yearning to understand on the basis of her voice. Lastly, it encapsulates the apparent crevasse between people's interiority and exteriority in Yūsuke's inquisition of the *Other* as an enigma, while also providing the space to teach him how to truly listen to others, through an inquisition of the self. Only after this latter instance can we truly speak of moments in which the motion of the car coincides with the mobility of the self to create moments of *auto-mobility*. The Saab's dwelling in transit is undoubtedly transformative, as it is depicted as a dynamically constituted space with particular affordances such as isolating the voice, complicating the gaze, and fixing the body into a forward state of motion. These bestow it with a quasi-religious

character that not only marks it as a liminal space itself, but moreover also allows each person within it to become open to mutually affecting reverberations – both sonic and emotional. In this way, although it starts out as a symbol of individualism, the car ends as an emblem of relationality, beyond any notion of a single driver, epitomising Beckmann's notion of 'motility', in which at long last it is impossible to tell who 'are the movers or the moved' (2004: 85).

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