

Other Ways to Die:  
A Study of the Depiction of Dying  
Protagonists in Contemporary  
Feature Film

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a consideration of how dying is expressed and made legible in the cinematic medium. Specifically, the focus of this study is the nature and function of dying protagonists in film, where the central character is aware of his or her impending death. In the films discussed, the protagonist bears knowledge of their death as imminent, be it in the sentence of degenerative illness, as the result of some supernatural intervention, or as the consequence of a tragically unalterable event. The ways in which these films interpret, treat and portray the anxiety brought about by death-awareness is manifold, yet united by the common goal of translating the dying into a mode of being-with-death. I examine this mode of being-with-death as shaped by a uniquely cinematic kind of intelligence, where images themselves articulate the poignant ontological predicament of accounting for the place of mortality in life. The thesis tested is thus whether these films invent an avatar of death to act as a substitute for actual death, or whether the very materiality of cinema suggests its own philosophical, artistic and ethical relation toward the end of existence.

The protagonists under observation here challenge and exemplify the nuances of each of these propositions. Examples are drawn from the work of Spanish director, Alejandro Amenabar, American auteur, Gus Van Sant, as well as a specific reading of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), and a selection of contemporary film comedies. The choice of films has been based, firstly, upon the presence of this dying protagonist, and secondly, on the particularity with which their visual economies encompass the limitations and imaginative possibilities of representing this condition. My reading of these texts puts forward the argument that the depiction of the experience of the dying protagonist is, to borrow from Roland Barthes, never an effect but always instead a

protocol of the representational medium. In short, with its characteristics of duration and performance, dying is a process to be relished on screen.<sup>1</sup> This thanatological study, however, does not adopt a survey approach, nor does it assert that each subset of films, taken as a whole, presents a definitive overview of how contemporary cinema represents dying. Neither does it assess the centrality of death awareness to culture at large. Rather, the aim of this thesis is to bring into relief as clearly as possible the representation of dying and death awareness as it is construed from the data of the cinematic texts in question. The extraction of stills from these works is thus included to aid this project. In the films considered, the stills offer a providential glimpse into the aesthetic subject-hood of the dying protagonist, and stand as evidence of the acute fascination they work to evoke from spectators.

Within the context of these categories, this dissertation proposes that the protocol of cinematic dying extends the possibility of existing in some way alongside death. I argue that the films in question operate and generate effects in which dying is made to feel logical and justified, incorporated in such a way as to pacify its otherwise unbearable intrusion. In particular, I argue that death acquires a self-sacrificial and transcendent immanence in the face of the physical and mental suffering depicted in Amenabar and Friedkin's films. Conversely, the type of melancholic unresponsiveness Van Sant's cinema depicts renders death as an indiscriminate and unfeeling threat, without recourse to reason or order. It is co-extensive to, and continuous with, life in Van Sant's universe. In film comedy, the translation of death-awareness into a performance of comic irreverence simultaneously accepts and defies death's seeming incomprehensibility. The intersection of the thinking of Jacques Derrida, Susan Sontag, Jacques Lacan, Roland

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan

Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas, Laura Mulvey, Catherine Belsey and Slavoj Žižek provide a means of critically apprehending the cinematography of these various situations. In particular, the critical approaches followed have been those that draw attention to the reciprocal relations that exist between this dying figure (the one who knows that he or she is to die) and the cinematic space in which they expire. In tracing this relationship I hope to also indicate how this very particular performance ramifies in the subject marked by the signifier.



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## STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE CONTRIBUTION

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.



# CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vii
Statement of candidate contribution	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter One	21
Alejandro Amenabar's <i>The Others</i> (2001) and <i>The Sea Inside</i> (2004)	
Chapter Two	75
The Santian Character	
Chapter Three	121
William Friedkin's <i>The Exorcist</i> (1973)	
Chapter Four	165
Comedy and Dying	
Conclusion	219
References	
Bibliography	231
Filmography	237



# INTRODUCTION

In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine.

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984.

The dying protagonist on film is a matchless individual. The awareness of death bestows this inalienable isolation, assigning a burden that can neither be shared nor mitigated by others. This isolation translates to a problem, a nightmare, a calling and source of eventual enlightenment, obliging such characters to embark upon journeys of strenuous suffering, self-assessment and self-sacrifice as a way to make sense of their fate. The effects of this kind of withdrawal, however, are two-fold. Awareness of one's death as imminent deprives but also enhances the individual it affects, making this protagonist seem troubled yet otherworldly, attuned to portentous omens otherwise concealed within the realm of everyday life. Next to death, life becomes anarchic yet enigmatic, and for such creatures, the task is to assimilate this profusion of meanings into day-to-day existence. Knowledge of death must, in some way, be borne, and it is a challenge that asks this character to resolve seemingly contradictory positions: that of living, and that of dying. It follows, then, that the distinguishing quality of the dying protagonist is the extent to which they suffer the difficulty – if not impossibility – of achieving this goal.

Films of the dying protagonist are structured by narratives and typified by visual imagery that convey a sense that these characters are especially predisposed to self-sacrifice and suffering. Often, it is only until the knowledge of death is encountered that the dying protagonist alights upon their purpose. In films of dying protagonist, the world is frequently transformed and abstracted by death-awareness. The imposition of death-

awareness creates conditions that are vigorously and often futilely endured. A journey toward meaning is variously undertaken, one that ultimately extends the possibility of existing in some way alongside death. In the realm of light-hearted melodrama, for example, the interim between the overriding awareness of death, and death itself, is particularly drawn out. Dying is synonymous with a kind of romance of the self in movies such as *Cocoon* (dir. Ron Howard, 1985), where the elderly and the infirm are cast as the ideal recipients of death's intractable wisdom that, once grasped, inspires the determination to live better. The acceptance of impending mortality in *The Bucket List* (dir. Rob Reiner, 2007) and *Funny People* (dir. Judd Apatow, 2009) similarly represents a more robust alternative to sickness, a rebellion against medical logic, and the final adventure that redeems the past and rejuvenates the soul. The indignities and prosaic suffering of the terminally ill are mostly concealed, and if they do appear, it is to accentuate the momentary interference of such obstacles on the path to emotional enlightenment.

Dying translates to a performance that provides the central conflict, and triumph, for this particular character, and which constitutes the drama that propels the cinematic narrative in which they feature. Once the certainty of death is accepted, the horizon of self-discovery looms large. The last, significant days of the dying are chronicled by videotape in *My Life* (dir. Bruce Joel Rubin, 1993), and its pain equates to the drama of retroactively animating the past in Anthony Minghella's, *The English Patient* (1996). In both films, the dying protagonist is forced, through sickness and injury, to embark upon a journey of complete reinvention. Whether captured by the video diary, or illuminated through richly detailed flashbacks, immanent death presents as a mystery that self-reflection and

imagination can decipher. Joel Schumacher's melodrama, *Dying Young* (1991), takes this concept further still, with a cancer patient, Victor Geddes (Campbell Scott), hiring an unqualified, but luminously pretty woman (Hilary O'Neil, played by Julia Roberts) to tend to him in his final, elegant moments. Hilary is the muse to Victor's terminal condition and it blossoms under her earnest tutelage to reveal nothing less than the meaning of life. Significantly, dying is a project that is tasked to the intellect, which must strive to comprehend it. It is a theme that continues in such Hollywood fare as *Meet Joe Black* (dir. Martin Brest, 1998), which goes so far as to bestow upon its silently ailing protagonist (played by Anthony Hopkins) the fantasy of interrogating mortality itself (in the form of Brad Pitt). This kind of fantasised encounter with mortality, however, turns sinister in *Flatliners* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1990), where a group of young medical students' experiments with near-death experiences provokes a crisis of self-discovery, forcing each character to come to terms with their own masochistic and suicidal proclivities. Within the context of these varied genres, the experience of near or approaching death brings urgency and verification to the life it endangers. What emerges is a protagonist that suffers death throughout life, constituted through a performance of rebellion or enlightened acceptance that works to postpone and displace actual death in the cinematic narrative.

While narrative structures these representations, adhering to a purely narratological view overlooks the heterogeneity of filmic representations, a diversity which extends to the specific ways in which dying is *embodied* in film. Indeed, it is the principle objective of this project to redeem the dying figure on screen from exclusively discursive interpretation, turning the question of what death means for cinema and how cinema makes meaning of death, into an exploration of how the medium itself invents and

animates a seemingly logical, tangible, and particularly appealing correspondence to the phenomenon of dying. As a result, this thesis pays particular attention to the visual motifs that configure these dying protagonists. More especially, the texts that will be discussed are distinguished by the *presence of a central character burdened from the outset by danger, illness or suicidal impulses*. Across each chapter, the aesthetic disposition of each film will be derived from the form of the cinematic material (images, cuts, language, and drama) made available through the film and via the extraction of individual screenshots. From the evidence of this kind of cinematic content, this thesis seeks to define the dying protagonist by expanding upon the ways in which this figure visibly translates the unbearableness of death into a performance that suggests the possibility of existing alongside it. Such performances, this thesis then argues, reflect contemporary anxieties about mortality, and intimate the ontological necessity of accounting for the phenomenon in cultural works. The centrality and visibility of the dying protagonist is thus posited as a bearable relation these films extend to the fundamental psychic orientation of human life that is always turned toward it, or what amounts to the same thing, turned away from it.

Proximity to death segregates the dying protagonist and is often the source of great suffering and anger. For the viewer, this presents an intriguing quality that provokes sympathy and secures interest. This confluence of the relatable and the remote comprises the pleasure and frustration we take in their journey on screen, and the cinematic medium in general. Gilberto Perez comments upon this paradox by emphasising the unique position of film as a medium poised between enactment and narration. In *The Material Ghost*, Perez argues that the sensibility of cinema rests on the strange logic of its forms. He writes:



The question is what kind of image the screen holds, what kind of representation of reality... Images on screen carry in them something of the world itself, something material, and yet something transposed, transformed into another world...Hence both the peculiar closeness to reality and the no less peculiar suspension from reality, the juncture of world and otherworldliness distinctive of the film image.<sup>1</sup>

Cinematic illusions are rich, textured and alluring, he argues, because they provide space for viewers to experience an array of thoughts and responses.<sup>2</sup> The dying protagonist dwells with particular urgency at the juncture of these polarities, between reality and otherworldliness, absence and presence. It is a figure made explicitly accessible to the cinematic spectator as a referent of the real (in the form of death), capable of bolstering and destabilising our myths of aesthetic self-hood. In films of the dying protagonist, it will thus be argued that the relationship between subjectivity and film form is tested, as engagement with such characters requires an exigent and, at times, perplexing combination of expectation (since the idea of death is embodied) and frustration (what is embodied is only an idea).

The dying protagonist *suffers* the unbearable proximity of death. This suffering stems from, and appears to us on screen, as the internalisation of life's mutability. The performance gestures toward an eventual demise whilst at the same time animating these characters and emphasising their distinct cinematic presence. As a consequence, we track an embodied journey through these characters, a journey that Murray Smith describes in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, as mediated by film's imaginative capabilities.<sup>3</sup> Spectators are neither deceived with respect to the status of cinematic illusions, he proposes, nor entirely caught within the cultural assumptions of

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<sup>1</sup> Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 27-8.

<sup>2</sup> Perez. *The Material Ghost*, p. 291.

<sup>3</sup> Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 41.

those representations.<sup>4</sup> The characters that this thesis investigates make accessible a version of dying that we do not necessarily mistake for any actual experience of dying (much less our own), but which transposes the reality of death into a cinematic performance that offers an engaging verisimilitude to the survivalism of egocentric identity. Suffering death in life, these sharply realised protagonists first and foremost create an embodied impression of a reality that exists *alongside* the intractability of mortality. It is a fantasised imagining, this thesis argues, one that makes apparent the aesthetic project of the cinematic medium, those continually shifting, reciprocal lines of representation and translation that forge links with viewers, the filmic world, and the wider context of social interaction.

This thesis examines the nature and effect of the dying protagonist as it unfolds variously in performances ranging from the comic (*Groundhog Day*, *The Odd Couple*), the apathetic (*Last Days*, *Elephant*, *Gerry*), the terrified (*The Exorcist*, *The Others*) and the resigned (*The Sea Inside*). Each personality dramatises the fated encounter with death that psychoanalysis advocates as characterising and applying meaning to our existence. In his 1917 essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud associates melancholy with apathy and sadness, as well as identifying its links to narcissistic pathologies. Freud posits melancholy as a frame of mind typified by an excessive, often unconscious apprehension of loss. Human desires, and the cultural constructions that are assembled to appease them, are always fractured by a loss that seems in excess of any loss in particular. The dying protagonist is disconsolate in this respect, awaiting loss whilst already experiencing its effects, suspended in retrospective longing. This is the economy of the elegiac ego that Freud outlined, where the pain of mutability and the futility of our desire to conquer it

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Engaging Characters*, p. 41.

does not reduce the field of our expressions, but rather intensifies them: “Transience value is scarcity in time.”<sup>5</sup> Longing for the freedom of a past unencumbered by death-awareness, yet transformed irretrievably by its incursion on the present, the world of the dying protagonist is memorialised loss. Days repeat, nightmares recur, and fantasy proliferates. The eyes of the dying protagonist gaze out upon a world as tenuous and evocative as a dream.

Cinema of the dying protagonist thus conveys this retrospective longing by portraying worlds made denser and more mysterious in the aftermath of death-awareness. The loss that is forecast by death-awareness, however, is not necessarily disguised by this operation. As with all works of culture, such a loss is pacified by the proposition and construction of certain, bearable relations to it. Culture thus makes meaning by offering semantic and visual correspondences to certain realities. For psychoanalysis, more specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis, death constitutes the essential negativity at the base of cultural works. Jacques Lacan derives this idea from Freud’s death drive (the instinctual recourse to a state of absent tension and activity), and with the aid of structural linguistics, submits that both the limits of psychic existence and our conditioning as social and cultural subjects are enabled (caused) by mortality, which persists as proscribed knowledge.<sup>6</sup> We encounter death in language, in the very symbols that give life meaning, Lacan writes, because the world is comprised by desire, an incessant, essential negativity; the effect of a primordial absence absolutely anterior to satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> As a relation of

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, trans (London, Hogarth Press: Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974, vol. 14), p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 104-5.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Bruce Fink, trans (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 6.

being to lack and absence, desire is also the very relation that allows life to garner intelligibility. But there is a price to pay for this exchange, as Catherine Belsey points out. The paradox of psychoanalysis is that in the advent of speech the irrecoverable loss of the “real” takes place, a loss that marks a future event: real death.<sup>8</sup> Mortality remains insinuated as a present absence within the symbolic order. Desires thus return to us in alienated forms: in the works of culture.

In whatever sense or schema the awareness of death is rendered, the event remains a kind of untranslatable nothingness destabilising cultural enterprises. This paradox is the axiom of our everyday existence as speaking subjects. In *Death and Representation*, Regina Barecca stipulates that death functions as the foundational distinction between representation and reality:

Just in case you thought experience and the representation of experience melted into one another, death provides a structural principle separating the two. See the difference, death asks, see the way language and vision differ from the actual, the irrecoverable, the real?<sup>9</sup>

Death’s occurrence marks the threshold of inference. Culture, as Belsey also reminds us, consists in making things, and so it obliges that element of Freud’s death drive that instructs us to recreate from zero.<sup>10</sup> Made things in this way offer a consoling distance to the primordial discord. Films of the dying protagonist are a special example of this, making a demand on a still relatively recent medium to contrive a separate, imagined space in which death, impossibly, *occurs*, and is impossibly incorporated into lived experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Regina Barecca, ‘Writing as Voodoo: Sorcery, Hysteria and Art,’ *Death and Representation*, Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, eds (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 72.

Cinematically, dying thus conveys the fullness and finiteness of existence, effectively shielding us from the fear of imminent mortality whilst at the same time intimating the inviolable isolation of our eventual encounter with it. Films of the dying protagonist in this way bring the viewer to the very precipice of meaning because what is perceived in the appearance of death (what is always, another's death) is the traumatic perception of the threat of our own disappearance from the world, the cessation not so much of biological life, but of self-consciousness itself. The impressions and meanings that are garnered from these texts bear a sense of universality and relativity. This existential contradiction is what Søren Kierkegaard perceives in *The Concept of Dread*, as the inescapable condition of human anxiety. "The spirit cannot do away with itself," he writes, "neither can man sink down into vegetative life...he cannot flee from dread."<sup>11</sup> This world of appearances, as rendered by culture, is the necessary context for self-consciousness. Such a regime, however, is relational. Films of the dying protagonist afford a momentary window into our spatial, temporal and psychic similitude to others, intimating that such insights are by nature acute yet ultimately fleeting.

According to Kierkegaard, self-consciousness is condemned to strive to circumvent its own terrible, yet fateful extinction.<sup>12</sup> The collectivization and visibility of death in cultural works is a primary example of this tendency, something Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' seminal book, *On Death and Dying*, nominates as part of our psychological armour against the crisis of our own encroaching mortality. The proliferation of television images of anonymous victims of war and natural disaster, for example, supports the general view of death as a crisis event that occurs elsewhere and to other people. The immanence of death

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<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* [1844], Walter Lowrie, trans (Princeton: University Press Edition, 1957), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, p. 140.

as it threatens the individual is not resolved by such depictions, but momentarily sidestepped, that which Jonathan Dollimore describes in *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, as symptomatic of a general societal evasion. Mediated images of death and dying, he writes, are used to screen the absolutely incommensurable relation between culture and nature enforced by the inevitable loss of life:

Western metaphysics and Western religion derive from that experience, Especially as it led to repeated attempts to distinguish between appearance and reality. Broadly speaking, the world we experience was said to be the world of appearances, the domain of unreality, deception, loss, transience and death – to be contrasted with an ultimate, changeless reality which was either deeper within or entirely beyond the world of appearances.<sup>13</sup>

Dollimore insists that the inexorable approach of death resides in the world beyond representation and remains there. The anxiety it provokes in the human condition is left unresolved by cultural works. In this thesis, I extend this essential proposition specifically to cinema of the dying protagonist, where a convergence of form and content attempt, in various ways, to depict, and often resolve, the crisis of mortality within the individual. Within these films, a constant exchange of narration and enactment takes place that mirrors the asymmetry of our larger inter-subjective relations. By unpacking this cinematic operation, it will be argued that films of the dying protagonist possess a unique capacity to “think” death’s progression by instantiating both its mystery and its apparent ordinariness, and the various responses it inflicts in turn.

Loss, suffering and transience emerge in the visual economies of these kinds of films, and as a result, the reality of the dying other is cinematically corresponded. How this correspondence acquires ontological veracity on screen is the formal question at the heart of this thesis. In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Stanley Cavill suggests that the ontology of cinematic images resides in their photographic basis, in

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1998), p. xiii.

other words, through the indexical appropriation of reality in the photochemical transformations of film. This transformation, effected without human intervention, reifies a reality that both requires and emphasises our exclusion. Cavill describes the world that is captured by film as simultaneously extant and absent:

A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is an importance of film – and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world...So there is a reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past: to deny that the world is complete without me. But there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgement upon me is not yet the last.<sup>14</sup>

The salient point here is that the screen screens us from the world it projects. As John Berger elaborates, visual art brings objects, events and persons within reach – though not necessarily within arm's reach.<sup>15</sup> Films of the dying protagonist attenuate our paradoxical self-consciousness and displacement in culture by bringing the untranslatable into view. In the same operation, sights are selected, edited and projected at the expense of others, meaning that some other point of view is necessarily eclipsed by the image projected onto, and filling, the screen. When the approach of death is screened, it is at once reified and alienated, meaning that the individual instinct for survival undergoes a similar process of denial and affirmation when viewing such images. The screen, the formal constraint of the medium, in this way enables films of the dying protagonist to approximate subjectivity in crisis, this sense that the sight is incomplete because we exist in some fundamental way outside it; that though the screen may screen us from the world it projects is also *veils* an unthinkable and essential nothingness.

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<sup>14</sup> Stanley Cavill, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 8.

By instituting a crucial remove, the visual field of cinema grants a correspondence to death's unknowability: that it can only resist illustration, or be illustrated by virtue of some essential negation existing in the medium of its incomplete expression. Death's expression through inarticulateness will be considered by reference to that small but distinct subset of contemporary films that feature a protagonist who knows that he or she is going to die. The major case-studies will be Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* and *The Sea Inside*, Gus Van Sant's "death trilogy": *Elephant*, *Gerry* and *Last Days*, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and a selection of comedic texts including Harold Ramis' *Groundhog Day* and Gene Saks' *The Odd Couple*. Evident throughout these films are disparate interpretations of a dying protagonist. This thesis will argue, however, that each characterisation, from the suicidal to the terminally ill, can ultimately be traced to that elegiac persona (Freud's melancholic), whose future losses become pathologically internalised.<sup>16</sup> The implication in Freud's text is that the lost object of the elegiac persona is *half-alive*, already dead though not entirely effaced and so persisting in some form. Films of the dying protagonist find a way to account for the elegiac pathology by depicting the suffering that such an existence enforces. The dying protagonist is melancholic or elegiac in nature because they represent subjectivity in crisis. Tormented by the ontological split that death-awareness has produced, they are at once haunted and consoled by a formed life not yet extinguished by mortality, and trapped in a present where they obsessively or destructively carry out the work of self-sacrifice. The corresponding performance thus attests to the anxiety of this mode of being, which no symbolic mandate can resolve. All things become subordinate to the task, or project, of dying. Ideas, beliefs and feelings on death are not so much routed through this elegiac

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<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, trans (London: Hogarth Press: Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974, vol. 14), p. 246.



persona and translated by their cinematic contexts, as created by them. This is the articulation of cinematic death wherein we find the same displacement, brought to its limit, endemic to all cultural narratives.

Chapter One considers the elegiac persona depicted in Alejandro Amenabar's *The Sea Inside* and *The Others*. Here, I argue that dying is the principle mode of being for Amenabar's protagonists, respectively a quadriplegic and a ghost who does not know she is dead, and that this is constituted exactly in the dialectic of appearance: of being seen, and not seen. The physical forms and cinematic datum that shape this elegiac protagonist internalise and externalise a condition of hyper-awareness. Through these depictions we experience the extent to which existence, for the quadriplegic and the ghost, becomes ambiguously synonymous with appearance. Each is preceded by a void of sorts: an expanse of sky, a dark and unfilled screen. The face of Ramon, the quadriplegic at the centre of *The Sea Inside* and Grace, the terrified ghost in *The Others*, come into relief through the transparency of these vistas. Our impression or sense of death is thereby defined relative to these two, contradictory, visual preoccupations of absence and presence. Amenabar selects, orders and projects sights consisting of vivid memories and flashbacks, hallucinations and fantasised imaginings, heightened moments of terror and quiet domesticity, moments of great stillness and intense movement. The visual is more than a mere theme in these works. Nor is it an automatic effect of the director's style. Through close inspection, it will be shown that the visual economy of Amenabar's cinema fashions from the fabric of its contrasting display, a dramatization of our sympathetic, yet polarizing relation to the dying other.

*The Sea Inside* deliberates on the loss of freedom – freedom of and *from* the body. The story concerns the last years of Galician Ramon Sampedro (played by Javier Bardem), paralysed from the neck down as a result of an impulsive dive from the rocks into an alcove of sea. Ramon is a protagonist who spends the majority of his days confined to his bed. We glean insight about his character from two, very distinct sources: through the daily routine of those who care for him, and via the imagined window that Amenabar provides into Ramon's inner world, the world of his memories and fantasies, the world where he can walk, run, fly and fully interact with those around him. As a consequence, Ramon's presence vacillates between two, very distinct states: that of living and that of dying. His presence in this way challenges and surpasses the ways it is represented. In the purest sense, it offers what Maurice Blanchot refers to as a *milieu* of fascination for the cinematic spectator.<sup>17</sup> Relative to several, contradicting appearances, Ramon's person becomes mutable and, above all, a spectacle in defiance of its physical limitations.

As a presence that partakes in fullness and indeterminacy, the dying protagonist also signifies the intrusion of the uncanny in Amenabar's films. This is especially evident with the representation of Grace in *The Others*. In *Death 24x A Second*, Laura Mulvey describes the uncanny as the illogical yet overwhelming sense of fatefulness intervening, and often upsetting, the quotidian.<sup>18</sup> In film, this translates to a sense of limitless depth behind the appearance of things, a quality that has the effect of halting the momentum of the cinematic sequence. A sense of limitless depth behind the façade of everyday life is apparent in both of Amenabar's films, and is utilised to postulate the ontological predicament that befalls the dying protagonist as an impossible negotiation between two

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* [1955], Ann Smock, trans (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 62.

concurrent, yet disparate modes of being in the world. The disturbance of spatial and temporal boundaries features heavily throughout *The Sea Inside*, though *The Others* relies more explicitly on this quality as a way to convey the intrusion of death in Grace's apparent life. Nicole Kidman plays this protagonist as an increasingly unhinged mother of two, ailing orphans. Her anxieties are exacerbated by the missing whereabouts of her husband, and the ghostly incursions that take place within the cavernous house she occupies with a trio of knowing servants at hand. Uncanny suggestions are fundamental to the emotional tenor of Amenabar's Gothic text, since it is eventually revealed that Grace is not the one haunted, but the haunting itself. Pursued by the mercurial shadows of her traumatic past, at its heart, the film is a meditation on unresolved losses. The film's deployment of Gothic conceits forward this impression, arresting Grace within a literal prison of tragic subjectivity.

In Chapter Two, I turn my attention to the cinema of Gus Van Sant, and his so-called "death trilogy" comprising of *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005). Within each film, Van Sant portrays lives governed almost entirely by the entropic influence of death's proximity. Death, mostly invisible, and mostly *sensed*, constitutes the uncanny presence that estranges mundane and familiar locales, objects and any and all human endeavours. It is never explicitly an event, or an intervening effect, but rather grafts onto life insidiously, banally or inexorably. These three films, in particular, highlight a fact I wish to establish throughout this thesis, which is that part of the poignancy of relating with dying protagonists is that the approach of death exists only through fantasised imagining. We engage with these protagonists on the proviso that they will serve as an authentic referent to an experience of dying, yet possess no prior experience on which to make this judgement. Van Sant's cinema makes this paradox

plainly apparent. Within the “death trilogy”, innocuous spaces such as schools, hiking paths and suburban roads take on an accentuated strangeness. They act as neither coordinate nor context to human activity. Protagonists are left to roam these spaces of abstraction, unaware of the fatalities that lay in wait. The dying protagonist is the ultimate outsider in Van Sant’s imagination and, as a consequence, becomes the ultimate stranger to the audience.

In *Last Days*, the inexorable duration of dying is conveyed through the catatonic movements of the protagonist, Blake, as he idles about his home in boredom and drug-induced confusion until the moment he takes a shotgun to his head. The suicidal act arrives without preamble. We see only Blake’s legs as they collapse to the ground. Death takes place silently and invisibly, transpiring off-screen. In *Gerry*, Van Sant’s hikers suffer the gradual inevitability of starvation and exposure in an endless desert. The surrender is difficult, and culminates in a desperate struggle between the two. It is a moment of stark survival and self-sacrifice, shot with claustrophobic proximity, forcing the audience into unaccustomed and uncomfortable positions of consideration. The mediation on death and the life it ubiquitously threatens is a theme that finds austere expression in the Columbine-esque, middle-American high school setting of *Elephant*. Van Sant highlights the absurdness of violence and the remoteness of the death of others by making both the assailants of the high school shooting, and its victims, interchangeable and anonymous figures that move in and out of frame of the camera. It will be argued that this Santian character does not merely encounter the uncanny presence of death in the text, but functions *as* the uncanny element itself.

Chapter Three concentrates on a single, influential horror film: William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*. If the world of the Santian protagonist is often nightmarishly resistant to meaning, it finds its counterpoint in the disconsolate persona of Friedkin's protagonist, Father Damien Karras. Karras encounters the uncanny attendance of death in everyday life, however it will be argued that it is his very disposition to the uncanny, not the uncanny itself, that gives rise to the overwhelming sense of dread attaching itself to each scene. The possession drama on which *The Exorcist* turns is merely the catalyst that hurtles this protagonist towards his inevitable, self-sacrificial end. It is essentially Karras' disposition as a man condemned to die that is construed through the encounter with the demon. Friedkin bestows a sense of hopelessness and import to this character from the outset, so that when the unimaginable horrors of the possession take place, they emerge against the backdrop of Karras' immense grief and lack of self worth. For Friedkin's protagonist, dying translates to a series of horrific events culminating in a relation to a world that seems predestined to reject him, exemplified in his final and fatal confrontation with the demon-child.

In the final chapter (Chapter Four), I introduce another, yet contiguous, relation to the immanence of death in the context of contemporary film comedy. The works of Gene Saks, Hal Ashby, Woody Allen and Harold Ramis, in particular, expand upon the notion and sense of the absurd to account for the fruitless, often insatiable pursuit to make meaning of death. Van Sant, Friedkin and Amenabar skew the world to lay bare the interminable condition of isolation these pursuits ultimately suffer. The films that fall variously under the banner of the comedic confer an equivalent status on this sense of naked dislocation by foregrounding the absurd nature of the fictions and fantasies we use to domesticate it. Chapter Four thus unpacks the panic and crisis at the base of this comic

persona. The comical protagonists that will be examined are burdened by death, and either resist or desire it as a way to resolve their current predicaments. This kind of misguided behaviour these attitudes evoke is extreme. While the tenor of these films is often exaggeration or understatement, the dangers and profundities that befall this comic protagonist are no less softened by these irreverent juxtapositions. The threat of death may be an absurdly contrivance within these texts but it remains maddeningly anterior. As Albert Camus writes, the absurd is both the definitive awakening and the provocation of what might follow.<sup>19</sup> Comedic films of the dying protagonist are hinged upon this particular pivot: between the possibility of a meaningful death, and the senseless capitulation of the self.

Throughout each of these chapters a dying protagonist will be identified, defined and read as precisely as possible from the data of filmic material. Creating aesthetic and thematic categories necessitates comparisons and distinctions, however it is the contention of this thesis that, when taken together, these various incarnations draw attention to the emergence and existence of a particular protocol of contemporary cinema, one in which the crisis of subjectivity is aestheticised. For the purposes of such an analysis, the cinematic material that brings this dying protagonist into relief consists primarily of isolated scenes, images and shots. These forms offer a cinematic thinking on death, persuasive enough to momentarily disrupt the narrative momentum and heighten the relation between materiality and meaning. This is the *modus operandi* of films of the dying protagonist. The common denominator, therefore, between comic, tragic and dystopian incarnations of these protagonists is that the cinematic forms that inform and shape them operate as heterogeneous and autonomous signifiers, capable of realising and

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<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 11.

abstracting subjective reality in the duration and space of a single frame. What results is a stylised impression of death-alongside-life. The directive of this thesis is thus to enter into the specific cinematic scenarios that augur death, a directive that depends on subtracting and foregrounding singular stills, scenes or visual minutiae at the expense of the film as a whole. This methodology does not seek to supplant film structure with film form, but rather aims to emphasise that the formal qualities of cinema generate effects separate and occasionally divergent from those produced by the medium's structural qualities (its narrative or discursive features). The cinematic signifier, as it occurs to the viewer in the extracted still, is paramount to this thesis. The attention given to such material in this way does not discount the effect montage and narrative content exerts upon our responses to dying protagonists. Instead, this thesis proposes that any given image or detail extracted from the film is worthy of critical consideration outside the larger strictures of the text. The application of this methodology is an attempt to establish how these forms, in and of themselves, convey a distinctly cinematic and profound thinking of death and dying.





## CHAPTER ONE: ALEJANDRO AMENABAR'S

### THE OTHERS AND THE SEA INSIDE

The first few seconds were like an ecstasy, a rapture, so pure I almost wasn't there. I'm writing this down because it's a moment our friends don't speak of, our writers don't write about. Characters in books, our husbands, neighbours, aunts, float in from the wings already changed. It's a moment of such solitude, such nakedness, so utterly unlike any other, that we tend to look away politely as from an obscenity.

Robert Dessaix, *Night Letters*, 1996.

This chapter looks at the portrayal of two types of dying protagonists drawn from two films by Spanish director, Alejandro Amenabar: the terrorised mother, Grace, in the supernatural thriller, *The Others* (2001) and Ramon Sampedro, the quadriplegic campaigning for the right to end his life in the director's following work, *The Sea Inside* (2004). Individuals suffering mental disease and terminal injury occupy the nostalgic, painterly landscapes of Amenabar's cinema. From the stifling, Hitchcockian atmosphere of *The Others* to the poeticism of Galician Spain, each film concentrates (almost fulsomely) on a vivid portrait of men and women forced by circumstance to come to terms with imminent death. This death-awareness is coupled with the loss of individual freedoms but also the consolidation and verification of life itself, a sentiment Amenabar's slow and proximate direction transmits, favouring close-ups that expose every gesture, expression and private emotion exhibited by these tragic protagonists. It will thus be argued that the awareness of death is both conveyed and abstracted in the tangible yet alien presence of these dying figures. As such, the promise of meaning intimated by these forms take the subject of dying, and by recourse cinematic spectatorship, to the very limits of representation and knowledge.

The primary interest of this chapter is not to qualify the representation of death in these works, but to ascertain the nature and extent to which the immanence of death and death-awareness is translated by Amenabar's cinema into an affliction endured and carried out by the living. Specifically, this will involve an evaluation of how this affliction is embodied by the dying protagonist, and the kinds of viewer responses it might generate. The nature of such representations of suffering is that they provoke the boundary between film viewer and film character by entreating the spectator to empathise and hypothesise about their own mortality using the dying protagonist as reference. Cinema bears this capacity, Libby Saxton proposes in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, allowing viewers access to simulated pain from a distance in space and time.<sup>1</sup> The viewer is privileged in films of the dying protagonist, but the kinship that its images forge between witness and sufferer is simulated, pronouncing a key mystification in our relationship to such forms. The encounter is fundamentally foreclosed. In these films, the appearance of dying signifies both representational affluence and poverty *in extremis*. Empathy coincides with disavowal because our distance is both cemented and brought into question by the exaggerated accessibility of Amenabar's subjects. On the one hand, mortality takes on its most lucid and tenable example, its approach exteriorised in the suffering that terminal, liminal conditions inflict. On the other hand, they are the manifest contents of an imagined experience that arises, and ends, in the finite conditions of the filmic medium.

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 63-4.

Both Grace and Ramon suffer the proximity and knowledge of death. This is what casts them as dying protagonists. Implicit in this characterisation is a teleological story of destiny, of a fateful death both welcomed and denied, and played out temporally and physically. Grace is the ghost that does not know she is dead and the film essentially unravels this delusion. Ramon's existence is provisional. Since his broken body was pulled from the shallow waters into which he mistakenly dove some twenty years, he languishes in a state of physical immobility, his most basic needs managed by family members. Ramon desires greatly to end his life on his terms. Death-awareness establishes the protagonist's fixed disposition in time and space (as dying), which in turn ushers the narrative toward its inevitable conclusion (death), becoming, in a sense, a cinematic convention: chronologically demarcated, physically legible and necessarily rescued from its otherwise featureless and abhorrent persistence. Michel de Montaigne speaks of this death-consciousness in his essay, "That to Philosophise Is to Learn to Die", when he writes:

I notice that in proportion as I sink into sickness, I naturally enter into a certain disdain for life...when we are led by nature's hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us into this wretched state and makes us familiar with it.<sup>2</sup>

Montaigne alludes here to the narrative that philosophy lends to the fact that death happens. Film, in many ways, picks up where these narratives naturally conclude, further familiarising this "wretched state", this sinking into and being led by nature's hand towards the end, through the communication of images that accumulate and translate these happenings to screen. The *mise-en-scène* of dying in *The Sea Inside* translates impending mortality into an imperceptible physical progression. The process is accorded qualities, or a set of appearances, that attest to its transcendent and miraculous power to

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, 'That to Philosophise Is to Learn to Die', *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, Donald M. Frame, ed and trans (California: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 63.

grant Ramon insight through intellectual and emotional suffering. If dying becomes something that Ramon strives to apprehend and appropriate, then the flipside of this representation is the utter exposure that Grace endures in *The Others*. Within this film, death encroaches imperceptibly on life. Its presentation is spectral, a hidden menace that gradually erodes the fictions holding the protagonist's existence so tenuously in place. There is nothing to replace this loss once it occurs. Places and people vanish, leaving Grace within the confines of an ever-darkening house, and the confines of her tragically indeterminate subjectivity (i.e. that of a ghost).

The quadriplegic that wishes to die, and the ghost who does not know they are dead, both express different aspects of Amenabar's fascination with death-bounded existence. What is thus proposed in this chapter is a way of reading these protagonists that acknowledges their potentially allegorical, even ideological dimensions, but which works ultimately towards an *exposé* of the aesthetic unconsciousness of these cinematic signifiers. The impetus for this methodology originates, in part, from Roland Barthes' semiotics. In *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes declares that the task of any critic is to depart from the usual route of dismantling myths for the sake of constructing new ones, and turn instead to the more fundamental disruption of the very logic that produces metanarratives.<sup>3</sup> For Barthes, the challenge that any semiotic reading undertakes is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, or a trait, or a narrative, but to perforate the very representation of meaning to question the symbolic itself.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, John Berger's reflection on photographic and filmic storytelling, 'Stories', forwards the theory that all narratives are

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Stephen Heath, trans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p. 167.

discontinuous because every narrative proposes a tacit concurrence of latent and explicit elements that structures the dynamics of exposition.<sup>5</sup> He poses the question:

Who makes this agreement with whom? One is tempted to reply: The teller and the listener. Yet neither teller nor listener is at the centre of the story: they are at its periphery. Those whom the story is about is at the centre. It is between their actions and attributes and reactions that the unstated connections are being made.<sup>6</sup>

With respect to cinematic stories of dying, these ambiguities are especially manifold and inevitable. The attributes, actions and reactions of the dying protagonist at the centre of these texts frequently speak of unstated, unintegrated connections. As indeterminate beings, the ghost and the quadriplegic are forms that gesture toward the resolute yet imaginative latency at the heart of all language and representation *a propos* death.



***The Sea Inside* (above) and *The Others* (below): darkness and light and the figuration of the absent human presence.**

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<sup>5</sup> John Berger, 'Stories', *Another Way Of Telling* (London: Writers' and Readers' Publishing Co-Operative Society, 1982), p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, 'Stories', p. 172.

What we perceive prior to any human presence in *The Sea Inside* and *The Others* is a vacant, depopulated space, followed by some telling visual minutiae announcing the particular cinematic-ness of the image. A disembodied voice instructs us to breathe as a black screen dissolves to a colour-saturated beach at the beginning of *The Sea Inside*, mimicking the mechanical projection of the film image upon the vacant screen. The shadow of a man materialises silently across the sand. The first frame of *The Others* is dark until the camera pans out to reveal an illustrated page from a book that the narration seemingly reads. The latency of the cinematic signifier is announced by these partial images, disembodied voices and shadows. What we find here is a language which is necessarily indirect because, as Jean Mitry suggests, what we see on screen is what an eye has already seen, which has an automatic effect on the data of the directly perceived reality:

The world is no longer *available* to us: *that particular* chair, seen from *that particular* angle, replaces *henceforward* all conceivable chairs...The image is thereby referred back to the concept. It suggests the idea through a form at the same time as it makes the object “unreal” by rejecting the reality of which it is the image in order to present itself as an image. In other words, it is positioned less between reality and fiction than between essence and existence. It evokes as essence through an existence as though evoking an absence through a presence.<sup>7</sup>

Within the first frames, Amenabar invokes absence through the delay and superficiality of cinematic datum. The visual withholds. A dislocation becomes apparent between the information imparted to us by the voice-over narration, and the meanings expressed by the partial images that follow. This dislocation is particularly apparent in Juan Antonia Bayona’s expressive 2007 horror film, *El Orfanato*, wherein a Spanish woman (played by Belen Rueda, also adopting the role of the lawyer, Julia, in *The Sea Inside*) who relocates with her family to restore the orphanage of her childhood, only to find herself at the mercy of ghosts. There is an immediate estrangement of time and space in the

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 34.

unstipulated context that inaugurates the film, showing a column of vast, overcast sky. The camera moves unhurriedly, descending upon the imposing orphanage, before closing in on its grounds and weaving amongst the nameless children playing there. Once inside, it tails the movements of a faceless adult, peering over their shoulder and drawing away as the figure continues her routine. There is no discernible dialogue. The scene simply plays out for the viewer and then fades into the cinematic ether, the intangible nostalgia of some long forgotten event lingering in the wake of what is interchanged. The insinuation of these sights extends beyond what might be hidden, however, and indicates instead the mark, or register, of some portent that the film intends to revisit. Robert Hopkins proposes that what is depicted by such images is time, or rather that the time of the image and the time of the film world are obliquely related.<sup>8</sup> Death is antecedent to life and this is messaged strongly by the dream-like *mise-en-scène* that opens the film. By the time we come to Laura, it is clear that something that lays in wait, a mystery that will incur a devastating penalty in its revelation.

Time is circuitous in Bayona's film. Laura travels back to her childhood home. She has brought with her a child already touched by mortality, having contracted HIV from birth. In the end, Laura loses everything. Her son mysteriously, and somewhat malevolently, disappears. She barricades herself within the orphanage at the mercy of the ghosts who have been tormenting her, prepared to sacrifice her life in exchange for learning the truth about her son. Cinematic death is the price this protagonist must pay in order to see beyond the appearances of a world in which loss has already exacted its forfeit. Once Julia accepts this, her eyes are opened and her fate is sealed. Her journey toward death is a progression from which there is no return, but, fantastically, a transformation. Secrets

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Hopkins, 'Depiction' in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, eds (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 65.

can be revealed. The spectres are unmasked. Light floods the house, which had hitherto been shadowed. Julia dies, but survives in the filmic afterlife as her reunion plays out on screen (forecast in the opening scenes) with the ‘lost children’ of her childhood. The cinematic signifier serves a different function in the beginning of Isabel Coixet’s *My Life Without Me* (2003). In the film, narrative presages the image. “*This is you,*” a voice states. The screen is blank, before sharpening quickly around the profile of Ann (Sarah Polley), the young protagonist with untreatable cancer, basking in the rain. The image is subsequently splintered by a quickening succession of cuts. Profile shots collide with close-ups of her bare feet and the wet tendrils of her hair, back to her face. The camera darts in and out of focus and refuses to settle on any aspect. It is the narration that orders the image, training our attention to Ann’s body and infusing it with a singular and exultant purpose: dying. Enunciating from a perspective of omniscience (“*This is you...Who would have guessed it?*”), the impression of noble death-awareness that is summoned by the voice is more or less confirmed by the protagonist’s appearance. Fractured though she is, the image is replete, resembling everything that is suggested by the narration: dignity, bravery, and foresight. Invited to partake in this image, to bask in its lyricism and significance, there exists minimal time and space for contemplation. The words endow her face with signification and imply the possibility of intimate identification, but it nevertheless retains its absolute difference in relation to the viewer as we are not, in fact, the “you” she invokes. Dying is already taking place. The film is already progressing toward its end.







**From light to dark: fated death as expressed in the *mise-en-scene* of *El Orfanato* (dir. Juan Antonia Bayona, 2007).**

Death-awareness finds no equivalence in the visual, though the visual derives from it, relaying its effect and searching fruitlessly for its source. Like the storybook that Grace's voice narrates at the beginning of *The Others*, speaking from some anterior position of knowingness, and the seaside dreamscape where what is presumed to be Ramon's shadow wanders namelessly, these cinematic spaces in which our protagonist's tenuously reside and which we gaze out upon, appear already memorialised by their absence. Both texts feature extended flashbacks and the seamless commingling of dreams with the quotidian. These scenes are beautiful, if emptily picturesque. The visual register is dense, yet some vital clue is missing in the *tableaux*. Latency gives shape to these backdrops. From the point of view of

Lacanian psychoanalysis, this is the residence of the Thing in the psychic constitution, not an object transformed by its own discrepancy and redeemed to a new status, but a veiled presence that defines psychic life, and that which psychic life endeavours to recuperate into object-status.<sup>219</sup> Lacan explains:

The Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real, I will say, suffers From the signifier – and you should understand that it is a real that we do not yet have to limit, the real in its totality, both the real of the subject and the real he has to deal with as exterior to him...the first relation that is constituted in the subject in the psychic order, which is itself subject to homeostasis or the law of the pleasure principle, involves flocculation, the crystallisation into signifying units.<sup>10</sup>

Two activities are of interest to this chapter: flocculation, the paths through which the cinematic signifier seeks out the lost real, which is always represented by what it is not (another series of signifiers), and the viewing experience, that which intuits but can never ascertain the loss that prompts flocculation (a loss that is nevertheless felt in the resulting cinematic scene). This brings us back to Berger's hypothesis about the connections that exist between unstated and stated events in any narrative. Lacan, as Catherine Belsey explains in *Culture and the Real*, defines this interconnectedness as the "magic circle" that culture provides.<sup>11</sup> Culture, she explains, safeguards the Thing, the place of the lost real in the symbolic, and regulates the function of the pleasure principle as it creates signifiers that preserve the source of the subject's compulsion towards life and death, at the same time deferring the unimaginable *jouissance* that might be met at these frontiers.<sup>12</sup> Stasis enters into the continuity of Amenabar's scenes by proxy of the things that comprise it, what Lacan might term "fabricated signifiers."<sup>13</sup> Real death (pure absence) is missing on screen. It is, and can only be, screened. When Ramon takes his last

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed and Dennis Porter, trans (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 120.

breath for the camera, the direction seems more interested in the space off-screen, flying through Ramon's window across a limitless stretch of sea. We have the means to discern the void it creates in the cinematic landscape, but uncover only its incessant propensity to be elsewhere.

Instead of interpreting the unending displacements of signification through the lens of other metanarratives, Barthes' anti-structuralism suggests a means of appreciating the metaphoric potential of Amenabar's films, subsequently accommodating cinematic form in all its impressionistic, open-ended heterogeneity. In *S/Z*, he asks:

What is the sum of the text? Meanings can indeed be forgotten, but only if we have chosen to bring to bear upon the text a singular scrutiny. Yet reading does not consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing the truth, a legality of the text, and consequently in leading its readers into "errors"; it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their infinite quantity, but according to their plurality (which is a being, not a discounting): I pass, I intersect, I articulate, I release, I do not count.<sup>14</sup>

What cannot be sought in the visual cannot be accounted for. It is unseen. Yet even the unseen is granted a visual expression in these texts; it becomes another signifying displacement from what is really unseen: death. "It is on the basis of this fabricated signifier," Lacan says, "that emptiness and fullness as such enter the world, neither more nor less, and with the same sense."<sup>15</sup> Amenabar's cinema features highly stylised, excessively visual protagonists that are well inclined to producing the kinds of heterogeneous effects that Barthes refers to, illustrating the precise co-extensiveness of absence and presence that Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies as the regulatory function culture imposes on our psychic integrity. In this light, this reading of Amenabar's cinematic signifiers will at times resemble a Barthesian activity; passing over the text, intersecting its incongruities, and bringing to bear a singular scrutiny that reflects upon

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<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Richard Miller, trans (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 120.

the specific evanescence of its subject (death) and its forms (filmic dying protagonists). Attention will be paid to the discontinuous details that derail narratological momentum, concentrating on the expression that each film regains in its place: a gesture, a look, that seeming superfluous instance of an image's pure exhibitionism.

That film materialises things in signs is perhaps best re-formulated for the purposes of this chapter as the displacements of filmic signifiers, in this case, how the appearance of Amenabar's protagonists seems to construe meaning from death-awareness. These appearances and performances show the figuration involved in artistic operations, what Lacan, in his analysis of the work of the potter in the creation of the vase, refers to as "dual orientation". The behaviour, gestures and expressions displayed by the dying protagonist expose this "dual orientation" as the introduction of an absence in the real that is called the Thing.<sup>16</sup> The opposing poles of self and other, the relation between signifier and signified, or more specifically, what a subject does when they apprehend a signifier, extends to the film-watching experience. From this perspective, films of the dying protagonist hold a unique relationship to the conditions they represent, embodying the burden of death-awareness, a condition the spectator has limited, if any, basis to judge its indexical similitude. That there is no indexical resemblance is besides the point of this investigation since the experience of the dying other – in this case a dying *cinematic* other, remains (dually) inassimilable to any internal, schematic familiarity with dying that the spectator may possess. No definitive referent exists. Georges Bataille describes this ontological irreducibility as an all-encompassing "gulf" that exists between one being and another in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*:

This gulf exists for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can

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<sup>16</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 121.

abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death. You and I are discontinuous beings.”<sup>17</sup>

A commonality, if not a homogeneity, becomes apparent between works of art about dying and the epistemic singularity of death. Each is condemned to remain at the level of inferences, imaginings based on nothing other than an impression of a reality whose meaning is not granted in advance by anything in culture. In place of a reading that merely reinforces that the portrayal of dying in these films is symptomatic of linguistic nonattendance, this chapter proposes that Amenabar utilises cinematic material to produce persuasive representational effects, creating signifiers capable in and of themselves of dramatising the dialectical and philosophical conundrum of our relation to dying others. This is the speculative inflection of Amenabar’s cinema: engaging the spectator in an illusion, the very materiality of which suggests at least the possibility of a temporary (hallucinatory) dissemination of its radical alterity.

Margaret Gibson’s 2001 study into death’s image on screen tenders the observation that death-scenes are presented as events of representation.<sup>18</sup> Fran McInerney takes similar issue with death-scenes in her essay, ‘Cinematic Visions of Dying’, concluding that the presented events of representation that constitute dying in contemporary Western cinema are largely “divorced...from reality.”<sup>19</sup> This observation implies, however, that reality should find equivalence in representation. Amenabar’s cinema seems to suggest that, whatever this reality is, by its very nature (and the very nature of film) it cannot – exactly – be replicated. Nor is it relative to anything. This state of incommensurability becomes

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<sup>17</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism*, Mary Dalwood, trans (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Gibson, ‘Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths’, *Mortality*, 6.3 (2001): 307.

<sup>19</sup> Fran McInerney, ‘Cinematic Visions of Dying,’ *The Study of Dying: From Autonomy to Transformation*, A. Kellehear, ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 229.

apparent in the intimate relationships that Ramon forges, especially his dealings with Julia, the disabled lawyer who arrives to help him with his legal battle to euthanize his life. Julia's arrival marks the advent and expansion of the fantastic horizon of Amenabar's text. At one point the camera overlays Ramon's image with Julia's face. The interchangeability of these images is accentuated by the shot-reverse shot, which has the effect of merging, then subsequently displacing, these characters. We move closer and draw back. Always, there is the intrusion of absence, or its illustrative echo, within the scene. There are various inconsistencies and intrusions of absence that alert us to the fantasised element in the *mise-en-scène*. Walls and doors disappear and give way to open space. Flashbacks are confused by small, yet incongruous details: Ramon rubbing the back of his neck before diving into the shallow ocean or a look that lingers too directly or too knowingly at the camera. The result is a shift not so much in thematic content or narrative material, but of the viewer's discernment of the film. What is conveyed about dying in a fantastic register bears little distinction to the more naturalistic representations in the text. The slippery purchase each finds on the absent real is revealed as the fantastical element heightens.

Amenabar's predilection for fantastical images extends beyond mere appropriation of stark reality for fantasy. The fantastic grafts seamlessly upon the quotidian to engender a deeper sense of distance and isolation, turning cinema's resemblance to reality into something more, something essentially *cinematic*. Like all images, the effect of the cinematic is to foreground distance in the scene, the kind that Barthes identifies in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* as exclusion, purely and distinctly, down to the final

image.<sup>20</sup> Ramon's fantasies, as with Grace's ghosts, are as precise and definitive as Ramon's bedridden condition and Grace's empty house. Each is founded on exclusion: of Grace from the world at large, of Ramon from Julia, and the exclusion of viewer as if from the primal scene.<sup>21</sup> The daydream of Ramon and Julia decisively illustrates Julia's contemplation of her own, impending mortality, a fantasy in which the subjective topic is Julia – not Julia relating to Ramon's predicament, or even Ramon imagining a potential future with Julia. In one sequence, Ramon listens to the recording of a conversation that occurred between them earlier in the day. Amplified by the dark and tomb-like stillness of his room, the voices speak as if from a distant past – far greater than the time we actually know has transpired since this conversation took place, which is barely a day. The sensation is reinforced by the pictures of Ramon's youth that Julia is shown to be leafing through in the next room. The film folds back in time, though the tape continues in the background, reminding us that no matter how much further back we go into Ramon's past, no matter how much Julia might discover, it will never be far or near enough to precipitate a lasting insight. This past is always, already, passed. Lamenting Galician music takes the place of the recording. Photos of Ramon, young and old, are matched with similar images of Julia. The music increases in tempo and volume as the montage builds to a temporally and spatially unsettling crescendo where, for a brief, hallucinatory moment, Julia accompanies Ramon as his memories return him to an inlet of sea where he plunged to what he believed was his death.

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Richard Howard, trans (London: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 132.







**The hallucinatory propinquity of the montage in *The Sea Inside* (dir. Alejandro Amenabar, 2004)**

The cinematic image, however, always has the last word. Displacement is continual. Flashbacks, photos, letters and the remembrance of times past, allude to the fundamental separation that is the basis and eventual destination of this cinematic fantasy. Ramon will die. Eventually, due to Julia's degenerative brain disease, she will forget him. By the time this occurs, Ramon, himself, is (cinematically) dead, though we hear him narrate the last letter addressed to her. At this final point, the image of his young body reappears, floating helplessly in the water. This time it completely obscures the sunlight. Meanwhile, the letter lies, untethered, on Julia's lap as she stares sightlessly out to sea. The camera pursues her gaze as the letter is carried off by the wind. The sequence promises and offers up the compelling possibility that some part of Ramon's death-boundedness, its unspoken, secretive dimensions, can be momentarily transmitted to the other (on screen and off) by the presence of the letter, and the series of shared images, intimations and allusions that film is especially disposed to arranging in a meaningful and contingent way. The promise is endangered, however, by the same move designed to augment it: the

constant shift of cinematic flocculation, which inevitably loses sight of the un-read letter, returning us to the definitive and horizon-less sea.

The experience of the dying other on screen is not a reconstituted reality. It is given to fantasy, though mostly, it is inclined toward proliferation. It becomes available in a mode of cinematic presentation (dying as a living, endured condition) that ostensibly activates the egocentrism of our own fear and curiosity towards dying, itself fluctuating between repulsion and attraction. Amenabar literalises this operation in the veritable game of hide and seek taking place throughout *The Others*. Most of the narrative is filtered through the psychological breakdown of the central character (and initial narrator), Grace Stewart, and her dealings with a group of faceless “intruders” within the cavernous house she dwells in with her two children (Anne and Nicholas) and their servants. Her husband, a soldier, is presumed dead. Adding to her predicament is the rare and fatal allergy to light her children suffer, which sees Grace frantically racing from room to room, shutting curtains, stressing that “*no door must be opened unless the one before it is closed.*” A door is invariably left ajar. Someone, or something, escapes through. A child’s cries are heard but never seen nor verified. Strange ideas and stories, occurrences and nightmarish apparitions unsettle the ontic and the temporal status of the story. Grace can no longer ignore her daughter’s urgings that ghosts share the house with them and the more shapeless and over-arching these mysteries become, the more terror takes hold of her. In so far as this protagonist is concerned, the threat is real and can only present itself as an external menace intimating a potentially awful experience that invariably addresses her with awful, adamant intent. There is no knowledge or revelation that can contradict Grace’s anxieties as they appear. She essentially stalks her own shadow. But like the endless, opaque ocean that bookends *The Sea Inside*, these spectres intimate a false

mystery. The haunted constitutes the haunting.





**Grace's descent into fear: *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenabar, 2001)**

If we are to believe, as Smith proposes in *Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, that engagement with fictional characters in any narrative is an imaginative activity, it follows that any concern we have for the welfare of Amenabar's dying protagonists goes well beyond a mere registration or mirroring of the narrative material.<sup>22</sup> It may go beyond, but only to a point – that point on which psychic wellbeing depends and from which it extracts meaning. As Barthes reiterates, the definition of any image is that we are excluded from it.<sup>23</sup> Our regard for this suffering, condemned cinematic other is therefore comprised of an undeniably impersonal component. It cannot take any other form in the cultural world, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, because the discernment of others will always come up against an obstacle in principle raised by the very domain of our subjectivity: the cultural world.<sup>24</sup> He argues:

My consciousness, being co-extensive with what can exist for me, and corresponding to the whole system of experience, cannot encounter, in that

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 407.

system, another consciousness capable of bringing immediately to light in the world the background, unknown to me, of its own phenomena...I cannot conceive another consciousness, for it too would have to constitute the world, at least as regards this other view of the world, I should not be the constituting agent. Even if I succeeded in thinking of it as constituting the world, it would be I who would be constituting the consciousness as such, and once more I should be the sole constituting agent.<sup>25</sup>

The juncture between self and cinematic other in this way parallels the incommensurability that exists between other selves and the human world perceived from the interior of our subjectivity. Vivian Sobchack similarly reflects in her study on death and documentary film in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, that even as our bodies tend to flinch and feel the possibilities of the degradation of flesh in the presence of the mortification of a cinematic body, it holds generally true that in the context of the contemporary cultural world, dying has come to be inscribed and understood as an objective technical phenomenon of the body as opposed to a lived-body experience.<sup>26</sup> Sobchack expands upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "veil of anonymity", adding that it is the veil with which we approach the cultural object and through which we are able to intuit the close presence of others.<sup>27</sup> Her assertion is that death is objectified because it is made more visible today than it has ever been.<sup>28</sup> This increased visibility titillates and offers a mediated view that softens the accompanying chaos and violence by containing it in narrative.<sup>29</sup> The visibility of dying in these films is also a proliferation of forms that draw attention to the specific function of the cinematic "veil", where the superficiality of representation is intensified, dually orientated toward pacifying the incursion of mortality and inventing its own, imaginative relation to it. The effect of this kind of cinema is that it permits the spectator to experience a vicarious dread that

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<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 407.

<sup>26</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 405.

<sup>28</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 231.

<sup>29</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 231.

anticipates their own eventual absence in the company of an array of self-referential images. This is the specificity of Amenabar's cinema. We perceive his films as the subject of their own visual intention, which, in addition to offering us an objective vision of the world (like the photographic), also points toward its agency as materialised subjectivity.<sup>30</sup>

As liminal beings on the verge of disappearance, our engagement with Ramon and Grace takes place along a fluctuating gradient of proximity and disassociation. The seeming accessibility of these protagonists, and the death they circumnavigate, is produced by the close-up, a technique that typifies Amenabar's style. However, the possibility exists in these works that, when we encounter the face of the dying protagonist, we do not automatically encounter death's precise eventfulness but, instead, another metaphorical displacement. The face evokes the suffering of death-awareness via its textural, imagistic expression on screen. Pain is relayed to the viewer, but also the yearning for life, a tactile image of desire not for death so much as for a way of being that can exist in some way alongside it and, in the process, comprehend it. Through the appeal of such faces, Sobchack explains, cinema exceeds its visual sphere and generates concrete situations of viewing as opposed to mere points of view.<sup>31</sup> A concrete viewing situation is made available to the spectator because the face of the dying protagonist is part of what Peter Brooks identifies as the seeming accessibility of the body's symbolic code.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the face is part of a larger, pre-symbolic "body code". We look to the human body as an always-deferred thing, he explains, never wholly seen, contained or possessed by the narrative or our gaze:

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<sup>30</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8.

Bodily parts...are the first building blocks in the construction of a symbolic order...Yet these structures and systems move us away from the body, as any use of signs must necessarily do. Representation of the body in signs endeavours to make the body present, but always within the context of its absence, since the use of the linguistic sign implies the absence of the thing for which it stands. The body appears alien to the very constructs derived from it...Narratives in which a body becomes a central preoccupation can be especially revelatory of the effort to bring the body into the linguistic realm because they repeatedly tell the story of a body's entrance into meaning. That is, they dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text: how, we might say, it embodies meaning.<sup>33</sup>

The dying body is a key signifying presence in Amenabar's cinema to the extent that it constitutes a spectacle of physical and psychic suffering that frightens, but in the process, necessarily holds the viewer at a safe distance. The body of the dying other is, to borrow from Barthes' analysis of condemned bodies in Tacitus' *Annals*, finality in profusion.<sup>34</sup> Relatable yet ultimately alien, their gestures, expressions and reactions in the face of death do not conform to Gibson's reading of mortality as constituting contemporary cinema's "unscene".<sup>35</sup> The suffering this protagonist endures is the equivalence this kind of cinema makes with death. However, this performance or mode of being-with-death presupposes that death is, scenically, unseen, and its displacement is the emptiness exerting pressure on the field of the visual. The absence of actual death is an imperceptible void that can never be found, concealed and sought by the very visual field it upsets. The façade of actual death is a facade that lets fictive death appear by virtue of representation.<sup>36</sup> Sobchack furthers that in cinema, our vision visibly inscribes its own investments in the world in a concrete situation – or site.<sup>37</sup> When this site is the dying protagonist on screen, our vision invests in a cinematic signifier in excess, which we discern in its context of pre-symbolic alien-ness.

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<sup>33</sup> Brooks, *Body Work*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 166.

<sup>35</sup> Gibson, 'Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths', p. 307.

<sup>36</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 235.





**Enigmatic and heterogeneous appearances: the pre-symbolic code of the dying body on screen, Grace, above (*The Others*) and below, Ramon (*The Sea Inside*).**

Amenabar's direction sequesters these protagonists by centralising their image within the cinematic frame. But the frame itself is predisposed to movement and intrusion. It suffers the threat of the unseen and the image that will inevitably displace it. We, in turn, suffer our exclusion from it. Berger remarks on this estrangement from cinematic forms by describing the medium as essentially peripatetic in nature, conveying stories that place us in an Elsewhere where one cannot be at home and where nobody can stay.<sup>38</sup> The intimacy of the close up is at the expense of the particular, an effect that seems counter to the fantasy that dying protagonists corroborate whereby the experience of mortality can be

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<sup>38</sup> John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 19-20.

translated to another via their highly concentrated form. Often it is through scenes of intense and private suffering, the markers that distinguish them as dying, that we encounter the essential strangeness of this character. For Perez, this estrangement is especially noticeable in the sudden break of point of view on film, bringing into view consecutive fragments of the visible as a perpetual exchange across the gap of the seen and the unseen:

A film image exists amid transaction with what lies out of frame, what cannot be seen at the moment, what has left view and what at any point may enter. Representation in the film medium rests on the out of frame: its relation to space off screen and its implied contents that the images unfolding on screen make sense.<sup>39</sup>

The aperture leading out of the cinematic frame is a predominant feature within *The Sea Inside*. It is the intimation of Berger's Elsewhere. Images of Ramon and his family and friends are continually upstaged by this space, be it in the form of a shadowed presence or an open window in the background. Rendered as such, the out of frame acquires an immanence as an intrusion or gap to be filled, speculated upon, or at least mitigated by another image, another scene. The window in Ramon's room eventually overtakes the general composition of the scene. Curtains billow into the frame, drawing interest to the to that which is beyond and partially out of sight. The light it shields seeps through, illuminating faces and bodies. Sometimes, the window borders a view outside, prompting a shift in focus to the lives that are bustling beyond. Other times, it is an exit through which Ramon literally flies, hurtling in his imagination toward some immeasurable exterior.

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<sup>39</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 137.



**The window and the intimation of the out-of-frame in *The Sea Inside*.**

Shadows, ghostly intrusions and indistinct forms threaten Amenabar's scenes. Our eyes, like that of the paranoid Grace, are coaxed toward these phantoms, into deserted rooms and down unending and emptied passages. These partial images, gaps, and shadows, together with the insistent presence of the dying protagonist's face, constitute the primary visual motifs in these films. Absence and presence interchange, and with it, the perceptual frontiers of filmic expression are emphasised. Close-ups urge us nearer. With the advent of the next frame, however, a detail intercedes to pull our focus across an unspecified visual tableau. There is an abrupt break in point of view. The direction in this way encourages a detached intimacy, giving rise to the indeterminacy Blanchot specifies in *The Space of Literature* as occurring at the intersection of solitude, fascination, image and the gaze.<sup>40</sup> Invoking Emmanuel Levinas' writing on the face, alterity and death, Gibson characterises this phenomena of indeterminacy as a passivity that exemplifies the encounter between the viewer off screen and the face of death on screen:

Levinas emphasises that death arrives leaving the subject breached and dispossessed of its end. Thus one cannot have one's own death, as death exceeds economy as a property of a subject who is there to receive it. We are passive and dispossessed in the face of death...For Levinas, it is in the face of the other person that we face an excess of alterity that goes beyond knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

We are passive and dispossessed when confronted by the face of the dying other. This dispossession entails detachment in both of Amenabar's films. Rather than withholding or frustrating emotional engagement with these protagonists, the passivity which characterises our viewing of these kinds of figures is pleasurable precisely because the "veil of anonymity" or encirclement of metaphorical connotation around death safeguards its terribleness, as opposed to being what Gibson describes as an effacing make-believe or "escape route".<sup>42</sup> The cinematic field cannot contain the alterity of another's death,

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<sup>40</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> Gibson, 'Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths', p. 312.

<sup>42</sup> Gibson, 'Death Scenes: Ethics of the Face and Cinematic Deaths', p. 311.

neither is it an end to which Amenabar aspires. There is no relation to this death outside of that which cinema invents. Real death does not disappear from film – it was never there to begin with. The terrible spectacle of death belongs, and is returned, Blanchot asserts, to the indeterminate milieu of fascination:

What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense...It no longer reveals  
Itself to us, and yet it affirms itself in a presence foreign to the temporal  
present and to presence in space...This milieu is, so to speak, absolute.  
Distance is not excluded from it, but is immeasurable. Distance here is the  
limitless depth behind the image, a lifeless profundity...where objects sink  
away when they depart from their sense, when they collapse into their image.<sup>43</sup>

Within these films, dying spans an impossible time period; consisting of many scenes, many moments, and many events. These representations neither conceal nor reveal. As such, they inspire both estrangement and fascination. Relative to an appearance only, these forms speak of a “lifeless profundity”, a mutability or spectacle that we are condemned to witness from a considerable and insurmountable distance. As Barthes writes, it is an exclusion that we tend to convert into an emblem of our own isolation.<sup>44</sup>



**The direct yet unresponsive address of the dying protagonist in *My Life Without Me* (2003).**

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<sup>43</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p. 133.

Our exclusion from the cinematic scene is a concrete viewing position that grants space to consider the ways in which cinematic bodies engage dying as a living process, which in turn raises questions as to the ethical responsibilities charged to viewers when we confront the suffering of others. It is significant to note that in the kinds of dying that Grace and Ramon undergo, the body is mostly spared. The face, in particular, is an unblemished surface. In *My Life Without Me*, the film's poverty-stricken, self-sacrificing heroine, Ann, greets the untimely news of her inoperable cancer with a pale, luminous expression that seems incapable of conveying anything less than the delicacy of understated emotion. Little of the indignities of pain or illness mar it. As mortality approaches, her reactions remain stoically checked. It is a face, Levinas surmises, present in its refusal to be contained.<sup>45</sup> Infinitely foreign, the alterity of the Other's face cannot be breached or subsumed by the identity of the I to which it appeals. This is because the relation it extends to the I is not founded on any condition of distinction.<sup>46</sup> Better than comprehension, it is speech – or discourse – that cuts across the absolute singularity of the Other. Unaffected and unadorned, the starkness of Ann's face is both endearing and maddeningly withholding, as if the knowledge of death bestows upon it a secretive air. Speech, in the form of Ann's narration, classifies her face ("*This is you*") and implies the possibility of intimate identification, but the image nevertheless retains its absolute difference in relation to the viewer. We are not the "you" invoked. These words, cutting across the singularity of Ann's face, promise an ultimately hallucinatory communion. We can do nothing but remain in opposition, adopting what Levinas terms "the facing position", a moral summons wherein:

Movement proceeds from the other. The idea of infinity, the infinity more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with

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<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis, trans (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1968), p. 194.

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.

the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation.<sup>47</sup>

In this sense, Levinas argues, the face speaks to us and thereby invites a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be that enjoyment or knowledge.<sup>48</sup> Upon learning of her worsening health, Coixet's camera brings Ann to the forefront, her face in sharp contrast to the blur of people passing her. Her narration explains: "*Now you feel like you want to take all the drugs in the world. But all the drugs in the world aren't gonna change the feeling that your whole life's been a dream and its only now you're waking up.*" The question of ethical relations to the other resurfaces in every instant of close proximity to Ann's expressions. Like Ramon and Grace, she is a purposefully concentrated figure designed to circumscribe the viewer within the bounds of the text. We are encouraged to empathise, even admire, Ann. But are we simply locked into her perspective? What freedom, if any, is offered here? In his study into fiction, emotion and cinematic forms, Smith proposes that the viewer is an imaginative agent, consciously and creatively negotiating the representational constraints of cinematic forms.<sup>49</sup> This analysis of the mimetic process acknowledges the persuasive ability of film to approximate reality, but identifies a key detachment in the viewing experience whereby the illusions offered are not all encompassing. Emotions are felt but there is room, even cause, for disengagement within Coixet's universe. Because vision and discourse are always at odds, it becomes possible to conceive of Ann as noble but somewhat unbelievable, and fundamentally, other.

In *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, John Ellis remarks that "the cinematic illusion is a very particular one: it is the illusion of something that has passed, which

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<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 196.

<sup>48</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 196.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, p. 54.

probably no longer exists...it says 'This is Was'."<sup>50</sup> Ellis refers to a complex doubling of space and time, echoing back to Lacan's observation of the "dual orientation" involved in the artistic process whereby absence, in the form of The Thing, intrudes upon reality. From shot to shot, Amenabar's cinema announces the illusion of something that has passed in the inexplicable entrance and departure of a character, the eerie recurrence of objects and through the arresting disappearance or appearance of a face. Perez contends that the existence and apprehension of this kind of disassociation of time and space is part of the pleasure garnered in the film viewing experience.<sup>51</sup> By taking account of the indeterminate position of film as both narrative and enactment, Amenabar's cinema can be read as indexical and fantastical, where possibilities and profundities are simultaneously produced and negated. Perez argues that film's propensity to generate discontinuities, ambiguities, paradoxes and a host of temporal and spatial dispositions is due to the autonomous nature of its forms:

Neither a reproduction of reality nor an illusion of it: rather they are a construction, derived from reality but distinct from it, a parallel realm that may look recognisably like reality but that nobody can mistake for it. Their picture of reality may be convincing but in the way fiction is convincing; we respond to the picture not as we would to reality but as we respond to the constructs of representation.<sup>52</sup>

Seen in this light, the complex doubling of time and space necessarily informs the complex way in which we view and relate to Amenabar's dying subjects. And the resulting profundities and varying responses to them is not simply the product of film's inherent disparity from reality. These cinematic beings fashion their own illusory, yet captivating, equivalence to dying and in this way Ramon and Grace stand as exigent expressions of the logic of all cinematic forms, producing significations (of the face, the body) that are always in (pleasurable, frightening) excess of what can representation can

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<sup>50</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 17.



integrate.

Barthes comments on the exigent phenomenology of film in his essay, ‘The Photographic Message.’ Though Barthes compares film to the natural literalness of the photograph, he observes that filmic is most amenable to contemplation as an extracted still, where the individual frame becomes akin to the photograph and thus capable of disclosing its “uncoded” aspects.<sup>53</sup> Part of the methodology of this thesis is the extraction of individual stills from cinematic texts for the purpose of an acute consideration of its forms, a way of passing over the image that is more receptive to its speculative inflections. These inflections are equivalent to an odd detail that catches the eye, or a partial object, what Barthes terms the *punctum*, something of the order of equivocation yet within the margins of the dialectical. This is something, he claims, only photography can supply:

In order to perceive the punctum, no analysis would be of any use to me (but perhaps memory sometimes would, as we shall see): it suffices that the image be large enough, that I do not have to study it (this would be of no help at all), that, given right there on the page, I should receive it right here in my eyes.<sup>54</sup>

As soon as the punctum is identified, something of the viewer is, essentially, given up.<sup>55</sup>

Blanchot likens this to the immobility of fascination that occurs when a sight takes up our gaze and absorbs it.<sup>56</sup> The images and scenes that concern this thesis are of the order of the punctum, those seemingly extraneous elements within the wider *tableaux* of each film. However, selecting and inspecting these seemingly extraneous features does not simply transpose the photographic punctum onto cinematic material, but rather forwards the possibility that the punctum is the extracted film still itself, or what results from the cut that the activity of extracting film stills requires.

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<sup>53</sup> Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, pp. 64-5.

<sup>54</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Richard Howard, trans (London: Vintage Books, 2000), pp. 42-3.

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

In *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film*, Brigitte Peucker hints at the presence of a filmic punctum in her reading of the artistic allusions in the work of Alfred Hitchcock.

She proposes that:

The visual arts play a central role in delineating Hitchcock's governing metaphor of vision. Or that Hitchcock's films, so narrative oriented, so intent of the twists and turns of plot, mask a continuous preoccupation with the stasis of sculpture and painting, suggestive of and displaced by the death around which every Hitchcock plot inevitably turns.<sup>57</sup>

The attention Peucker pays to the discontinuous, ambiguous repetition of paintings in these films gives up something of her own fascination with the capacity such images possess to suddenly disrupt narrative progression. The stasis that Peucker perceives to be caused by the presence of these artistic works comes about via the "cut", what she refers to as an activity that "pursues" the nature of these details.<sup>58</sup> The gaze pursues, and is then arrested by, the detail. The fascination with these instances, to paraphrase Barthes, cannot be transformed but only reiterated through the reflective insistence of the gaze.<sup>59</sup> Gazing reflectively at Amenabar's images (a fleeting expression of the face, a shadow) traces the vertiginous, imperceptible process of cinematic flocculation, adhering on its way to Berger's principle that while our gaze reveals something about our position in the world, our interests and desires, the relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled.<sup>60</sup>

The relationship is never settled, psychoanalysis says, because it is the penalty we incur for our evolution as speaking beings embedded in language, a system where meanings rely entirely on disparity. This inherent contradiction originates and ends with death.

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<sup>57</sup> Brigitte Peucker, *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 68.

<sup>58</sup> Peucker, *The Material Image*, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 49.

<sup>60</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 7.

Death, constitutively interior to subjectivity, is also altogether exterior to any cultural resource at the subject's disposal. For Freud, subjectivity is continually perturbed by the original instinctual energies left by the deficit of our pre-cultural, libidinal autonomy. Although the residue of these energies can never entirely be expunged, they remain alienated, Dollimore surmises, so that civilisation can exist.<sup>61</sup> The residue of these energies is part of the pleasure principle every human, to varying extents, suffers, since to seek their gratification strikes against the regulation of cultural order.<sup>62</sup> This leads Freud to concede another paradox inherent to the speaking being: that human desire is essentially self-defeating. Freudian psychoanalysis submits that the most basic instinctual drive for satisfaction is oriented towards repetition, which aims towards a state of zero tension: ultimately, death.<sup>63</sup> Repetition is where the death drive manifests. As Mulvey argues in *Death 24x A Second*, desire is the motor force that propels any narrative out of its initial stillness.<sup>64</sup> This stimulation of movement (the metonymy that inaugurates cinematic flocculation) is also inherent in the death instinct, a movement that jostles with the will to return and rediscover the stillness from which it originally proceeded.<sup>65</sup> Mulvey's theory is that cinematic topographies resemble these competing compulsions endemic to human life.<sup>66</sup> This resemblance is most striking when the film still is subtracted from the linearity of the medium.

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains that “there is no way one can reduce

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<sup>61</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, p. 183.

<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol XVIII, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p. 38.

<sup>64</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 70.

<sup>65</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 71.

desire in order to make it emerge, emanate, from the dimension of need.”<sup>67</sup> Lacan distinguishes need from the erratic, mutable character of desire, and recasts it as relative to lack, which is in itself unanswerable since it is not the lack of anything specific but “the lack of being properly speaking.”<sup>68</sup> Refiguring Freud’s concept of the death drive through linguistics, Lacan proposes that while lack is at the basis of desire, to attach it to the socialised conditions of lack, desire converts a specific absence into a state of perpetual and essential negativity.<sup>69</sup> Death is the primordial discord that persists as an absence, compelling yet at the same time supplanted by language. Lack is the burden we bear as speaking subjects, yet it is also, he insists, the very thing that death makes possible, the limit which from which existence attains all the meaning it has.<sup>70</sup> And it is an absence, Belsey explains, that has considerable attendance in our cultural and social lives.<sup>71</sup> Film, an integral part of the cultural imagination, makes this absent presence especially felt, repeating and insisting and arresting our gaze with the intrusion of what Mulvey believes is the uncanny, that hint of stillness within movement.<sup>72</sup> In Amenabar’s cinema, the posthumous silence that attaches itself to certain scenes, those indeterminate details, intensify when the still is extracted from the sequential logic of the narrative, prompting us to question that which halts this movement from outside the frame: where is the figure that casts the shadow in the opening scenes on the beach? Why was the door left ajar in Grace’s house when the film has gone to great lengths to show her locking it?

This uncanny doubling of space and time, this absent presence, casts its intractable

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<sup>67</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 207.

<sup>68</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 222–3.

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan - Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953–54*, Jacques- Alain Miller, ed and John Forrester, trans (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 151.

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 115.

<sup>71</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 62.

shadow over the entirety of these films. It materialises in the silhouetted man at the beginning of *The Sea Inside*, in the cloaked figure with its back to us in *The Others*, and throughout both films as a more general opacity interrupting the veracity of what is being presented to us within the cinematic frame: the inert view from outside a window that mimics a painting and then disappears, or a refracted thing or object that repeats itself, and recurs, striking at the fringes of our vision. The body of Ramon itself is one of these uncanny forms. For most of the movie, we become accustomed to the sight of his gently animated face as he gazes outside his bedroom window, dreaming, and featuring in those dreams as a similarly mobile presence. When Ramon's ruined body is glimpsed it enacts a break in point of view. His disfigurement is uncanny in the Freudian sense because the act of forgetting it is made so decisively apparent in the sudden arrival of the sight. Thus, it is not the image of Ramon's wasted muscles and incapacitated legs that proves awful, but the reminder therein of the condition that has been forgotten, and that the *mise-en-scène* can now, no longer, forget. The intrusion of the uncanny is even more unsettling in *The Others*. If we take into account the Lacanian tenet of the Real (that which is anterior to symbolisation), which can only be understood in conjunction with the orders of the Imaginary (the image) and the Symbolic (language), Amenabar's *mise-en-scène* can be read in this film as parlaying the unavoidable conflict of the splitting in the speaking subject and the divide that subsequently occurs between this level of consciousness and the field of the unconscious. When Lacan characterises the real as "that which always returns to the same place"<sup>73</sup> it follows that this is both the place of the symbolic (created as a result of the lost real) and what the symbolic cannot contain: the subtracted mark of the real in the unconscious. This is why, as Fabio Vighi argues, it is misleading to presume that the filmic unconscious awaits rescue from signification. Rather:

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alan Sheridan, trans (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 49.

Its peculiarity is that it remains radically other, in as much as the thinking self can only establish with it a negative relationship, a rapport based on non-recognition...the aim of our Lacanian approach to film is to assess if, how and to what extent a given film allows us to locate and describe the dialectical relationship between its narrative structure and what “ex-sists” therein, that is, those elements that antagonise radically that structure despite being integral to its significance, functional to its symbolic economy.<sup>74</sup>

The death drive operates, Belsey writes, at the level of the signifier, and pursues the “second death”, which is not physical expiration but the full and terrifying acknowledgement of what we are.<sup>75</sup> In language – in the province of narrative – this converts to recognition of what we are not: not replete, not included in the scene, and not immortal.<sup>76</sup> The logic of the Lacanian death drive is dramatised and masked in Amenabar’s cinema in those instances of scenic un-sceneness, those indeterminate appearances and visual profundities, all the discontinuous motifs and repetitious details that “ex-sist” within the narrative frame but which have the effect of arresting its momentum. These recalcitrant objects and images ultimately return our gaze to the dying protagonist. We begin to see that Grace herself “ex-sists” as the agent and arbiter of her own impossible constitution in space and time. She is the ghost she unknowingly chases, the uncanny absence-presence that enacts the cut in the narrative, the thinking subject that, unlike Ramon, does not know where or what she is: already dead and condemned to die again.

Amenabar’s direction traverses crisply over potentially turgid territory in *The Sea Inside*. The legal battle that Ramon finds himself waging for the right to euthanize occupies a small amount of time in the narrative. What opens up in its stead is Ramon’s inner space. With a painterly eye, Amenabar figures his dying hero within lush dreamscapes and

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<sup>74</sup> Fabio Vighi, ‘Lacan For Cinema Today: The Uncanny *Pouvoir De La Verite*’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 10 (2005): 235–6.

<sup>75</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 47.

<sup>76</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 47.

memory sequences. Ramon exists in several times and several places: ensconced in the wry, *joie de vivre* of his family life, in heated encounters with church officials who attempt to counsel him, his measured persistence with the law, in the fantasised realm of his relationship with Julia (another character bearing a degenerative life sentence), his begrudging friendship with local neighbour, Rosa, and the younger man in photographs and memories. Bardem's performance of a man who wishes to die resembles a story of purposeful activity. Dying becomes an activity undertaken with energy and intent. It is an activity that Grace also carries out with dogged determination as she guards herself from the ghostly incursions of her past. Its purposefulness, however, is based on the sharp equivocation, now difficult to shake, that fully dying corresponds exactly to fully surviving. Cameron Crowe plays homage to this theme in *Vanilla Sky* (2001), his remake of Amenabar's *Abre Los Ojos*. *Vanilla Sky* concerns David Ames (Tom Cruise), a disfigured protagonist who tenaciously pursues the mystery of his inexplicably dissolving reality. This life, we learn, is already fractured, already haunted. David is mired in the past tense, cryogenically frozen to relive the "lucid dream" of his deepest desires and imaginings. The insignia of this "lucid dream" are scattered like clues throughout the film, clues that lead David astray until a technician cipher appears to inform him of a glitch in his programming. The appearance of the technician is a jarring cut in the narrative where two cinematic spaces and times violently collide, like the car-crash that originally injured David. There are several traumatic breaks, however, the first of which occurs in the opening montage. David wakes up and drives to work. The streets of New York are evacuated. The camera focuses on the stricken immobility of his face as he checks the scene in front of him. His anxiety at this moment suggests not the fear of insanity but the dread of a completely centre-less world. In Lacanian terms, this centre-less world is a field missing its missing object (*objet petit a*). Accordingly, Crowe's *mise-*

*en-scène* is misleadingly set-up to position the protagonist in the throes of a nightmare. David awakens to an image of his pre-accident self, wherein his face is horrifically disfigured. When he wakes up – again – the residue of this “nightmare”, its lifeless animation, steals its way into his “lucid dream” as he is stricken repeatedly by glimpses of his maimed face in reflective surfaces, foreshadowing the eventual, nightmarish return, his will to resume to a state of zero tension, to die – finally.







**The horror of the waking dream as a field missing its missing object: David Ames (Tom Cruise) in Cameron Crowe's, *Vanilla Sky* (2001).**

It is the face, and the profuse expressions it displays, that illustrates David's existential conflict. It is by turns masked and ruined, an indeterminacy made all the more jarring by its contrast to the familiarity of Cruise's features. Like the close-ups of Ramon and Grace, the face functions as a partial object in *Vanilla Sky*. This indistinct, unpredictable quality extends to Amenabar's protagonists, whose appearances and expressions are especially given to change at unexpected moments. Visually, these figures inhabit a landscape as tenuous and speculative as a dream on the brink of a nightmare, straying into the frame inadvertently and then withdrawing with phantom-like efficiency. Voices, whispers, music and sounds attend the appearance of this figure but remain unbounded to it. A narration is relayed at the beginning of *The Others* and yet the flickering, incandescent storybook images that accompany it imply a different story, an Elsewhere intimated and then mitigated by this re-telling. *The Sea Inside* commences at the instruction of an unnamed voice. There is a projection upon a projection as a white screen expands across the cinematic frame. We hear the sound of waves and a vacant beach comes into focus. A

man's shadow falls across the frame into and then strides ahead of it. Intimations of human life, these shadows presage the potential for revelation as well as carrying within their form a primordial antecedent, a person-less void, that black screen, the initial inertia of pre-cinematic time and space. They are the material ghosts that Perez writes of, products of the very conventions of cinematic representation wherein we glimpse only a fraction of the visible at a time, a movement of cinematic signifiers implying an indefinitely greater space extending unseen beyond the boundaries of the image we are given.<sup>77</sup>



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<sup>77</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 26.







**The evocation of absence within the frame (*The Sea Inside*).**

A stealthy sense of unease takes shape and inserts itself into *The Sea Inside* from the outset. It is a destabilisation that persists in the face of the otherwise straightforward narrative of Ramon's endeavours to convince his family and the courts of his right to die. What becomes apparent is a confluence of various times and spatial arrangements. The fantasised terrain of the beach is a space that the immobilised Ramon must wake from but when he does, another painterly vista takes its place: the Galician countryside, or the bustling, provincial village in which Rosa lives. Ramon emerges in the relative space between off screen (where death is imagined as a choice, a verdict, a justification; a solution) and the life unfolding on screen where he is missing (the aftermath of his death). This is the predicament of our encounter with both Ramon and, ultimately, Grace. Grace is a protagonist that fights for her life not aware that it has already, dreadfully, transpired.

She is mostly terrified before we happen upon the dreadful revelation that not only is she dead, but responsible for the deaths of her children. Sinister happenings hint at this. The house is fogbound, as if existing in some netherworld between life and death. Like the window that leads out of the frame in *The Sea Outside*, the sound of a faraway piano, furtive knocks and abrupt crashes sound from the maddeningly remote depths of the house. Moved to accept her daughter's pleas that there are ghosts residing with them, she seeks advice from the local clergyman. Setting off in the mist, she stumbles instead on her somnambulist husband. Overjoyed, Grace leads him back to their house but the reunion is tellingly short-lived. He sets off again, returning to the front where he tells her he is expected. Grace's anxiety increases exponentially with the splintering temporality now evident in the *mise-en-scène*, coding these situations as uncanny, with clear nods to the psychologised ghost story epitomised by Henry James', *The Turn of the Screw*. The house rapidly changes and the mist expands. A book of strange, funeral photographs are found containing portraits of their current servants before their graves are discovered. The house plays even more diabolical tricks, leaving Grace inconsolable, breathlessly chasing its spectres about the estate. The sources of these hauntings turn out to be a dead-end, leading to another narrative cul-de-sac. For Belsey, it is signification itself that heralds this foreclosure, demarcating a past marked by the loss of presence, whilst concurrently referencing a future absence.<sup>78</sup> Art, she elaborates, contains both presence and absence in its exteriorisations, paradoxically making what is not there evident in presentation itself.<sup>79</sup> This is the pervading quality of loss-without-origin that is initiated at the earliest instance in Amenabar's cinema. It emerges in the unsettled relationship between temporality and inter-subjective space that its indeterminate images forge with viewing subjects.

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<sup>78</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 73

<sup>79</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 72.



Images auguring a loss-without-origin in *The Others*.

Whilst suggestive of the contradiction that psychoanalysis places at the heart of both language and vision, the play of distance and nearness these indeterminate images animate also marks a uniquely cinematic intersection of form, content and ideas about representation and aesthetic self-hood. Through a phenomenological lens, the perception of images is not an “act” so much as the background from which all these acts emerge, and is presupposed by them. Merleau-Ponty describes this precisely as the field of perception, a seamless imagining of people and things (subjects and objects) whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it, belonging instead to the realm of the imaginary, that which displaces reality.<sup>80</sup> In cinema, the viewer both awaits and imagines what comes next. The ghost provides no essential link between thing and idea other than to suggest that a tenuous mix of presence and absence constitutes both the signifier and the signified, and that the latter will forever be an effect of the former. The ghost stands in for a tenuous idea of living *alongside* death. This cinematic signifier is the mark of disconnection by which all differences are established: the difference between the ghost and actual death, the difference between viewer and protagonist. These phantom forms are the spectres that can never be completely exorcised from the visual field of the text because their irreducible propinquity reflects our own curious relation to the cinematic text. According to this logic, David Punter, in *Gothic Pathologies*, claims that the spectre is the form of all textuality.<sup>81</sup> All texts, he elaborates, are “haunted” by the shapes of their incomplete expression, the shapes of what they are not, and by the possibility that, in the end, our myths of body centrality and subjectivity itself, are based on a fundamentally necessary denial of death:

The ghost comes to menace the body with its limitations; but it also comes

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<sup>80</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xi.

<sup>81</sup> David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* (London: MacMillan, 1998), p. 1.



to celebrate the loss of the body, just as, in all textuality, we are invited to be in the presence of simultaneous celebration and mourning of loss, the loss we might say of the “text instead”, the text always more perfect, more preserved from arbitrary incursion than the text we have.<sup>82</sup>

Amenabar’s ghost story engages with Gothic tropes, deploying its aesthetic conventions to suggest that the lines of confrontation initially set up between Grace and these supernatural ‘others’ are especially vulnerable to attack. Amenabar weaves a tight web of ambiguity around the true nature of her oppressors. Grace, herself, is pale and panic-stricken, hystericised by the abject fear of leaving a single door unlocked. From that moment on, the house grows darker, vaster and more disorientating. Rooms are barricaded and dimmed corridors telescope unsettlingly before her eyes. Dizzied, she veers from one room to the next. Grating reverse cuts, and a soundtrack of screeching and chattering cellos and violins alert us to the presence of something terrible laying in wait. Threatened at every turn by fugitive shadows that turn out to be the shapes of her own, repressed trauma, the sense of incursion is overriding in this labyrinthine nightmare, making us increasingly aware of the protagonist’s own neurotic complicity within it. In this respect, Grace exemplifies Punter’s more general figure of the “textual ghost”. Attenuated close-ups of her bleached expressions of terror in mirrors and windows reflect a dark despair at a loss never disclosed, but which has preceded, and now commandeers the narrative. We stare back and terror is reciprocated, in many ways because we occupy the same peripheral position to the scene as Grace. The horror is not that we are central to the nightmarish scene, but unable to affect it any way, external to it and thus perpetually displaced.

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<sup>82</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 1.



**Terror and the reflection: the foreclosed encounter with Grace's tragic subjectivity in *The Others*.**

Grace continues to barrel through the murky rooms and hallways in a bewildered rage. Wherever she intends to go and whatever realisation is driving her onwards, is repeatedly thwarted by the seeming trickery of the house and its generally gothic conceits. In one scene, a mysterious and ghastly old woman takes the place of her daughter. Locked doors inexplicably open, and weeping can often be heard in some far-flung room of the house. These Gothic tropes of encroachment accumulate, as do Grace's attempts to free herself from them. Her ultimate failure hints at a world already riven by loss. The camera is riveted to her reactions as opposed to any possible discoveries, prompting a manic repetition of emotion that reduces Grace to the pure register of terror. She does not embody action but the wreckage of action. The Gothic is welded to this kind of pathology, Punter says, for in order for the haunting to occur at all there must be some prior disturbance which eludes our understanding.<sup>83</sup> This prior trauma cannot be mourned. And what Grace cannot mourn, she suffers in fright. This, we learn, is the event of her suicide and her murder of her children, acts that the film provides no reason or

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<sup>83</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, pp. 13-14.

context for. These answers, like the confrontation Grace seeks with the ‘others’, echo back since it is death’s fate (consequence and purpose) to exist in elusive retrospect. Dying protagonists such as Grace are thus trapped in a world dictated and ravaged by time. They are melancholic, yearning for the past. According to Dollimore, Freud’s explanation on the origins of life in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the pain of this melancholic desire is rooted in primordial loss, a lack inherently incapable of completion:

What connects death with desire is mutability – the sense that all being is governed by a ceaseless process of change inseparable from an inconsolable sense of loss somehow always in excess of anything in particular.<sup>84</sup>

Grace’s instinct is to cling to this world despite its obvious and continual disintegration. Her determination in the wake of loss, however, relates more to what Freud identifies as the impossibility of desire’s socialisation than to the mere fact of her denial of being dead. The compulsion towards self-preservation, he argues, is not so much the refusal of death, but the quotient of “component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death.”<sup>85</sup> The lonely corridors that Grace is condemned to walk disguise the simple pursuit of this path, and in this they exert the same culture-inaugurating delay that Lacanian psychoanalysis attributes to the displacements of the signifier.



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<sup>84</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, p. xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p. 39.



**The manic reiteration of terror in *The Others*.**

Undergoing the repression symptomatic of her condition, Grace tends toward a compulsion to repeat, itself a manifestation of the death drive. Dollimore points out that this is not a drive of any outward aggression, but is in the first instance turned toward the subject.<sup>86</sup> Too overwhelmed by the wound of prior traumatic experience to act rationally, the compulsion to repeat is left unchecked by her unconscious. Confusion and terror thus descend on Grace in a constant avalanche of anxiety. She is adamantly prepared for the worst, clutching her keys, locking doors as she enters and exits, attuned to the smallest alteration in her tightly controlled environment whilst remaining steadfastly blind to her own, paranoiac behaviour. When the individual fully takes on board the pressures of their cultural and personal past, Punter argues, the boundaries around the self implode and what we deal with is a journey of exile, of bodies separated from minds, of minds without

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<sup>86</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, p. 191.

a physical place to inhabit, cast adrift on seas of space and time which appear to bear no relation to moral life.<sup>87</sup> Running from her past and fleeing from the horrors that lie in wait for her, Grace is both the perpetrator and victim and subsequently ensnared in what Punter likens to a double process of forgetting wherein “we confront the possibility of the making of the monster; of a soulless and immobilised being whose eyes gaze continually inwards at an irrecoverable (primal) scene.”<sup>88</sup> As Grace flings the covers off the hidden shapes of furniture in an abandoned room, determined to unveil the disturbance that has been plaguing the household, she alights upon a mirror into which she gazes, transfixed by the sight of herself staring back. Amenabar’s gothic inflections exteriorise this doubling process, trapping the protagonist into an eventual and tragic confrontation with herself. Grace has always been the ghost. An apparition arising in the domain between two deaths (between actual and cinematic death), her being – as both already dead and currently dying – invites us to partake simultaneously in the exaltation of presence and the mourning of absence. In this sense, the ghost is, to borrow from Slavoj Žižek, forever “looking awry”, existing in some terrible way outside the dialectic of desire, both on the side of the body, and outside it, by their very insistence that they are, in fact, not dead.<sup>89</sup> By the very enunciation of “*We’re not dead! We’re not dead!*” the subject is what it purports to be.<sup>90</sup> The ghost of Grace and her children attain their legibility on screen and become what they purport *not* to be: not invisible, not dead.

Of course, both films have to end and must end with death, but these endings are transposed by perhaps the most inconclusive image of all, which is not a death of any kind, but a figuration of absence, distance and incessant movement, situating death’s

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<sup>87</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 17.

<sup>88</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 191

<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction To Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1992, 2001), p. 32.

logic on the side of the symbolic. Faces and bodies and voices fade on the screen until, finally, *The Sea Inside* concludes with an infinite stretch of sea. The image is depthless, vacant. It disqualifies sentiment. Similarly, as Grace and her children move to bask in the sunlight from a window, Amenabar's camera pulls away from them. They dissolve into shadow, into their original stillness. The representation of the end as quiescence is what Mulvey interprets as the return of the repressed motionlessness that cinema's impression of movement depends.<sup>91</sup> She argues that in fusing endings with stillness and death, cinema's secret is displaced as the final frame marks death not as a riddle, but the point beyond all narratability.<sup>92</sup> The journey of Ramon and Grace as dying protagonists distorts and supports the symbolic space as an imaginative leap toward the out of frame, into the milieu of fascination and, finally, the sphere of the textual, beyond (behind, above) which, Punter suggests, there is nothing possible to say.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 79.

<sup>92</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 79.

<sup>93</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 4.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE SANTIAN CHARACTER

Then when the moment came it brought a sudden fear and unreality. They could never be prepared to look at death in the crude form that awaited them. Stephen felt, as he had done before at moments of extreme tension, a dislocation in his sense of time. It seemed to stutter, then freeze.

Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong*, 1993.

Under Gus Van Sant's direction, the subject and experience of dying produces an unusual cinema. In a distinctive departure from the emotional and contextualising approach of Alejandro Amenabar, Van Sant captures the opaque simplicity of bodies as they blunder unknowingly into danger, slowly and vaguely transitioning from life to death. The tendency to sensationalise the actual deaths on which his films *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005) are based is steadfastly resisted. Left intact are the largely uncommunicative facets of human desperation and tragedy. As with the latter releases – *Elephant*, inspired by the 1999 Columbine High School Massacre, and *Last Days*, a fictional re-imagining of the suicidal demise of musician, Kurt Cobain – *Gerry* sidesteps the polemic and moralising that could potentially characterise this rendition of a fatal hike into the wilderness. Focus is placed on the profundities beneath the facts and information that tend to narrativise these events. Characters modestly appear, cast adrift in unsettled contexts. They occupy cinematic space for an intermittent period of time and then move on – out of frame, and out of interest. The camera does not often follow. The unpredictable nature of the direction produces a difficult relation to the cinematic subject and their overriding incoherency. The result is perhaps closer to painting than storytelling. Though his protagonists are driven to death, this death-boundedness is chiefly registered as a phenomenon vaster than human experience can convey.

John-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967) provides a useful referent for the fatalistic protagonists populating Gus Van Sant's self-professed "death trilogy" of films. As this chapter will attempt to argue, Melville's restrained aesthetic mode stands as a precursor for Van Sant's muted portrait of contemporary alienation. Melville forges a tale of cat and mouse between the titular hit man (*Le Samouraï*) and his pursuers within the Parisian police and the criminal underworld, one that devolves into an elegiac, existential *fait accompli*. Much like the transposable *milieux* in Van Sant's trilogy, the world of this grave, ghostly assassin is tenuous. Violence, crime and, ultimately, death are prefigured in the most banal objects and environments. Both directors share a proclivity for visual abstraction, geographical isolation and temporal dislocation. Melville fashions static interior landscapes whose inanimate contents – because of their separation from the figures we might presume own them – create palpable, capricious impressions. As John Flaus writes of *Le Samouraï*, "He [Melville] does not seek to simulate the world but to create anew from the materials of the world. The severe form, the precise detail, the delicate effect are part of a style which shows rather than refers to its subject."<sup>1</sup> *Le Samouraï* (Jef Costello, played by Alain Delon) exists in state of stoic and ritualised compliance with his environment. Effects as delicate as a change in light within his darkened apartment dictate the *modus operandi* of its subject. Seclusion turns to threat in response to the smallest intrusion. Costello displays none of the mannerisms of an inhabitant. He moves against his backdrop rather than dwelling within it. What is shown by this arrangement is arguably the most revealing characteristic of all: the protagonist is a fugitive. His fate is to elude and disappear.

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<sup>1</sup> John Flaus, 'Melville: *Le Samouraï*.' *Cinema Papers*. 1.1 (January 1974):56.



In *Space, Time and Perversion*, Elizabeth Grosz states “bodies are always understood within a spatial and temporal context, and space and time remain conceivable only insofar as corporeality provides the basis for our perception and representation of them.”<sup>2</sup> In the works of both Melville and Van Sant, these contexts – and all their corporeal effects – make for deceptively latent and anachronistic locales. Day and night are particularly indistinguishable occasions in *Le Samourai*. It is dusk every time we arrive at the scene of the garage where Jef’s stolen cars are re-fitted with new license plates. The police station exists in permanent and artificial daylight. When the camera tails the police inspector within this windowless locale, it winds its way through a maze of identical rooms and nondescript persons. Jef continually withdraws from sight, calculating escape routes from behind the cover of his trilby. His hands seek refuge in his pockets. When they do pick up objects – a gun, for instance – a pair of pristine white gloves detracts our attention from the violence about to be inflicted to the strange anomaly of his attire. A dreamlike vacillation is evoked by the simplest of gestures and actions undertaken by this protagonist. Causality diminishes in much the same way in Van Sant’s *Last Days*. Blake, the drug-addled protagonist, neither sleeps nor wakes nor partakes in any other basic customs that mark time. When he does answer the door, he engages an unwitting Yellow Pages salesperson in a garbled conversation without having any idea as to the purpose of his visit. In his mansion reside people to whom he barely speaks and who seem hardly aware of his odd and increasingly dangerous behaviour. It is not only Blake’s context, but also his movements against it, which resemble a cipher in this dreamscape imagining. He floats in and out of the house and back again and the camera glides listlessly after him.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1995), p. 84.

Jean Mitry's semiotic theories offer a useful account of what we might infer from such films where the dialectic logic of montage and cutting shots are replaced by more abstract and overly prolonged sequences. Within these cinematic dreamscapes, reality is not less falsified, Mitry argues, but the cinematic sign becomes progressively less readable as any number of meanings can be interpreted from it.<sup>3</sup> The opposite effect of this filmic signifier, untethered by any specific context, is that it becomes a cliché, what Mitry describes as a stiff and lifeless characteristic of cinematic representation.<sup>4</sup> From Mitry's perspective, Jef and Blake's lack of determination in time and space can be read as the product of a context of surplus significations, often implied within a single, continuous shot. Surplus significations, however, are still subject to a signifying process, Mitry asserts, a process that has to take account of the logic of the term of its reference.<sup>5</sup> This frame of reference is one that eschews order in favour of chaos, mystery and stillness. In this way, Van Sant and Melville's cinema exposes the ephemeral contingencies of the medium itself.<sup>6</sup> The immobility that characterises these protagonists, the neutrality of their reactions and the neutrality with which these are recorded, is expressive in and of itself. Pascal Bonitzer refers to this expressive neutrality in the work of Alfred Hitchcock, claiming that a kind of signifying revolution was inaugurated by the director's insistence on the gaze and the subsequent hollowing out of cinematic forms.<sup>94</sup> The effect of this type of close-up, immobility and emphasis on the gaze in these films is a corresponding

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<sup>3</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>94</sup> Pascal Bonitzer, 'Hitchcockian Suspense', *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, Slavoj Žižek, ed (London; New York: Verso, 2010), p. 17.

repression of the gestural.<sup>95</sup> In the world of Van Sant and Melville, the camera's gaze is similarly paramount and similarly obscuring of any 'innocent' presentation of reality. What unfolds from their impassive style is precisely this introduction of nothingness into the cinematic frame, what Pascal argues is a second signification wherein the ordinariness of gestures and things are troubled, doubled and distorted.<sup>96</sup> Cinematic time and sequence is simultaneously fractured and intensified. By giving us cinematic signifiers that are entirely impermanent in the meanings they offer, any kinship that arises between the viewer and the dying protagonist is brief if not permanently estranged.



**The hollowing out of cinematic forms: above, Jef Costello in *Le Samourai* (dir. John-Pierre Melville, 1967) and below, Blake in *Last Days* (dir. Gus Van Sant, 2005).**

Without any clear spatial and temporal coordinates, Melville and Van Sant's protagonists are both integral and incidental to the *mise-en-scène*, supplanted almost entirely by

<sup>95</sup> Bonitzer, 'Hitchcockian Suspense', p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Bonitzer, 'Hitchcockian Suspense', p. 20.

labyrinthine contexts. The direction is noticeably averse to filtering these contexts through the lens of any particular experience. The Paris conveyed to us in *Le Samourai* is a featureless and grey cityscape, always on the verge of night, full of secret doorways into which Jef readily disappears. Jef is as still and unyielding as the very walls of his apartment and thus easily camouflaged by his surroundings. When the film begins, he is indistinguishable from the background, a shadowy outline stretched out on a bed. Melville further refines this sense of spatial and temporal mysteriousness by extending the Hitchcockian camera technique of zooming in whilst concurrently tracking back. He draws out the suspense of Jef's inevitable demise so that whatever the protagonist sees, reacts to and moves towards is blocked by a recapitulation of the same space, as if the direction is circling him. A second signification takes place wherein the scene is troubled, doubled and distorted by the gaze of the camera. Camouflage turns quickly to containment. Jef is intermittently plunged into darkness, his image refracted through numerous reflective surfaces. In his final moments, he is executed from behind by a barrage of gunshots coming from a darkened pyramid of hiding spots. The fatefulness of his murder is echoed in the stylistic choices of the cinematography as opposed to any expectations we might attach to its narrative or genre references. Keith Reader has commented that, whilst the iconography of gangster films is employed throughout, the text presents a marked detour from the genre:

*Le Samourai*, like Melville's later *La Cercle Rouge* and *Un Flic*...certainly uses film noir iconography: the snap-brim trilby, the trench coat. But its resolutely non-naturalistic use of colour already marks it out as something different, as does a charged absence of dialogue...where the elusiveness of essence is articulated through the refusal of psychology. Character and plot all but disappear here into a hieratic universe.<sup>7</sup>

Melville's cinematography thus arranges a disproportionate ratio of falseness and authenticity in its selections, foregrounding the imperceptible decline of Jef's existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Keith Reader, 'Le Samourai', *Sight and Sound* 3.9 (1993: Sept.): 56.

The director's interests reveal themselves in a collection of visual meditations that promulgate the mythology of a figure condemned to exile. In one frame, his apartment appears like a cardboard cut out approximation. In another, the apartment is a vivid polysemy of details and activity. Both cases formalise a vision of the world that is duplicitous and finite. Operating free from the instruction of dialogue and narration, this cinematic aesthetic actually becomes – as Mitry suggests – like the image of consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Abstract images are offered up to the eyes of the audience to be understood with no intermediary other than the temporary signification of the filmic signifiers themselves, a cinema brought into the wordless scenography of the imaginary.<sup>9</sup> From its dilapidated outposts to its urbane sophistication, Paris – this city of exile – is as unresponsive as Jef, and as compelling in its enigmatic superficiality.



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<sup>8</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, p. 257.

<sup>9</sup> Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, p. 257.



**Backed into a corner: framing in *Le Samourai*.**

Jef is the perfect prototype for the Santian character. He is a material ghost, a figure of exile *in extremis*. Whereas Jef's isolation is revealed in an incremental display of interstitial motifs, such as the increasingly agoraphobic space of the apartment with its caged bird and bugged objects, the contexts of Van Sant's death trilogy stand as semioticised attempts at displaying the interstitial itself as an overriding background to human activity. The starting sequence of *Gerry* runs for some five minutes, during which the melancholy gentleness of Arvo Pärt's violin and piano composition turns over the scenery of the desert. As the major key ascends, the minor key lowers, and the intonations coalesce in a circular melody. It is a fitting accompaniment to the unbroken panorama that Van Sant films. The car we follow curves gradually into an ever-extending horizon. When the perspective shifts to show the passengers, it is as if our faces are mirrored back to us: passive, pensive, looking but not quite recognising the infinite expanse that rolls out in front of them. We are correspondingly swept up in a heedless momentum at the beginning of *Elephant*. The film commences with several accelerated minutes of sky passing swiftly to night from behind the stark shape of an electricity pole. Below, we hear clearly the sounds of school sports coming from what we might assume to be a field. The moment is passed over without clarification. It is a baffling omission, and one that persists in different ways throughout the film. Characters are introduced with inter-titles and names, only to be abandoned by the camera or enveloped in the mundane commotion

of high school, never to be encountered again. The direction engenders a sense of time passing, ineluctably, but not in a modernist stream. Rather, it is as if time dissipates into a desert. In the scene where one of the students, John, greets his fellow classmates dressed in combat gear, toting bags obviously filled with guns, there is an eerie if detached presentiment of violence. Somewhat suspicious, John questions them and receives a clipped reply to “*Just get the fuck out of here and don’t come back.*” As he stops to watch them, so does the camera. Leaves kick up in their wake. The sound of the wind increases, unnaturally, drowning out all other sounds and encasing them in a hermetic moment, as if the world around them has suddenly evacuated. John is dispossessed of any agency within this scenario. He is suspicious yet helpless, and the resultant outlook provokes a disquieting ambiguity.



**Moments passing before our eyes in *Gerry* (above) and *Elephant* (below).**

The Santian character dwells in the midst of these depopulated zones. As neither externalisations of the subjective states of his characters, nor analogous expressions of any specific social or cultural fears, the Santian character suffers the hopeless estrangement of identity, an affliction shared by Edward W. Said’s postcolonial exilic

subject:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.<sup>10</sup>

Said does not write of an exilic journey because exile is perpetual. To claim, however, that Van Sant makes no effort to surmount the unhealable rift between these worlds and their exiled constituents merely names a truism of these films. Van Sant imparts enough information for the viewer to infer that these are lost and abandoned individuals, neglected by family, and by the world at large. They can never go home, since these films suggest that there is no such place to begin with. Van Sant's unique accomplishment is that the loss found in the wake of this unhealable rift becomes apparent without evoking an over-arching sorrow. A conspicuous apathy typifies the repeated use of long takes through which we track the movements of characters without the reprieve and orientation of regular editing, and sometimes at the expense of any identifiable point of view, turning objects as ordinary as trees and streetlights into unfathomable and threatening landmarks. In *Last Days*, the camera trails the reclusive musician as he rambles through his New York estate, muttering to himself and wildly gesticulating. All the while, we are behind. The camera affords no close-up, not even a glimpse of his face, disguised by his matted hair. As Jaques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet comment in their study of the materials of cinematic expression, film bears precisely this power to make absent that which it shows because "every film is a spectacle and always presents the slightly fantastic character of a reality that may not reach me and from which I may be

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<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 137.



exempted.”<sup>11</sup> Curiously, this contiguous recording of movement “unrealises” what it represents so unobtrusively. This is the autonomy of Van Sant’s cinematic forms, where bodies defer to the de-corporealised energy discharged by larger architectural and geographical spaces, an energy with no other intelligence save to disclose, by their very presence on screen, the dark and inarticulate background from which these bodies take shape and are destined to return.

A denser reality becomes apparent in *Elephant*, *Last Days* and *Gerry*, as deliberately concocted and hollow as anything Melville’s aesthetic styles. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the slightly fantastic character of a reality from which we are exempted is the indistinct, inert “proto-reality” haunting the image, not as the primordial Real that obliterates everything, but, as Žižek reinterprets, that which gives name and shape to the Real as an invisible limit or distorting screen.<sup>12</sup> This is, indeed, language itself, in its fundamental inability to symbolise such alterity, a traumatic configuration that nevertheless provides the conditions for cinematic representation.<sup>13</sup> As Fabio Vighi explains:

If, therefore, any symbolic configuration is intrinsically dependent on its “invisible” relationship with the Real, filmmaking is nothing but the distortion it shapes itself into whilst trying to achieve meaning; or, to put it in a slightly different way, it coincides with the effect of the “gravitational pull” it suffers from the self-generated Real.<sup>14</sup>

Melville’s *mise-en-scène* appears to be elegantly blemished by the “gravitational” pressure of these unreachable spaces. It is the darkness that consistently flanks the edges

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, Richard Neupert, ed and trans (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 77–8.

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2003), p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Fabio Vighi, ‘Lacan for Cinema Today: The Uncanny *Pouvoir de la Verite*’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 2005:10. 236–7.

of his frames, a darkness that, as the film unravels, brings us incrementally closer to the moment of Jef's death. Van Sant's direction steadfastly avoids linking spaces and times, favouring distortion and abstraction. We contemplate, watch, and observe the washed out sky turning dark behind the electricity pole at the beginning of *Elephant*, the monolithic and shadowed mountains in *Gerry* and the inky, depthless nightscapes in *Last Days*. Immanence, even expectation, diminishes. Unreadable and unrecognizable landscapes and objects encroach and displace the already tangential cinematic space taken up by his human figures. They stand as distorted embodiments of some inner, alien space – belonging not to the protagonists so much as to the medium itself.



**The evacuated world in *Elephant*, *Gerry* and *Last Days*.**

As such, the visual is paramount in the Santian world. Narrative is secondary. Human activity and emotion is a curiosity: fleeting and elusive. In *Le Samourai*, Jef's enigmatic status is largely unexplained. Van Sant's protagonists are similarly "unsolved" by the time they reach their various ends. Appearances are always deceiving, in this case, because of the play of inattention and attention that revolves around these characters and the precise, over-exposed details of the inanimate, physical world that by turns threatens, overwhelms and contains them. Jef and the host of troubled youths in *Elephant*, in this way, seem both integral and supplementary to the scenes they enter and the objects they wield or wear. The weapons used to gun down the pupils of the Columbine-esque school arrive cheerfully by mail, opened by the two antagonists with the benign excitement of children unwrapping presents on Christmas Day. The same relaxed ease with which the darker haired assailant, Alex, played Beethoven's *Für Elise* on the piano, is evident as he assembles and fires the guns. This vertiginous world of interchangeable objects and indistinct emotions presages the dreadful shooting about to take place. The elliptical narrative heightens this confusion, folding back on moments in time from different perspectives, yet never offering a complete, resonant picture of how the massacre came about. The unsettling ambiguity around Jef's fate seem at odds with his iconic appearance. The trench coat, for example, connotes far more than the posturing of film noir archetypes epitomised by those played by Humphrey Bogart. A reproduced and easily discarded form, it functions as a motif in the purest sense. When Jef stands in a police line-up of identically clothed suspects, his armour is divested, creating a striking cinematic expression of what Tom Milne identifies as the fungible, mutable horizons of this character's supposedly rigorous state of being in the world.<sup>15</sup> In another scene, police

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Milne, 'Jean-Pierre Melville,' *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary: The Major Filmmakers, Vol*

ask a character to identify a man that he may have passed earlier in the lobby of his lover's apartment building. The man remembers one thing: a trench coat. The ordinary and recognisable functions of the trench coat are consequently effaced. This is the aesthetic intelligence of filmic expression, Daniel Frampton argues, presenting objects and revealing a way of thinking – a way of seeing that is simply different to our way of perceiving.<sup>16</sup> Our gaze is drawn to this item as a secure indicator of character, but is also frustrated by its easily duplicated appearance. The effect of this reiteration and duplication of objects is that it displaces the subject of reception, Fredric Jameson argues in *Signatures of the Visible*, conferring another momentum upon the narrative process.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing beyond the appearance of Jef's unflappable hat, his Gitane cigarettes and bottled Evian water save for a series of metonymic displacements disturbing any assumed connections we might be making between characters and events. Ambiguities escalate with the over-determination of these articles, and their increasing opacity in the text.

Frampton conceives of the aesthetic intelligence of cinema as the "film-mind", distinct from the human mind. Jameson similarly elaborates that the dramatic meaning of cinema stems from "within" the medium itself, rather than being derived from some outside force.<sup>18</sup> Both Jameson and Frampton's emphasis on the distinct intelligence of filmic language is useful here because it gestures toward the reciprocal, rhetorical nature of the medium, itself capable of juxtaposing and entangling images and the real in its own set of unique relations. Film produces effects from within the province of its own expression where many representational systems meet and supplement one another, Peucker

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*I*, Richard Roud, ed (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), p. 682.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (Great Britain: Wallflower Press, 2006), p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 183.

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, p. 73.

explains, thus presenting a “real” body as a suspended image in a variety of scenarios.<sup>19</sup>

The result is a spectacle of corporeality not unlike that seen in *tableau vivant*:

Tableau vivant is a meeting point of several modes of representation constituting a palimpsest or textual overlay simultaneously evocative of painting, drama and sculpture. As the staging of well-known paintings by human performers who hold a pose, it involves the “embodiment” of the inanimate image. Tableau vivant, in other words, translates painting’s flatness, its two-dimensionality, into the three-dimensional. By this means it figures the introduction of the real into the image – the living body into painting – thus attempting to collapse the distance between signifier and signified.<sup>20</sup>

The collapsing of distance between signifier and signified in *Le Samourai* is exteriorised by Melville’s *mise-en-scène*. Melville introduces his elegant protagonist by situating him in the corner of a dimly lit and expansively shot room. Suited, Jef lies corpse-like on his bed. The scene is canvassed, flat. It turns to still life, interrupted by the tiniest movement of Jef’s hand as it reaches for and lights another cigarette. We wait for something, but as duration continues unchanged, anticipation levels out to encourage a more passive interest, drawing the eye to the contours and shapes of Jef’s habitat: the caged bird at its centre, the bare walls, the illustrative shadows, the windows and the indistinguishable world beyond.

Something of Edward Hopper’s still, restrained palettes and solitary figures are echoed in each director’s compositions. The rendering of space within Hopper’s works such as *Night Windows* (1928) and *Summer Evening* (1947), for example, depict moments of heightened seclusion, perhaps even the isolation that gently strikes us in the most mundane instances of everyday life. Pamela N. Koob writes that the intrusion of architectural space in these works, and the positioning of the subject in relation to it, reveals both the location of the artist’s gaze and the visual imperatives of his composition,

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<sup>19</sup> Peucker, *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film*, p. 31

<sup>20</sup> Peucker, *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film*, p. 31.

allowing us to witness his act of seeing and the various visual attractions it observes.<sup>21</sup> As with the opening scene of *Le Samourai*, Hopper's human subjects are rarely at the centre of his compositions, often standing to the side of a dominating window, archway, or perched behind a grand piano. The result of this demarcation of space and people is not the total deprivation of a protagonist's interior perspective so much as the orchestration of cinematic space through the interplay of icons. Koob's interpretation of Hopper's art provides a correspondence to what Melville and Van Sant's cinematic aesthetic communicates. From the watercolor palette of *Le Samourai's* interiors, the sketched outline of its wall trimmings and crevices, to the modernist profusion of geometric lines and shapes, a strong evocation of oppression is conveyed when the protagonist literally collides with these barriers. Geoff King perceives a similar stylistic parameter in *Elephant* when he describes the film as having "a flatness of texture."<sup>22</sup> While King attributes this flatness to the extended duration of Van Sant's shots, drawing attention to the presence of the camera,<sup>23</sup> this chapter proposes that such iconography encourages a passive type of observation, the kind where opaque impressions of reality can only be glimpsed. Alex walks around his high school cafeteria scouting his surrounds and making notes. The pursuit would seem innocuous if not for the increasingly cacophonous noise and the cartoonish tumult of activity taking place around him. Alex moves out of step with this background, slowing until finally stopping still, inert and clear against a mural of blurred faces and bodies and sounds. He holds his head in his hands, apparently agonised by some unspoken emotion. For Andre Bazin, the screen image is a kind of window that makes a fragment of the larger, imaginary world visible, in a way that suggests that there is no reason to suppose that this world would necessarily end at the image's limits (the

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<sup>21</sup> Pamela N. Koob, 'States of Being: Edward Hopper and Symbolist Aesthetics', *American Art* 18.3 (Fall 2004): 68.

<sup>22</sup> Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> King, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 148.

field of view).<sup>24</sup> Due to the overly stylised character of Van Sant's cinematography, we begin to see that it isn't the human subject that matters so much as the speculative nature of the *tableaux* they are situated in.

Van Sant's visual style immerses the spectator in landscapes arrested by time and bordered by an immensity of space. Ordinary locales and objects appear extraterrestrial by their sheer scope and augmentation on screen. The camera considers these spaces, capturing cinematic positions of thinking. What would normally be conveyed through narrative is instead filtered and reconfigured through the intelligence of filmic language. As such the smallest intrusion or detail in the frame is significant. The extent of space granted by Van Sant's frames varies between an extreme interest and a supreme disinterest. The effect is the same: the image is flattened and slowed and consequently hollowed out. We trace circuitous paths around increasingly mysterious terrains. Protagonists also circle these terrains, aimlessly and dreadfully picking their way through hallways, houses and roads. The impression of this experience is given by the length and breadth of Van Sant's shots, wherein the human element staggers and stumbles into sight. Our eye, like the camera, is lured to the background, the elsewhere, the horizon line. The point of view is unsettling since it isolates a mode of being, and a manner of film-watching, that is fundamentally estranged from any relational context outside of that which the direction proposes, which is itself a perspective enunciating nothing, refusing to establish any kind of rationale for the events that are (or in this case, aren't) taking place. Dying is no more consequential than a change in weather, leaving its strikingly chaotic imprint on the individuals it burdens, and the worlds from which they eventually vanish.

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<sup>24</sup> Andre Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (New York: Delta, 1973), p. 87.







**(From top) Edward Hopper's *Night Windows* (1928), *New York Movie* (1939) and *Summer Evening* (1947), scenes from *Le Samourai*, and Van Sant's *Gerry* and *Last Days*.**

When captured by Van Sant and Melville's camera, Jef's frugal possessions and the imposing, blank landscapes pertaining to *Gerry*, *Elephant* and *Last Days*, form a hieroglyphics of moral ambiguity and existential fatigue. The background comes to the fore. Silence pervades Melville's melancholy, tonal cinema, intruding as a kind of raw intelligence in those stilled moments in Van Sant's films where time detaches from, and immobilises, the bodies, actions and events of the film's diegesis. Koob recognises a similar effect in Hopper's art, whereby the intensely personal nature of the work emerges, like intelligence, from the carefully constructed elements of perspective. Writing on *New York Movie* (1939), she observes that:

Sunlight and the work's underlying, balanced geometry set the meditative mood. The light spills on the floor, continued on the wall, alludes to a similar shape in the room beyond. Timelessness, harmony, and clarity – suggested by these recurring forms and the associations of sea and sky – are paradoxically offset by a note of uncertainty in the shadows, the odd view through the doorway, and the implied human presence.<sup>25</sup>

Introspection and suggestion define Hopper's aesthetic. In *Summer Evening*, the pale light on the wall all but consumes the drowsy characters situated alongside it. What this predominance suggests, however, remains implicit in the visual relation. Van Sant stretches this muted introversion to its absolute limit. People and objects recur, and the

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<sup>25</sup> Koob, 'States of Being: Edward Hopper and Symbolist Aesthetics', p. 73.

cursory gestures and movements that accompany them are offset by the archaic and unmediated appearance of an inhuman landscape always looming large. As the two “Gerrys” journey indefinitely along a winding and inexhaustible road, any sense of direction, of arriving, becomes subordinate to the directionless emotion couched in the musical score and the peculiar symmetry it offers to this as yet un-established context. Though not in any way suspenseful, we sense that something unhappy is about to transpire – is perhaps already transpiring. The pulsating music and the persistent bleating of the caged bird match the dilapidated interior of Jef’s bedroom in *Le Samourai*. Similar ambient sounds intermittently punctuate Jef’s image on screen and reposition him within a context of intense secrecy. As Frampton explains, silence is the darkness of sound, not so much the absence of noise or music but its mysterious underside that concentrates our perception and generates powerful, if uncertain, feelings.<sup>26</sup> In Van Sant’s approach, a spartan aesthetic correlates to a mysterious narrative silence, which in turn suggests the enigmatic death-bound quality of each of his respective protagonists. Silence expresses acceptance, inertness; an aphoristic indifference is the only form of rebellion available in these stark and unpredictable landscapes. The spectator observes this, passively.

Van Sant’s wayward youths owe at least a degree of influence to Jef’s Puritanism. This Puritanism translates to an unearthly presence in the death trilogy. As they plot the demise of their peers, there is something distinctly innocent about Van Sant’s young, desultory characters, which are ascribed their guilelessness by the guilelessness of Van Sant’s camera. Expressions are neutralised by the impartiality of the direction that observes but does not disclose. In general, close-ups have an isolating effect, Mary Anne Doane suggests, as they subtract an impression of a face from the wider context of the

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<sup>26</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 120.

narrative.<sup>27</sup> When Van Sant brings us in into close proximity with his protagonist's faces, the attention transforms expressions and features into deeply experienced entities within the text, autonomous signs of what Doane identifies as separation and isolation in the text.<sup>28</sup> In Van Sant's death trilogy, close-ups never endow these faces with an *a priori* meaning but instead emphasise the absence of any signifying imposition, and the singular absence of that staggered arrangement of shots that propel the narrative toward meaning. In *Gerry*, faces delay and seem to absorb time, and are frequently positioned with equally discontinuous images of the wilderness they are hopelessly lost in. For King, this display of faces initially exposes the realness of such a predicament; however, the overall effect is something markedly remote:

Style is motivated largely by content. The duration of shots in which little happens creates an impression of what might be the real experience of being lost in the middle of nowhere, In one case, the faces of the two characters are framed closely in the shot, bobbing up and down with motion, as they trudge and trudge and trudge and trudge and trudge, seemingly endlessly. The proximity of camera and the holding of the shot for several minutes, combined with a relatively loud sound mix of their footsteps crunching through the sand, create a strong evocation of presence for the viewer, an impression of sharing the experience in something closer to its real duration than formal convention would normally encourage. After a while, however, sound/image combinations such as this come to seem increasingly stylised, formal and abstract... making the viewer conscious of cinematic time as much as character-experiential duration.<sup>29</sup>

The closely held shot of the two Gerry's profiles, trudging on and on in unison, shatters the entire notion of any character-experiential duration. Eyes squint in the sunlight, shielded by hands and the shirts they've fashioned into hats. Heads are bowed as they walk forward. The impression of these windblown, sunburnt faces eclipses any particularity of expression or intent.

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Anne Doane, 'The Close-up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema', *Differences* 14.3 (2007): 97.

<sup>28</sup> Doane, 'The Close-up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema', p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> King, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 147.

Like Melville's impenetrable Samourai, the Santian character is silent. Without speech, it becomes especially difficult to understand these protagonists, a feeling that contributes directly to their blankness and a lack of distinction from other characters on screen. Jef suffers his death in silence. The silence of his death is like a rupture, the culmination of what Susan Stewart describes as the pornography of distance, a spectacle that ends only in speculation.<sup>30</sup> The mystery of his persona and his murder remains unsolved. Instead, as Frampton suggests, the rupture instills a new sense of reality, a poetic translation of its thinking that directly illuminates a film's ongoing objective/subjective ambiguity.<sup>31</sup> Did Jef ever intend to kill Valerie, the singer? Perhaps he willingly walked into the trap set up for him when he accepted the contract? Before we get the chance to ruminate on these questions, police arrive, the nightclub empties and the band packs up. The film ends. Divested of every conventional signifier, the image of the two "Gerrys" materialises against an unrelentingly vacuous backdrop of mountains and plains and sky. Nowhere in this relation, and within the couple's queer, hermetic dialogue, is there confirmation or elucidation of the dangerous situation they find themselves in. The nickname "Gerry" is interchangeable between them. It is also a word they use to mean "fuck up", as in "*you Gerried the rendezvous*". They refer to their intended destination as "the thing" ("*Fuck this*", Matt Damon's Gerry states after they've been walking for a while. "*Fuck the thing?*" Casey Affleck's Gerry asks. "*Fuck the thing!*" is the reply.) In between this obscure, private slang they are otherwise mute. Speech is a crucible of ludic contradictions and misunderstandings that extend to the way the bodies of these figures forge mindlessly into obviously dangerous terrain. The situation makes no sense, and

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, pp. 110–1.

<sup>31</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 111.

cannot, because the characters involved can sustain no narrative authority. As Steven Shapiro suggests in *The Cinematic Body*, the obliviousness of these figures bear an excessive capacity to mislead, being not quite lost and yet never absent or distant enough to fully recognise.<sup>32</sup> For Jef, reticence and disguise are a way of blending into the public, unseen. However, when these covers fail him, the film hurtles steadily toward its fateful return, back to the scene of the impending crime, confronting the viewer with same indescribable expression on Jef's face, the same sense of futility mirrored in the opening scene. Melville's stern direction and Van Sant's sound and image arrangements thus create conditions whereby the barest inflection of movement or utterance carries unexpectedly devastating consequences.



**The beginning and the end: repetition of expression in *Le Samourai*.**

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<sup>32</sup> Steven Shapiro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 17.

From beginning to end, the human presence suffers from perpetual exile in the Santian imagination. Humanity is estranged and its otherness speaks directly to the viewer's otherness, entering a world that is neither here nor there, interchangeably background and foreground, enduring its interminable duration, waiting, watching. The focus placed on fragmentary dialogue, gestures and fleeting expressions in the death trilogy warrant a shift from the syntagmatic reading of signs to a Barthesian anti-structuralist semiotics in which "the text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects."<sup>33</sup> The visual image disconnects from narrative. Presence imbricates with absence. Blake, the musician portrayed in *Last Days*, rambles madly around his estate, spending the night in the woods and baptising himself in a lake, returning to his house like some sort of wraith. His suicide transpires like a disappearance, his ghostly effigy rising from his lifeless body. Van Sant shreds any semblance of recognition from the students traversing the middle-American high school in *Elephant*. Titles are given to certain figures but their stories overlap to the point of confusion. When the young killers arrive, they enter a world that, for us, has already been divested of its chronological or spatial coordinates. Guns are fired and people flee but the event simply passes before our eyes. No rationales, explanations or adversaries are tendered to account for these trajectories of exile. As Linda Peckham points out, when absence and indefinite space take the place of narrative schemata, the whole logic of suture, the continuity of the image, is fissured.<sup>34</sup> The adversary of the exile is time itself, in its essential arbitrariness. The conflict it inflicts is systemic: malaise, repetition, torpor and indifference. The response is distance, ritualistic behaviour and a kind of austere

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<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller, trans (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Peckham, 'Not Speaking With Language/Speaking With No Language: Leslie Thornton's *Adynata*', *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 184.

solitude. The end is always death.

That death draws near for these figures is a cognisance channelled through, to borrow from Barthes, a “scenography” of waiting.<sup>35</sup> For Barthes, waiting both takes place and is a place, an interior domain in which we lose all sense of proportions, where expectation is always undermined by an inability to move, an enchantment he describes as being “woven out of tiny unavowable interdictions to infinity.”<sup>36</sup> Barthes speaks of waiting as a kind of exiled experience because it induces suffering, the same suffering Said attributes to the indefinite postponement of any possibility of return.<sup>37</sup> The Santian character suffers the lack of any certain, temporal context, save for the finality they find in death. The Santian character suffers in silence and inertia. They exist in the interim, the meanwhile, in the adjournment of the return. The intractability of this reality easily converts to pathos in the bleakly futuristic world featured in Mark Romanek’s, *Never Let Me Go* (2010). Romanek adapts Kazuo Ishiguro’s tale of dystopian England in which human “donors” are cloned and raised in various institutions to provide organs for transplants. The lives of three “donors”, orphans Kathy H, Ruth and Tommy, are but temporary intervals of childhood and adolescence awaiting their terrible and inevitable end on the operating table. The way Romanek chronicles this fate is affecting, imbuing moments and objects with a palpable sense of transience, reinforced by the quiet resignation of Kathy’s retrospective voice-over. Time and space are demarcated, specified and narrativised. The monstrous thus becomes comprehensible. What we find here is the protean nature of film, what Laura Mulvey identifies as cinema’s affinity with metamorphosis, its predilection

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<sup>35</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Said, *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*, p. 142.

for transformation from frame to frame.<sup>38</sup> We are compelled to respond to this vision because this is cinema that moves forward, entreating us to intuit from successive sequences some semblance of hope in spite of the narrative's fatal conclusion. Protagonists are firmly at the centre of these arrangements. There is no space for hope in *Gerry*, and if it is intimated, it is soon quelled by Van Sant's alienating and ominous organization of space and time. When the Gerrys scramble to the top of a mountain, the vista they find is more of the same: endless desert. At times they set off confidently, and for a while we accompany them, but the camera always pans back to show the scope of their misdirection, how insufficient these attempts actually are at moving them closer to the road, the car; to rescue. The vision is devoid of any romanticism. For the Santian character, the exilic subject, return is out of the question.<sup>39</sup>



***Gerry* (above) and (below), Mark Romanek's, *Never Let Me Go* (2010).**

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<sup>38</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 189.

<sup>39</sup> Said, *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*, p. 142.



Fundamentally, for Said, exile is interminable.<sup>40</sup> “No sooner,” he writes, “does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.”<sup>41</sup> After repetition, ritual and boredom, an anxious sense of *déjà vu* erupts anew in the death trilogy. While the prospect of death in *Never Let Me Go* dovetails into the retroactive longings of Kathy, as she looks back into her past and what happened to her, Ruth and Tommy, death-boundedness manifests itself differently in *Elephant*, *Gerry* and *Last Days*. It turns cause and effect into incompatible entities, making the world anonymous, and subjectivity, turbulent and permeable. Death-boundedness is not the question or issue of death in this type of cinema, but equates to something uncanny, what Mulvey identifies in *Death 24x A Second* as the overwhelming and irrational sense of fate or destiny, and the outside intervention in the everyday.<sup>42</sup> In many ways, Van Sant’s films are the perfect vehicle for expressing this uncanny intrusion, doubling incidents and encounters, and giving us characters as insubstantial as they are volatile. As Barbara Creed writes, cinema is well disposed to exploring narratives of *déjà vu* in relation to illusion and repetition:

The cinema is the *déjà vu* art form par excellence. With its...ability to collapse spatial and temporal boundaries, it has the ability to represent *déjà vu* experiences and explore *déjà vu* themes with an eerie power ... In life, as in film, the most common meaning of *déjà vu* is that it signifies the strange, surreal feeling that what is happening now has already happened before in exactly the same way...In addition, the cinema draws on *déjà vu* experiences at the level of form: in the context of spectatorship; the evolution of genres; and the way it represents the image.<sup>43</sup>

This strange, surreal feeling is generated by Van Sant’s detached style of direction.

Convention would dictate that the kind of close order of shots employed in *Gerry* would have the effect of making available the subjective point of view of each featured protagonist. We are so close to their faces that it has the opposite effect. In *Last Days* and *Elephant*, a sense of *déjà vu* is the result of excessively long and continuous tracking

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<sup>40</sup> Said, *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*, p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> Said, *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*, p. 149.

<sup>42</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Creed, ‘Déjà Vu, Film and the Uncanny’, *AntiTHESIS*, 17 (2007): 8.

shots that generate an overlapping and essentially contrapuntal temporality. Narrative is thus refined to a narrowly fatalistic arc: it is the gradual and inevitable emanation of absence into presence, where interpretation submits to observation, leaving the essential inscrutability at the heart of these portrayals intact.

The films comprising Van Sant's death trilogy can be variously positioned along a spectrum of independent, "art" cinema by virtue of their more obvious formal attributes, and less obviously, by the influence these formal attributes exert on narrative content. "Death trilogy" in itself implies a series of interrelated texts whose thematic content is centred upon the subject of mortality. This routine summary, however, seems inadequate when considering the configuration of images and ideas set up within these films. Certainly, there are commonalities of style: formal elements such as long, tracking shots and extreme close-ups that draw awareness to each film's divergence from more mainstream cinematic conventions and thus, the artifice of the filmic operation. In more ways, *Gerry* is the progeny of the early films of Edison and the Lumiere brothers than it is a member of the contemporary mystery and crime genres, and is even less related to the filmmaker's earlier movies such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Finding Forrester* (2000). This is cinema that relishes its cinematic-ness, a contemporary variation of what film scholar Tom Gunning defined, in his study of the infamous 1895 screening of Louis and Auguste Lumiere's, *The Arrival of a Train at the Station at the Grand Cafe in Paris*, as the "cinema of attractions", a cinema based primarily on its propensity to show rather than tell.<sup>44</sup> What we find in the death trilogy is a return to a smaller production and a barer aesthetic style. Within, mysteries are uncovered but never solved, crimes committed but

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<sup>44</sup> Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, Thomas Elsaesser, ed (London: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 58-59.

not punished. With the diminishment of expository dialogue and action, something else opens up in Van Sant's eerily vacated frame. The absence of any chronological deadline or psychological imperative in the narrative furthers this possibility.

The cinema of attractions went underground into avant-garde practices (of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, primarily) with the introduction of sound in the late 1920s, and the adoption by the major American studios of what is now referred to as the classic Hollywood style of filmmaking. When the studio system began to collapse in the 1950s and 1960s and the dominance of its influence started to decline, a new avant-garde emerged in Europe, more visible than any before or since. The films of Godard, Truffaut, Antonioni, Fellini, Buñuel and Bergman differed widely but were generally distinguished by an interest in the deconstruction of narrative, the disruption of classical Hollywood continuity, and, above all, in the intrinsic cinematic-ness of cinema. This question of what the camera can reveal and its clear attendance within Van Sant's films is what aligns him with early European avant-garde filmmaking. As Gunning elaborates, this tradition is epitomised by the direct address of the camera to the audience wherein:

Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inwards towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.<sup>45</sup>

Certainly, the energy Van Sant's cinema expends in the direction of simulation attempts to lay bare the cruel and unfeeling backdrop to human life. Against this backdrop, bodies and their attendant gestures and expressions are disconnected from any psychological rationale for the reason that they are simply something the camera cannot "know". This

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<sup>45</sup> Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', 58-59.

offhand presentation is where Van Sant acknowledges the viewer. The view is transparent, but it is a transparency that is incapable of clarifying or communicating any intelligence within the view itself. It is simply a space for our observation.

Beyond their suicidal tendencies and languid disinterest in life, Van Sant's fatalistic protagonists are relatively unknown entities. Much is implied, however, in the kinds of disorderly, upset habitats in which these characters move. The quotidian is turned on its head by the insistence of a direction more interested in observance than examination or discernment. There is no compensation for this deficit. The omniscient approach defamiliarises the most basic verities and thereby intimates an even greater strangeness at the base of language and meaning. Words give way. Speech often makes no sense or is too muffled to hear, easily drowned out by external noise. Something of the opposite operation is undertaken in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007). One could easily imagine Penn's adaptation, and exiled protagonist, in the hands of Van Sant. Relaying the final years of Christopher McCandless, a top student who exchanges ambition, family and possessions for life in the Alaskan wilderness, Penn's direction initially resembles *Gerry* in that the natural world dominates the frame and dwarfs the character traversing it. The major point of departure lies in the narrative, which conveys the protagonist's doomed choice as a journey toward meaning. The obliqueness of the world, and the attraction it holds for Christopher, is illustrated and further reinforced by the hindsight of his sister's narration. There are visible signposts, dates and names. Van Sant provides neither. Christopher is a pastiche of Thoreau and Jack London quotes, seventies counter-culture and other rebellious archetypes. He is recognisable. After his death, he leaves behind his thoughts in writing. The young men in *Gerry* are nameless and unattached. Their fatalism is more awful for this. And unexplained, it has no limit.



*Into the Wild* (dir. Sean Penn, 2007) and the journey toward meaning.

Gerry is about as sparse and unhurried as a film can possibly be while still retaining the barest thread of plot. Two young men drive into the desert; they park; they trek; one dies, the other kills him and makes it to a road and hitches a ride. They stumble and dawdle, by turns distracted and panicked by the prospect of never being found. Darkness descends, followed by light, void of any indication of how many days have transpired in between. They stop and then doggedly pick up pace. There is no semblance of a back-story or other characters to interact with for any substantial period. In contrast to *Into the Wild*, there is the distinct absence of any internal or external monologue. Little is learnt or revealed during the course of this misadventure concerning the original purpose of their trip to Rattlesnake Canyon, their specific relationship, and their growing fears. As Susan Sontag explains in her discussion of the distilled photographic image, our comprehension of the world and its constituent objects and inhabitants proceeds from not accepting the world as it looks.<sup>46</sup> The knowledge of how these things and people function takes place in time and must be justified in time, because only that which narrates can make us understand.<sup>47</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.

distilled and featureless world of the Santian character is thus integral to our apprehension of the tragedy that awaits them. Some fatal mistake is signalled in the anomalous beginning, insinuated rather than explicitly conveyed by any actual obstacle or event.

Whereas journalism, film and crime-genre television tend to process death rationally, making fear palatable by treating murder and suicide as a precise event or moment with the potential for resolution, Van Sant's eschews the conventions of crime fiction and non-fiction narrative. Without warning, death occurs. The occurrence sheds light on nothing other than its fatal arbitrariness. It provides neither the apex of plot, nor does it prompt any questions as to who, what or why it happened. There is no intervening point of view. Its secret is both intimated and withheld by the camera. In *Gerry*, the murder takes place in the guise of a suffocating embrace. Similarly – and without any forewarning – the gunshots in *Elephant* are startlingly efficient. Victims are shot at and then turned from, as another is quickly targeted. After we hear the gunshot, the camera lingers long enough on Blake's body so that we witness the bizarre supernatural appearance of his spectre. Crime-genres and news, on the other hand, relay fatalities as contingent events, figuring death on a spectrum of events. Horrific content is pacified by an emphasis on statistics, information and investigation. By seizing death in narrative, aligning it with a desire to know and process of retribution and retrieval, the irrepressible fact of dying and the little we can actually know about the mortality of others, is safeguarded. Death has always, already, happened. Dollimore surmises that such narratives particularise death and in doing so, quietly keep at bay the ceaseless process of change that connects death with our desire to know:

The very passing of time, which makes us so keen to seize the day, is also what somehow prevents us doing so; the day slips ineluctably through our hands...time and change, driving us toward a horizon of oblivion, make it

hard to seize anything, let alone the day...And if we do manage to halt time imaginatively, isolating the moment, it is often then only to encounter within it the haunting stillness of non-being.<sup>48</sup>

Exile is the experience, agony and stillness of non-being and the central pre-occupation of Van Sant's trilogy. Death-boundedness, the direction that his exiled creatures are set upon, persists because we are granted the time and space with which to acknowledge its uncanny intrusion into their routines and habitats. Diffusing the senselessness of this uncanny signature of death is the task of the detective, the crime-scene investigator, the journalist and the narrator – all avatars of the symbolic – those trustworthy interlocutors who mediate the viewer's access to the dead body. Without the presence of an investigative agent, impressions carry more weight than fact or evidence. There is no one to suspect, since we can see exactly who is killing whom. The silence of death and the unfathomable act of killing endures.

Van Sant documents the visible world – the sum of its constituents and everyday phenomena – with unhurried indiscriminateness. Still-life un-eventfulness prevails. The lack of any narrative markers and choreography ensures a relatively uncensored view so that the viewer's exposure to bodies, faces, and places feels often brutally disconnected from context. Inanimate forms are exaggerated beyond scale and estrange human behaviour. The indexical relation between what is seen and what is perceived on screen is unhinged by virtue of this divide. The unavailability of concrete bodies to contextualise lived experience, Stewart argues, thus brings the inanimate object to the forefront of our attention.<sup>49</sup> The experience of the object lies outside the parameters of the body and, in

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<sup>48</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, p. xvi.

<sup>49</sup> Stewart, *Objects of Desire*, p. 133.

consequence, is saturated with meanings that will never be entirely accessible to us.<sup>50</sup> In Van Sant's cinema, a passive contemplation of objects and persons occurs without any familiar phenomenological context to scaffold these perceptions. We receive impressions in place of information, metonymy instead of metaphor. Trapped within the paucity of this aesthetic is a perverse and often confounding excess where the severe detail stands in for and, in the process, obliterates temporal boundaries and with them, any narrative determinations that might suggest death is the consequence of some incumbent evil. "If death is an evil at all," Thomas Nagel proposes, "it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of."<sup>51</sup> Van Sant's ineffable cinematic forms deprive us of the certainty of context. Instead, they are a kind of phenomenological thinking about death. Film is precisely this phenomenological thinking, Frampton reasons, capable of transfiguring the people and objects within it:

Film presents not our world unmediated, but its own world ... film is an extension of seeing, of hearing, of thinking, and thus an extension of knowledge, while existing at the skin of things ... Film is thus an event with no memory, context or history. Film displaces our world, and show us another world ... Film thus operates as if our cognitive, linguistic thought had never come. Our spatial reasoning – the primal thought of a pre-rational being – is called upon ... Film, beyond dialectics, without ever producing finality, presents a freeing of intention and the operation of open judgement.<sup>52</sup>

More often than not, Van Sant favours a vacated shot: beautiful yet disarmingly alien. Human perspective and presence, however, is not omitted or obscured for the sake of contrast or to suggest that some grand, symbolic meaning hovers somewhere just out of our reach. A different ordering of thoughts is proposed in the view. And the view itself is not tragically remote. The view stands as the film's contemplation of remoteness, of the limits of narrative and human subjectivity. When trees fill the screen in *Last Days*, time gathers and slows. Everything seems illuminated in those dazzling shots where the scale

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<sup>50</sup> Stewart, *Objects of Desire*, p. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, pp. 202-3.



and infinite reach of the branches and sky are foregrounded. The peripatetic Blake staggers hopelessly at the outskirts. In *Gerry*, the camera alternates between a similar kind of absolute dismissal of, and a suffocating nearness to, its protagonists. There is no middle ground of perspective. The expectation of one protagonist to elucidate events and make connections is stymied. Maps are argued over and then discarded. They walk for miles to no avail. They build a fire and yet no urgency or relief is expressed. Visual motifs, suggestions of sound and snippets of dialogue, undulate and signify within this disorientating, elliptical time frame.

Trekking haphazardly, each Gerry insists that nothing is wrong, despite having in their possession a meagre array of things (cigarettes and one water bottle) that would suggest otherwise. Their search for “the thing” veers from bush to blinding salt flats until they are literally dragging their feet, staggering toward an endlessly receding sun. The predicament is self-explanatory. Whatever this “thing” is – this “*fucking thing at the end of the trail*” – is on the level of meaning no way connected to any object, or any actual thing. It remains an un-integrated element in the signifying chain. And unnamed, it has no efficacy. Of interest here is not so much the interpretation or interrogation of this displacement, but its translation in cinematic language. There is an insurmountable space between these “Gerrys”, the “thing”, and the landscape in which they are trapped. Any attempt to construct a nexus between these seemingly impenetrable elements is, therefore, always a failed attempt. Conversations consist of oddly nonsensical anecdotes about computer games and game shows. Questions drift off (“*Is this the way we, ah...*”), meetings (“rendezvous”) take place at indeterminate spots and are consequently “Gerried”. Pointless arguments, like the endless horizon they shuffle toward, go on and on. In one particular scene, Affleck’s “Gerry” is, inexplicably, atop an outcrop of rock

from which he is unable to climb down. He instructs Damon's "Gerry" to build a "dirt-mattress" and for seven or so minutes the process is unwaveringly depicted, at the end of which Affleck jumps, and the film promptly moves on.



**Extreme and dehumanising perspective in *Gerry*.**

This "thing" that is alluded to by name may be the Thing, something psychoanalysis, in Belsey's reading, interprets as the retroactively forbidden, leaving a hole in what it is possible to signify, and which, in turn, can be signified only as an intrusion of emptiness.<sup>53</sup> As Belsey points out, it is a gap that remains a source of dissatisfaction in the psyche and in culture, a structural discontent that gives rise to desire.<sup>54</sup> Words inscribe and invoke this "gap" as a paradox: an irreducible void with a potential surplus of meanings. In this way, the contents of images that comprise *Gerry* can be said to resemble the constituent parts of a dream, where, in the psychoanalytic account, meaning

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<sup>53</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 84.

<sup>54</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 84.

can be translated only at the level of word play, of nonsensical signifying material.<sup>55</sup> As

Žižek argues:

The basic presupposition of psychoanalytic interpretation is that every final product of the dream-work, every manifest dream-content, contains at least one ingredient that functions as a stop-gap, as a filler holding the place of what is necessarily lacking in it...an element always —sticks out, marking the dreams constitutive lack, i.e., representing within it its exterior.<sup>56</sup>

From this logic, language and vision exemplify the real as unknowable and as a result will always differ from it. The gap cannot be breached. There is nothing to interpret beyond the huge, panoramic landscapes, just as the allusion to “the thing” and the problem of being lost are in themselves empty predicaments, veiling nothing but a potential absence, one from which we need to keep our distance.<sup>57</sup> And Van Sant holds rigorously to this distance. Not a single close-up of a pained expression splices their last death march across the frozen tundra. Somnolent hobbling eventually collapses. “*I’m leaving,*” Affleck’s Gerry croaks. He fumbles for the other’s hand. He meets a timid embrace that turns awfully, though unsurprisingly, into what appears to be a desperate mercy killing. There is no remorse, or anguish, registered in the aftermath, save for the ambiguity of intent and a sort of unfulfilling, anti-climatic return: to the road, to the car, to culture.

In *Last Days*, the minimalist cinematography employed to capture rock musician, Blake’s, stumbling and meandering existence fixes upon unremarkable objects, trees and doors, investing them with an immeasurable importance. They do not stand as clues to action or even as indicators of who Blake is and how he comes to be the way he is. Blake only occasionally passes within their reach. His point of view is never aligned with the camera and in this way, is unable to direct our gaze. We are left with the absence of

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<sup>55</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 84.

perspective, the slippage between emptiness and continuity in the cinematic sequence. In the distortion of movement and stillness, we confront the dead-end of representation which Žižek identifies as the “elusive *je ne sais quoi* that makes all the difference between the sublime and the ordinary.”<sup>58</sup> Though frustratingly unyielding, Van Sant’s *mise-en-scènes* transform our sense of time and space, and with it, the human presence, an opening up and insinuation toward what Žižek terms the “something more” of Heidegger’s “auratic object”, an object in which there is “something other than itself, a sublime, indescribable X which cannot be located in any of the positive features of the object, yet the presence of which distinguishes it, makes a Thing out of an object.”<sup>59</sup> Adopting Mulvey's approach to the filmic image, and in subjecting Van Sant’s cinema to a process of repetitious viewing and extraction,<sup>60</sup> prisms from the isolated still the uncanny aesthetic of the auratic, cinematic object, the Barthesian punctum, this “ineffable kernel of the real”<sup>61</sup> that exiles at the heart of the speaking subject.



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<sup>58</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 170.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 170.

<sup>60</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 179.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 170.



***Last Days: exile in movement.***

Van Sant's direction devotes the bulk of its attention to extraneous details. The emphasis is confronting. When his characters do appear they do so as if belatedly, already subtracted from the scene, disappearing easily within the proverbial and literal cracks. As Belsey points out, perspective gives, but also takes away.<sup>62</sup> It is not the role of the Santian character to resolve this spatial disorientation. Whether they are trying to steer a wildly veering car in the beginning of *Elephant*, or marching purposefully into a desert without water or food, the Santian character does not seek exile in the way that Christopher McCandless does, but is exiled and remains so. The world can only be relied upon to assure this sense of banishment. These protagonists are stubbornly withdrawn, the camera, coldly observant and what is presented as a result is a somewhat radical re-subjectivisation of cinematic eventfulness, where a human end does not automatically equate to the structural end of the narrative – indeed, to narrative itself. The moment of death is entirely obscured by what precedes it. Blake's suicide, for instance, is an oddly subdued affair, a strange conflation of movement and stasis. The high school shooting

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<sup>62</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 100.

takes place with calm efficiency. There is no significant build-up, no psychological insight into the perpetrator's motivations. In each instance, the unintelligible and mysterious quality of violence and death invades the narrative and re-contextualises our understanding of the film's chain of events. In its final moments, Mulvey surmises, stillness returns, both literally and figuratively, to cinema and narrative.<sup>63</sup> Out of a primary inertia, there is the advent of movement and sequence and then the return to stasis. In its drive toward resolution, she writes, narrative offers the cinema a means through which the ferocious realness of death – marked in the symbolic by its underlying, enigmatic stillness – can emerge in a medium-specific form.<sup>64</sup> This is what distinguishes Van Sant's death trilogy: a persisting and superseding death-boundedness and inactivity where beginnings and ending are not simply effaced, but altogether absent.

These are not protagonists in the classical sense – nor do we perceive them in conventional ways. There is something of the already dead about them, as if they are ghostly imitations of presence incapable of asserting their own, particular temporality. They are secretive, indistinct, moving but also unmoving. The death they seek fuses into the death of the story. Something is distorted by way of what we, as cinematic spectators, desire for these characters. Presuming that what we desire is to see, to have verified the death that has been intimated from the beginning, what follows is decidedly irresolute and anti-climactic, since our anticipation will always surpass what actually takes place on screen. There is nothing of consequence exhibited, no catharsis afterward. These fatalistic protagonists remain so disorientated, so isolated from their origins – so irremediably other – that the motivations, thoughts and feelings that one would normally be privy to at this point in genre films is barred to us. Kathy's narration in *Never Let Me Go*, for instance,

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<sup>63</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 79.

reflects on the transitory nature of life. The devastation of death is softened by her memorialising of the past. By contrast, the devastation of *Gerry*'s death scene is lightened by a ridiculous joke as Affleck's character asks: "*How do you think the hike's going so far?*" Stationed behind a window, we watch Blake's ghost climb an invisible ladder. The boundaries around the narrative, much like the self, implode and the result is a disarming absurdity, a blankness or postponement of action that effects a jarring estrangement from meaning. As Emmanuel Levinas remarks, death approaches in the fear of someone and, also, in the hopes of someone, and its immanence stems at the same time from its threat and its insufferable delay.<sup>65</sup> This comprehension of the inevitability of death is one of the modalities of our relation to others, he argues, and as such it is approached without being able to be assumed, involving a sort of last interval that our consciousness cannot traverse.<sup>66</sup> The stark cinematography we encounter throughout the death trilogy is the literal translation of this kind of thinking about death and the dying of others as the final frontier for the viewer. We stand in the background or hover alongside these scenes, looking upon an emptied and expressionless tableau and a violently incomprehensible alterity.

The distance that Van Sant maintains between the viewer and his protagonists, and the cinematic landscape they wander through, calls into question the very sovereignty of the viewing subject by making explicit the absence encapsulated in the latter's emphasised display. Human life is miniature and inconsequential when set against the extremity of these backdrops. The unerring timelessness of these natural and man-made environs ultimately works against the grain of cinema's forward movement. Momentum concedes to deferral. Primordial and unearthly sights fill the frame: endless carpets of desert, empty

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<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 234-5.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 234-5.

bedrooms and corridors, the quivering drops of dew on a leaf. The act of pausing opens up a reflective space in these films, accounting for much of the meandering pace of the narrative, at once driven toward the inevitability of the protagonist's fate as to the reality of what remains unchanged by it. Van Sant's direction appears idle and purposeless, yet it is ever observant. Languorous single-takes keep silent sentry just behind, or occupying some supreme position of impossible distance from, its subjects. Within a specifically psychoanalytical account, it becomes feasible to not only identify the paradox at the basis of Van Sant's "realism" (merging stillness into movement, absence into presence), but to articulate the particular temporal relationship that its images forge with viewing subjects. Though the texts that it is culture's imperative to create may be no more than fictional satisfactions that gratify at an imaginative level, Belsey explains, within their signifying form one finds an undeniable pleasure and beauty, an ineffable nostalgia.<sup>67</sup>

But how do we figure this particular transformation of reality untethered from narrative cohesion and logic? Is there anything to intuit beyond the act of looking, beyond the depiction of those vague, scattered moments prior to the moment of cinematic death? Such questions suggest that there can be no correct way to view these scenes and no retroactive interpretation that adequately resolves the ambiguity that Van Sant's images uncover. According to Žižek, this emptiness is incorporated at the level of the signifier in a way that necessarily fences it off from direct experience but which nevertheless pervades human life:

One of the lessons of Lacanian psychoanalysis ... is the radical discontinuity between the organic immediacy of —life! and the symbolic universe: the "symbolisation of reality" implies the passage through the zero point of the "night of the world." What we forget, when we pursue our daily life, is that our human universe is nothing but an embodiment of the radically inhuman "abstract negativity", of the abyss we experience when we face the "night of

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<sup>67</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 72.



the world.”<sup>68</sup>

The over-lapping sequences in *Elephant* and the endless duration of being lost in *Gerry* attest to this radical discontinuity, and a loss that simultaneously threatens with oppressive proximity and passes over us, unintelligibly, ultimately falling short of its mark because its intent is never explicit, cannot be adequately traced, is as fugitive a quality as the expressions that flit across Blake’s face. Belsey suggests that these symbolisations draw attention to a difference from the past, suggesting a loss of presence and a simultaneous potential for absence in the future.<sup>69</sup> Ambiguity is the by-product. We bear witness to the suicide of Blake and the murder of Affleck’s Gerry from the point of view of a stranger standing outside in the former, and from a passive, inscrutable perspective in the latter.

In *Elephant*, sporadic editing, startling background noises and an indistinguishable temporality constantly foreshorten the time we spend with the various characters. Individual stories loop back and intersect. Observance is the only perspective available, the only position amenable to the transitory, indistinct nature of what is being shown. Close-ups give way suddenly to overcast sky. A photograph is taken but never verified by the camera. Names are mentioned and then forgotten. Conversations and jokes are set at a volume that makes it difficult to keep track of what is being said. *Gerry* adopts a similar approach in the presentation of its characters. Ambiguity is continually inscribed through repetitious shots of desert. The wayward duo offers a study in extremes, either sweltering under the fullness and severity of the sun or slumbering in the complete darkness. Character becomes something other than what we expect it to be. The story of survival (like any explanation that might be offered as to why two high school students undertook

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<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 61.

<sup>69</sup> Belsey, *Culture and the Real*, p. 73.

a shooting spree at their high school) takes a backseat to something more mysterious: a mood, a temperament; representation itself as laid bare by the motionlessness of Van Sant's camera.



**Perspective giving and taking away in *Elephant* and *Gerry*.**

In this sense, there can be no ending. The losses we suffer as human beings may be the primary motivations for culture but within the Santian imagination these losses are second-hand occurrences. The cinematic forms that reside in these dystopias thus question the authenticity at our disposal when confronted with the unnameable desire that is initiated at the advent of signification: the lost, pre-historical Thing that hovers uneasily between the real and the symbolic, something that can be traced back to Heidegger's

conception of a mode of Being that is defined by this very interrogation into what is lacking in language: the temporal disposition of Dasein, thrown into the world, exiled, marked by the certainty of mortality.<sup>70</sup> Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, he continues, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain and in suffering this deficit we have no way to access to the loss-of-Being which the dying man suffers, at most we are always just “there alongside.”<sup>71</sup> This “there alongside-ness” is the state from which Van Sant operates and the position we are assigned as spectators. The effect is not the impoverished *mise-en-scène* we might imagine. The answers that are supposed when we bear witness to the suffering of the loss-of-Being lay dormant in his severe forms and inhuman landscapes. Time passes and continues, endlessly and unbearably. Stasis takes the place of movement and vice-versa. Cinema in this way articulates the operation of all art forms: representing presence and engraving absence. As Mulvey notes, the ferocious reality of death can become a vehicle for the aesthetic attributes of cinema, and in the hands of Van Sant, the cinematic index invites immersion, stilling the gaze of the spectator and stilling time beyond the parameters of narrative continuity, registering time already past, but also casting forward into ambiguous ends.<sup>72</sup> But what happens when the ferocity of death cannot be entirely recuperated, when the distinction between reality and imagination is blurred, when the moving image stays still, silence takes over, and there is virtually no diegetic content capable of orienting our perceptions and responses? Perhaps a Gus Van Sant film happens.

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<sup>70</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 282.

<sup>72</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 57.



## CHAPTER THREE: WILLIAM

### FRIEDKIN'S THE EXORCIST

In the night he woke in the cold dark coughing and he coughed till his chest was raw. He leaned to the fire and blew on the coals and he put on more wood and rose and walked away from the camp as far as the light would carry him. He knelt in the dry leaves and ash with the blanket wrapped about his shoulders and after a while the coughing began to subside. He thought about the old man out there somewhere. He looked back at the camp through the black palings of the trees. He hoped the boy had gone back to sleep. He knelt there wheezing softly, his hands on his knees. I am going to die, he said. Tell me how I am to do that.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, 2006.

William Friedkin's 1973 horror classic, *The Exorcist*, depicts a world ravaged by supernatural violence. The particulars of this world appear in the first instance in the friendly guise of the MacNeil household. It is here that the young daughter, Regan (Linda Blair), falls prey to the spirit of the ancient demon, Pazuzu. In Friedkin's adaptation of William Peter Blatty's novel, the demon targets a host of terrified characters before victimising the child. Regan's possession is the visual centerpiece of the film. As Pazuzu takes control, her youthful appearance deteriorates into something resembling death. Fluids ooze and spew unnaturally from her body, decorating the house and any inhabitant that crosses its path, conveying the violence of the possession as it escalates and imbricates a series of causally related events and persons. No one is immune to Regan's degeneration, however, it is a testament to the enduring image of the child, writhing hideously in her bed, that most of the attention paid to the film revolves around the obscene and sexual nature of her attack, distracting from the fact that it is rather conventionally arranged around a protagonist, who is not Regan, but the priest charged

with her deliverance, Father Karras (Jason Miller). As the film unravels, the young girl all but disappears. Replaced by a bestial conglomeration of horrific sounds, familiar voices and shape-shifting appearances, the presence of the demon/child is disturbingly ambiguous. In and around it, death abounds and threatens, but it begs the question: whose life, exactly, is at stake? Whose nightmare is playing out? The answer lies in the vertiginous confluence of perspectives within the film, and the haunting, haunted, figure they alight upon, that of the incumbent exorcist, Father Karras.

In *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*, Jeffrey Crane surmises that in order for events to be deemed horrific they must first and foremost be witnessed.<sup>1</sup> This axiom of the horror genre is formalised in the “shock-cut”, an editing technique that Brigid Cherry likens to the shot-reverse-shot that is appropriated to emulate the sensory and cognitive experience of extreme agitation.<sup>2</sup> What the shock cut reveals to the audience of a horror film is two-fold: the graphic moment of violence and the reaction image. The convention is well established, from the shower-scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s, *Psycho* (1960), to the final confrontation between Donald Sutherland’s grieving father and the grotesque face of the red-hooded phantom he has mistakenly believed to be his recently deceased daughter in Nicholas Roeg’s, *Don’t Look Now* (1973). The shock-cut does not always require such explicit choreography to simulate agitation, however. *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Myrick and Sanchez, 1999), for example, experiments with the dynamics of this technique by fragmenting its unity. The film masquerades as the found footage of a trio of missing college filmmakers who embarked on an excursion deep into the Maryland woods to debunk the myth of a witch

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey L. Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments In the History of the Horror Film* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1994), pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 85.

who allegedly resided there. The point of *The Blair Witch Project* is not that the story be revealed as a hoax, but that the facsimile of emotions conveyed by the actors involved, in their visceral appeal, do enough to destabilise the boundaries separating fact from fiction, and the temporal and ontic status of the text. Stripped of editing, music and transitions, everything is telescoped through the shaky lens of the camera, occurring to us in the tense interval of anticipation. The perspective of the filmmakers achieves little, if any, purchase on what might be hunting them. Inexplicable noises, whooshes of wind, gasps and rustling twigs magnify in the ever-encroaching night. In its fruitless search to capture their source, the camera swerves into darkness then back to the faces of the terrified students. In Cherry's analysis of the film, this filtered, claustrophobic point of view becomes the trigger for the horror and from then on, the film is a descent into death.<sup>3</sup> The camera that verifies and subsequently subjectivises these characters, inscribes a literal absence in the diegetic space. Footage increasingly cuts out and the screen goes black until these figures are only snatches of light and movement, objectivised by the uncanny existence of the footage itself.



**The isolated reaction shot as exemplified in *The Blair Witch Project* (dirs. Myrick and Sanchez, 1999).**

During the shock-cut, two types of cinematic perspective converge: one that objectively

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<sup>3</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, p. 190.

registers a horrific tableau, and the point of view that identifies it, thereby registering it as a horrific sight. Gilberto Perez categorises these perspectives as distant and proximate vision. Borrowing the terms from philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's essay, "On Point of View in the Arts" (1956), and applying them to his reading of F. W. Murnau's, *Nosferatu* (1922), Perez describes proximate vision as a point of view that seizes hold of an object, making it possible to apprehend it as palpably rounded and corporeal, whereas distant vision opens out our gaze upon an unspecified visual field so that no single object stands out and our gaze is drawn to the distance between things, the background as opposed to the foreground.<sup>4</sup> In Perez's estimation, *Nosferatu's* central antagonist, the vampire, is terrifying because he is evanescent and everywhere, a supreme and impending absence writ large in the architectural spaces of the film and thereby personifying the existential conception of death as something inherently facing and determining our being-in-the-world.<sup>5</sup> As soon as he is glimpsed, he dissolves into the recessing shadows of doorways and arched windows. Each scene under Murnau's direction is threatened by his expectant and insidious intrusion.<sup>6</sup> Proximate and distant vision collides, and the former inevitably concedes to the latter. Immense, ambient darkness flanks and hollows out ordinary objects and scenery. An undifferentiated trepidation prevails, and a sense of despondency is evoked with it, as the reassurances in everyday life that once held death in check vanish. "There being no object that stands out and holds the consciousness, nothing solid on which the eye can rest or the mind can sense," Perez writes, "we are tremblingly thrown back on our own subjectivity and our own fear of death."<sup>7</sup> Death surely approaches in *Nosferatu*, and its victims are consigned to dog its steps, ensnared and, finally, besieged.

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<sup>4</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Perez, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Perez, pp. 136-7.

<sup>7</sup> Perez, p. 142.



In many ways, Friedkin's film discloses the ultimate and cumulative expression of the shock-cut, continually supplementing violent images with terrified reactions. Of all the characters subjected to the gruesome theatrics of Regan's possession, it is Karras who is the most reluctant to accept her demonic countenance, the least reactive and, in the end, the most traumatised participant. Karras' prominence in Friedkin's shock-cuts foreshadows this. The film assumes Karras' proximate vision at significant moments, and it is a perspective in conflict with what it apprehends. Karras endeavours to treat the demon/child as his patient but is thwarted by his fear. His command of the situation is short-lived, shattered the moment the demon/child gazes back, turning its deadened eyes upon him. The demon's deathly gaze, a gaze that is impervious, impossible and follows him everywhere, objectifies Karras. Žižek identifies a similar de-subjectivised perspective in the works of Alfred Hitchcock, surmising that the ultimate threat his films offer is a point of view shot not clearly allocated as the point of view of anyone, but of the indeterminate and free-floating Gaze of an impossible subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Hitchcock is at his most uncanny, Žižek stresses, when he directly engages the viewer with the look of this external fantasmatic Gaze:

A house with a family at dinner – is all of a sudden, by means of codified markers like the slight trembling of the camera, the 'subjectivised' soundtrack, etc., revealed as the subjective shot of a murderer stalking his potential victim. However, this procedure is to be supplemented with another reversal, when, in the middle of a shot unambiguously marked as subjective, the spectator is all of a sudden compelled to acknowledge that there is no possible subject within the space of diegetic reality who can occupy the point of view of this shot. So we are not dealing here with the simple reversal of a subjective into an objective shot, but in constructing a place of impossible subjectivity, a subjectivity which taints the very objectivity with a flavour of unspeakable, monstrous evil.<sup>9</sup>

The demon-child is this locus of impossible subjectivity, but it is not the first taint of

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<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, pp. 35-6.

unspeakable evil colouring the diegesis of the film. Although the camera does not visibly tremble, during the exposition it links distant places and times as if it were operating under the instruction of some menacing, omnipotent intelligence. A paranormal darkness shrouds the opening suburban setting. The camera crouches behind the cover of garden, waiting and watching as a light winks out from the window of a townhouse. Low and remote, it pans out and past a sidewalk. The Virgin Mary's marbled face is transposed over the scene, her eyes cast down. Sound, not yet music, whirs in the background before pitching into shrieking violin as the credits fill the screen. We open on an archaeological dig in Northern Iraq, the ancient site of Nineveh. The sun bleeds into colour. An Arabic chant prefaces the next sequence, wherein workers hack viciously at the escarpment. Day trades for night. A child runs frantically through a maze of ruins. The elderly Jesuit priest, Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow), the first priest to encounter Pazuzu, stares searchingly at a totem-like demon. The statue stares back and for a moment the two figures face each other. The camera retreats slowly from this impossible subjectivity, towards some inexorable destination.





**Ominous beginnings, ominous things: the lingering shot in *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973)**

Several perspectives operate at once within this exposition. Distant vision comprises the de-subjectivised camera perspective at the beginning, directing our gaze across unspecified locales, and prompts the uncanny sense that the Virgin Mary's downturned face and the confrontational totem may possess their own, unfeasible gaze. This convergence of distant and proximate vision constitutes the genuine reflex of horror throughout the film. The proximate point of view of Merrin comprises the diegetic, if momentary, subject that draws our attention to the direction of the evil inhabiting the totem, that it is something to be feared, perhaps that it is something he has seen before. Above all, his perspective, as it stares down the totem, suggests that this evil, whatever it is, cannot be confronted. As if to reinforce this, sand swirls around them and the camera flees to its next location, and next victim, in the Georgetown residence of the MacNeil family. Proximate vision, at best, approximates in *The Exorcist*, bringing into view incomplete objects and details not only fleeting but also misleading. It initially alternates

between the point of view of Merrin and Regan's mother (Ellen Burstyn) – characters involved in the forthcoming conflict though by no means the central protagonists. Initially, Karras appears on the periphery. He is a face in a crowd, notable but mysterious, the priest Regan's mother “keeps seeing”. During one such occasion, Regan's mother passes him on her way home. She pauses to observe him. It is a distanced shot and he is barely discernible within it. In conversation with another priest, his anguished words (“*I feel like a fraud*”) carry urgently to her before being drowned out by the noise of the street, effectively breaking her reverie. The sight of Karras narrows the visual field of the film for a precise and meaningful instant, circumscribing him within the narrative. The next shot Friedkin grants of this protagonist is through a silent and disembodied perspective, as the camera stalks him down streets into an underground train station. He is a blur of movement, hurrying along, hulking into his coat. A homeless man pleads with him for money and he turns in surprise, disgusted yet stricken by the unblinking and penetrating gaze that meets him. Behind him, a train flies past. The foreshadowing is undeniably violent. Karras is literally cornered. On either side of him, both behind and in front, something terrible and annihilating awaits.

Distant vision is salient in *The Exorcist*. It traverses time and space, instilling ordinary spaces and objects with an intangible sense of menace. It is not enough to say that the viewer becomes complicit with this point of view because it is not resolutely specified as belonging to any villain, indeed, any subject at all. Nor it is entirely accurate to argue that, as spectators, we become acquainted with this eerily free-floating perspective, enjoying a voyeuristic thrill in the violence that is subsequently enacted on characters. The appearance of things is emptied out and de-subjectivised by this anonymous, all-seeing perspective, thereby increasing its susceptibility to be filled by our anxieties, magnifying

the sound and texture of domestic objects and spaces so that they are deprived of any sense of familiarity or safety. This kind of nightmarish dissociation is most apparent during the opening of David Lynch's, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and the confusing oscillation of focal points that typify his direction. The perspective of the camera moves from objectively recording to a confronting, claustrophobic interest in a barrage of persons and objects. There is little relief on hand for spectators in either perspective. At one point, it moves so close to the covers of a bed that it seems to pass through the thing itself. The bed is empty but breathing can be heard somewhere behind the camera, as if someone were being suffocated. This distortion provides the terrible tension in the Lynch film, Žižek argues, wherein the distinctiveness of ordinary things is abjured by the unfathomable address of the camera, an ontology that figures the universe as “palpating slime that continually threatens to blow up the settled frame of everyday reality”.<sup>10</sup> In this reading, Lynch’s camera is a fearful and unpredictable agent. When it closes in on objects and persons, it does so with a frightening intensity. Yet the closeness it reaches for is never truly imminence. What Lynch’s direction achieves is an atomisation of the fabric of reality, bringing the spectator into an intermediate space that is the brink between the visible and invisible, the corporeal and the spectral. It is cinema in transit. Like Murnau's cinematography, where the phantom sense of the unseen taints each composition, the visible world in *Mulholland Drive* is similarly assaulted by the uncontrollable fluctuations of appearances.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 138.



**The eerie dissociation of distant vision in Mulholland Drive (dir. David Lynch, 2001)**

As protagonist, Karras is deadlocked in the indeterminate space between distant and proximate vision. This is the primary visual motif of the film. Expressing his tragic subjectivity as a position of dreadful intermediateness, the omnipotent, autonomous perspective of the camera tracks and traps him within compositions where he is either engulfed or obscured by shadows and objects. The gaze of other characters that forces him out of these shadows lead in one direction only, which is exposure to the unfathomable, de-subjectivised gaze of the demon/child. By the time Karras reluctantly consents to help Regan's mother secure an exorcism for her, his doubt and unwillingness has the unmistakable undertone of fear, a fear that has been established from the outset, displayed, visually, by his unsettling spatial configuration within the film. This is what

makes Karras' arrival in the MacNeil house so suspenseful. The night after his mother dies, a colleague visits him. Friedkin stations his camera at the far end of the corridor as the priest strides closer. Distant vision alternates with the proximate vision of Karras' colleague, who looks in vain for his friend in a room where a card game is taking place. The next shot is a duplicate of the original one, where the corridor stretches out until the priest stops at Karras' door. Instead of opening on our protagonist, the door closes and our attention is drawn to where Karras' name is tacked humbly onto its exterior. At the centre of the next shot is a bottle of alcohol, which sits on the floor in the middle of the two figures. The camera draws back and Karras has his head in his hands, hidden from us. The camera eavesdrops on their conversation, hiding in the surrounding shadows of the room. Karras mumbles drunkenly about his mother until he falls into bed. At no point during the scene does he requisition the gaze of the camera. We leave him as his friend turns off the lights on his way out. What is left of Karras is unsettlingly divested of life. He dissolves into the off-screen space, his outstretched legs the only inclusion in the frame. His sleeping face, when the camera hovers above him, is a mask of death. The crosscutting of perspectives works here to isolate Karras as a figure of interest. However, as Perez similarly identifies in Murnau's work, the oscillation of focal points does not connote suspense from their eventual reparative coming together in the protagonist, but instead amplifies the prospect of an impending and fatal destiny.<sup>12</sup> A tragic momentum builds, a deepening rather than resolving of turmoil, he argues, where the unity it reaches for is the unity of undifferentiated peril.<sup>13</sup> The threat of death alters the appearance of all things in Friedkin's film, and with it, our perception of Karras.

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<sup>12</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> Perez, pp. 134-5.



**Karras as corpse in *The Exorcist*.**

These images of Karras contain their own, over-arching logic in that they arrange a kind of illustrative symmetry with Regan's putrefying, corpse-like body. What is impressed upon us by the cinematography of the first encounter between Karras and the demon/child is precisely this liminal state of being, and the liminal space in between these figures as the borderline between what Linda Badley, in *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, argues as the dread of non-being on the one hand, and of material death on the other.<sup>14</sup> Every step Karras takes becomes a literal step closer to death. He takes an inordinate amount of time climbing the stairs to Regan's room. Suspense gathers in the interim. In the background, a thick wheezing noise can be heard. Karras opens the door and the shot has Regan's corpse-like body facing the camera, her eyes hollowed out and concealed by shadow. She could be looking at Karras through the open door, or she could be sleeping. Either way, the gaze is poised to seize upon the subject that enters the room. And the subject must enter. The camera closes in on Karras as he hesitates behind the door. When he crosses the threshold, the collision between proximate and distant vision reaches a crucial amplification. Exposure to this unfathomable and possessive gaze once again equates with fatal entrapment. Like the view from the wife's window in *Nosferatu* (1922) as she beholds an advancing line of the dead, the priest's point of view here carries an intense implication, occupying a position outside the room yet central to its configuration

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (London: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 24.



of space, so that the audience becomes aware of the distance between these two figures exerting the pressure of a gaping void, calling for someone to fill it.<sup>15</sup> Karras is addressed by name and compelled forward and all the bleak, portentous suggestions imparted in the exposition crystallise in that moment of awful, and irreversible, recognition. He gazes at, and is gazed at in return, by an incomprehensible subjectivity.



**The deadly space in between (*The Exorcist*).**

Badley points out that the endgame of horror is precisely this arresting, totalizing fear because the genre enacts the dissolution of the subject who is watching the atrocities unfold, in turn dispersing boundaries not only between the self and other, but between the rational subject and the body of evidence before it.<sup>16</sup> In his dreams, as in his day to day life, Karras is brought to a literal precipice separating him from the abyss, or the abysmal creature that stands in its place: the spectre of his dead mother calling to him; Pazuzu, in all its beastly costumes. Each sight is an affliction. Pazuzu performs enthusiastically for him, screeching and snarling like a pig, eyes ablaze as they seek him out easily from the

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<sup>15</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, pp. 141-2.

<sup>16</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 10.

shadows of the room. As the possession worsens, the world outside becomes evacuated and ghostly. But for Karras, it is merely a reflection of the loss he has experienced: the loss of his mother. This is the lineage he shares with Amenabar's tragically imprisoned protagonists. The quadriplegic has already suffered the termination of his body. The ghost is already dead. Resistance is a redundant tactic since everything that takes place in *The Exorcist* is a belated presentation of mortality's exacting finality. For Ramon in *The Sea Inside*, the intractability of death takes on an inverse appearance. It is an elusive, insidious overture: a fleeting shape or heightened dreamscape. While the aesthetic dimension is not as outwardly fearful under Amenabar's direction, the obdurate otherness of the world is nevertheless registered. As much as the faces of Amenabar's protagonists are insisted upon, and for every close-up of the priest's stricken expressions, there is an equal emphasis on distance and unpopulated locations. The awareness of death bears down upon Karras to the point that he is barricaded in Regan's room. This sense of undifferentiated trepidation makes for a grim and hopeless atmosphere, generating the conditions whereby the range of possible inferences we can make about Karras' involvement in the possession drama drastically narrow: he will not make it alive.

In Badley's formulation, horror is the most physiological of genres.<sup>17</sup> As protagonist, Karras is not just the organising principle, but the material ground on which the ensuing supernatural drama is staged. Karras' haggard, Saturnine appearance is as carefully documented by Friedkin's direction as Regan's morbid transformation. He is haggard and Saturnine, a mysterious entity in the text. Initially, his presence, with all its connotations of grief and poverty, are juxtaposed with the growing disturbances in the MacNeil household and Father Merrin's past conflict with the demon. These strands inevitably

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<sup>17</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 11

intersect yet the effect is not the neat dovetailing of structure we might expect, rather an example of what Mulvey, in *Death 24x A Second*, describes as a trace of the uncanny on the cinematic index, where film combines two opposing kinds of narrative time evoked by the images themselves.<sup>18</sup> Stillness is this uncanny trace, Mulvey believes, and death, as a trope, embodies it:

Linearity, causality and the linking figure of metonymy, all crucial elements in storytelling, find a correspondence in the unfolding, forward-moving direction of film. While the main, middle, section of narrative is characterised by a drive forward, beginnings and ends are, on the contrary, characterised by stasis. Narrative needs a motor force to start up, out of an inertia to which it returns at the end. The cinematic image can find visual equivalents for these different phases: an initial stillness, then the movement of the camera and character carry forward and energise the story, from shots to sequences through the linking process of editing. But at the end, the aesthetics of stillness returns to both narrative and cinema.<sup>19</sup>

The tropes of stillness are barely concealed within Friedkin's cinematography. Locations are expansive and emptied. Shadows, framing and sound invest the particulars of everyday existence with a silent unease, yet through Karras, stillness is embodied link with Mulvey's argument more directly. Karras is wary and tense. Grief weighs down on him. He is the noticeable pause in the film; a presence that ushers the film towards its denouement but also complicates its forward-moving metonymy (for example, the scene where Regan's mother inexplicably stops to observe Karras in the street) by communicating autonomous messages beneath the level of narrative meaning. The camera singles Karras out from the first instance in a manner that disrupts the expected trajectory of the text. He appears already dislocated from the activity of other, more prominent characters. A sudden disorientation akin to *déjà vu*, of an involuntary memory or strange sense of reality that overwhelms the defenses of the conscious mind, condenses around his image.<sup>20</sup> "Just as the photograph's relation to time goes beyond equivalence in

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<sup>18</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 62.

the grammar of tense,” Mulvey states, “so the autonomy of the camera eye goes beyond the grammar of person.”<sup>21</sup> The medium itself becomes the horror in *The Exorcist*, tainted by the stillness of Karras’ half-remembered dreams, memories and nightmares, yet moving with him, unalterably, towards his fatal end.



**The transfixed face of Karras and the trace of stillness on the cinematic index.**

Karras suffers from the pathology of the tragic figures, the kind that Susan Sontag outlines as central to Walter Benjamin’s writing on Saturnine characters in his work, *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* (1928), in particular, the tendency to project his inner torpor as an immutable misfortune.<sup>22</sup> Fated to meet the demon, time affords Karras only constraint. Yet since the Saturnine temperament is slow and prone to doubt, Sontag clarifies, too many possibilities intersect and detour and “one has to cut one’s way through with a knife”, a knife than may well end up being turned against oneself.<sup>23</sup> Time moves in many directions within *The Exorcist*, and it is through Karras that these

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<sup>21</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign Of Saturn* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> Sontag, *Under the Sign Of Saturn*, p. 117.

vicissitudes are introduced into the scope of cinematic duration, a duration that Mulvey argues is especially amenable to interactive spectatorship, the kind that notices the details within the visual tableau, picks up on the extra-narrative density of visual motifs and as a result, breaks down the overriding horizontal structure of the text.<sup>24</sup> By the time we become more acquainted with Karras and the horrors that lie ahead of him, their singular, shocking effect is diminished by these temporal vicissitudes, by Karras' dreams, hallucinations, memories, chance encounters and eerie coincidences. The cumulative effect of such cinematic material is there insistence that what we are bearing witness to, has been telegraphed from the start.

“In the cinema,” Mulvey states, “time as it passes becomes palpable, not in the fleetingness of a halted second but in the fleetingness of a sequence in process, an amorphous, elusive, present tense, the immediate but illusory ‘now’ that is always experienced as fading into the ‘then’.”<sup>25</sup> The suspenseful quickening of time that propels horror films is not the only strand of time that plays out in *The Exorcist*. As with Friedkin's film, Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) utilizes the memories, dreams and hallucinations of a traumatised protagonist to complicate a sense of cinematic “now-ness”. Several stories operate at once within Lyne's portrayal of Vietnam veteran, Jacob Singer. Lyne starts by recreating the implied source of Singer's trauma, the day his platoon was ambushed and, under the influence of some sudden, drug-induced psychosis, turned on one another viciously. The film then transitions to the prosaic dejectedness of Singer's post-Vietnam life, a life in which he has lost his son, marriage and career as an English professor. A series of odd, dissociative occurrences create a temporal schism. Singer's paranoid tendencies flare up. Faceless assailants chase him and he dreams

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<sup>24</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 189.

frequently of his deceased son. He hosts a New Years Eve Party and watches as the guests gradually, and horribly, morph into a horde of menacing demons. This imprecise past constitutes the third timeline and it is not until the final moments of the movie that Lyne discloses (through an abrupt cut-back to Singer's initial posting in Vietnam) the source of his delirium as the after-effect of an experimental form of LSD that he had been unwittingly taking. The past is the present. Wounded from the attack, Singer dies on the operating table.





**The autonomy of cinematic time in Adrian Lyne's, *Jacob's Ladder* (1990).**

The suggestion of drug use would make Singer's past his present, and what followed from Vietnam an induced phantasm. The real phantasm in *Jacob's Ladder* is immediacy itself, as it is construed by the data of Lyne's images. Each demonic apparition that vanishes before it can be properly registered, every time Singer curiously blacks out under the ministrations of his philosophical chiropractor (played by Danny Aiello), the following onslaught of dreams and fractured memories create an impression of recollection, of a scene attempting to, as it were, "work itself out" within the mind of the protagonist. The absence of any clear, chronological markers cause both Singer's reality and nightmares to have an interchangeable veracity on screen. David Punter identifies this opacity in the work of American horror writer, Stephen King, suggesting that the fearful isolation of his protagonists stems from their immersion in unidentifiable and unnameable material.<sup>26</sup> The picture of the present that King creates, figures as the vacuum, as latency itself.<sup>27</sup> Demons and monsters materialise at unexpected moments and in unexpected places, and in doing so, they fissure the very fabric of temporality. By virtue of the boundaries they cross, Elaine Graham argues, monsters are the very vehicles in the horror text through which it becomes possible to comprehend the fabricated nature of all

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<sup>26</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 162.

things.<sup>28</sup> Everything is susceptible to perversion, but once this perversion materialises (in words, on screen), it passes before our very eyes. Punter explains this pre-narrative denseness as the very texture – or trickiness – of textuality:

Whereby the crack itself opens us to a world where the registers fuse, where competing claims for the status of the real, all such claims bracketed by the role of the semiotic, are the very substance of which text is woven.<sup>29</sup>

When Julie Kristeva writes of the abject form in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, she describes it as death infecting life, something rejected from which one does not part, what disturbs order, systems and identity.<sup>30</sup> Singer can never entirely “wake up” from his nightmare. Some semblance of Regan surfaces momentarily when the demon sleeps. The words “Help Me” appear as if scrawled from the inside of her body. The body is now abject, infected by death.

Past, present and portentous futures blend within the darkening horizon of Jacob’s mental breakdown. Dreams bear an inscrutable similarity to reality in *The Exorcist*. This kind of fetishistic rendering of temporality, wherein repetition and return stretch out the cinematic image is, in Mulvey's estimation, the very process that allows space and time for associative, speculative thought and the interpretation of cinematic form and style, where key moments become visible that could not have been perceived when hidden under the narrative flow of a film.<sup>31</sup> Daniel Frampton conceives of this undercurrent of images and motifs as the “filmind”, defined as the collective perceptive shifts in cinema that expand and collapse a viewer’s sense of space, making apparent a co-existence of various

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<sup>28</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> Julie Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, L. S. Roudiez, trans (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, pp. 146-7.



durations.<sup>32</sup> Frampton explains that this is made possible because the medium has an intelligent design of its own accord, meaning that a “film-thinking” can be derived from the expression, and communication between, its elementary forms. In *Filmosophy*, he writes:

The filmind gives us images and situations with knowledge of the whole film, allowing it to think a “time” in relation to any character or action or event. There is no “presentness”, only the film-time than meanders where it pleases. Action that we might denote as present could turn out to be “long in the past” or “way in the future” later on in the film.<sup>33</sup>

For Frampton, the filmind recreates its own relation to time that is often non-linear.<sup>33</sup> The filmind, he argues, is omniscience.<sup>34</sup> For Žižek, this omniscience equates to the triumph of the gaze over the eye, a transfixed gaze which isolates those details puncturing the frame of symbolic reality, a traumatic surplus of the Real over the Symbolic which collides with our own, initial identification as a pure, abstract gaze.<sup>35</sup> Crucially, these details have no underlying substance in the sense that there is nothing in reality that corresponds to them.<sup>36</sup> Excessive, uncanny shapes eclipse the cinematic frame. Much like the birds in Hitchcock’s 1963 film, they are surplus signifiers, bursting out into the diegetic from an external, intermediate space (off-screen) and effectively endangering the viewer’s safe distance from diegetic reality.<sup>37</sup> Singer’s demons are never substantiated, nor are they completely unsubstantiated by the drug-conspiracy ending. The affective force of their shadowy violence is their unnerving collision with our gaze, a gaze that is inaccessible but nevertheless there, like Žižek’s stain of the Real, as a kind of bruise effacing the frame of symbolic reality.

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<sup>32</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 137.

<sup>34</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large’, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, Slavoj Žižek, ed (London; New York: Verso, 2010), pp. 235-6.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, ‘In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large’, pp. 235-6.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, ‘In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large’, p. 237.

The endgame of Friedkin's horror is less about conquering death or repressing the awfulness of mortal infallibility, and more about the inability of each of these strategies to combat the fixture of death (the Real) in the symbolic mandate. As Robin Wood stipulates, the monster represents an enormous surplus of psychic energy, and repressed, it must always strive to return.<sup>38</sup> Stylistically and formally, *The Exorcist* follows the logic of Hitchcock's thrillers, in that the film is arranged around the premise of a destined yet traumatic return for the protagonist. The tenuous threshold between dream and reality, past and present, life and death, thus becomes an unmitigated predicament in these films. However cataclysmic happenings turn out to be and however dire their consequence, inertia is the only position available for the dying protagonist. Jacob wafts in and out of consciousness, frenzied by fear and numbed by grief. There is no way out of his nightmare. Like Karras, who waits fearfully outside Regan's door, his inertia is the product of both dread and attraction. Lyne emphasises this inertia by emphasising Singer's gaze. Whatever Singer gazes at in horror or disbelief is fleeting. By lingering on Singer's transfixed look, its essential meaninglessness in terms of symbolism is revealed. In the context of horror, the dying protagonist always faces out. Singer stares searchingly at darkness, as Karras searches the deadened eyes of Regan. A fated collision is heralded and takes place, returning the gaze to itself, where suspense is never the product of a simple physical confrontation between subject and assailant, but always involves the mediation of what the subject reads into the other's gaze, which is a phantom in itself, imagined by the protagonist in the field of this lethal otherness.<sup>39</sup> The opposite operation takes place in Amenabar's films, where the dying protagonist faces an overwhelming

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<sup>38</sup> Robin Wood, 'The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s', *Horror: the Film Reader*, M. Jancovich, ed (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large', p. 214.

tableau of meaning. The world is mysterious, but yielding. The transfixed gazes of Ramon and Grace long to see beyond the distortions of existence marred by loss, inventing a cinematic relation to death that can in some way exist alongside it because it is what the protagonist desires in the sight before them. The tenuous barrier between life and death remains this way in Amenabar's movies. It is literally monstrous in *The Exorcist*. There is no negotiation outside of surrendering to the intrusion of its primordial, demonic forms as these forms reflect precisely how Karras positions himself in relation to their threat, which is mortally condemned. The elderly Jesuit priest revisits an unsuccessful exorcism that has haunted him for years, an exorcism that ends in his death. Dead mothers reappear and the same nightmare recurs. The demon launches its assault with cartoonish impunity. The instant Karras offers his body in exchange for Regan's, is the moment he opts to sacrifice his life.

In Lacan's formulation, what is foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real, a surplus that Žižek describes as an elusive density that persists as a non-symbolised stain, a hole in reality which designates the ultimate limit.<sup>40</sup> This is the function of the grotesque in Friedkin's text, rendering the deadened remnants of the child as the conduit for the reflex of horror, not the object of horror itself. *The Exorcist* is not notable for its technical ingenuity. Many of its special effects, such as the infamous twisting head scene, are now considered mild in the light of contemporary torture opus *Saw* (2004, dir. James Wan) and its subsequent sequels and similarly inspired works. However, and in spite of its once explicit emphasis on shock and gore, the dramatic interplay of characters and stories remains the one aspect that tends to escape critical attention. The common thread taken up by academics is the bodily spectacle of Regan's possession and the demise of Father

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large', pp. 238-9.

Merrin, who arrives to conduct the exorcism. Charles Derry, for example, writes:

After all the potential flaws are tabulated, trumping all is the once innocent twelve-year-old Regan...enthroned in her bed, cursing, vomiting, wiggling her tongue, propelling herself up and down, moving the furniture, masturbating with a crucifix, talking in strange tongues, and killing people... doing all the sorts of things a well-behaved child should never do – so, of course, she must be possessed by the devil.<sup>41</sup>

Derry extracts a valid theme that Friedkin's text has since come to epitomise: the perversion of innocence by an all-encompassing, indiscriminating evil. Cherry furthers this reading by offering her own analysis of the effect of these horrific degradations, stating that while these susceptible bodies encourage disgust, it is this impervious demonic force, always escaping our view, which consolidates our fear.<sup>42</sup> The worst atrocities occur in plain sight and in broad daylight. The demon essentially takes flight from its primordial origins in Nineveh and lands (with a literal thud) in Regan's bedroom. In Friedkin's world, evil happens in the very place we least expect it to, that is, the mundane, and the everyday, in short, everywhere.

It is Karras who suffers the intrusion most severely. What he finds in the demon's deathly contortions and utterances is both a repulsive perversion of nature and a deeply private presentiment. At the most rudimentary level, it is apparent that the priest is compelled to assist the family because the child represents the helplessness he felt when unable to assist his mother in the final stages of her illness. Karras is also deeply reluctant to believe that the possession is a supernatural affliction, and drawing on his knowledge of psychiatry, attempts to diagnose Regan's condition as multiple personality disorder. In either reading, the exorcism/analysis scenario places the priest in the initial position of an

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film From the 1500s to the 21st Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 2009), p. 116.

<sup>42</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, p. 159.

authoritative interpretive agent, not unlike the detective given to us in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, C. Auguste Dupin. Poe's tale of intrigue begins with an incriminating letter stolen from the Queen by a royal minister with the intent to blackmail her. The hero, Dupin, achieves the seemingly impossible feat of taking the letter back from the unsuspecting minister during a carefully choreographed encounter. Dupin, as Lacan underlined in his 1955 seminar, knows with one glance that he has found what he is looking for.<sup>43</sup> The mystery of who inhabits Regan is no mystery at all in the sense that Karras has seen the reflection of this demonic thing in his day-to-day life. Much like the purloined letter peeking out from a card rack on the wall of Minister D's hotel room, what is referred to as The Demon hides in plain sight. Seen everywhere, Lacan argues, it is because this unit, or signifier, is by nature a symbol only of an absence and, distinct from other objects that must be or not be in a particular place, it will be and not be wherever it is, and wherever it goes.<sup>44</sup> The demon, this ruined, abject thing at the heart of the house, in this way induces a chain of events leading Karras through a series of displacements that could be taken as the detour of the signifier. Its repeated presence in the film ensures that Karras is always, as Dupin so effortlessly discovers the letter, the intended addressee of the possession: returning, revisiting, and futilely hoping for a different outcome, finding himself in the exorcism, exiled, receiving from the other his own message in reverse form.<sup>45</sup>

The demon is not a problem that analysis can solve, though the analytical process ensures that the drama of the signifier is set in motion and that its subject (Karras, not Regan) is identified. It is the demon, and not Regan, who addresses Karras by name, who questions

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Lacan and Jeffrey Mehlman, 'Seminar on "*The Purloined Letter*"', *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 42.

<sup>44</sup> Lacan and Mehlman, 'Seminar on "*The Purloined Letter*"', 54.

<sup>45</sup> Lacan and Mehlman, 'Seminar on "*The Purloined Letter*"', 72.

him and taunts his faith, imitating his mother in a malevolent bid to ensnare him. Karras is initially driven to approach the demon in a bid to diagnose Regan's "personalities", and have his guilt expunged via the treatment of the perceived disorder. The price of this exchange is, of course, his life. The film "knows" this, intimating this fate in the malignant sights and sounds, those vacuous point-of-view shots and demonic visages that cut across the frame in the film's prologue. As Friedkin tracks Karras from his haggard existence in the Jesuits, his shame among his family, to his hesitant, fearful arrival at the house, his position can be interpreted as moving along the signifying chain, alternately displaced during the intersubjective repetition wherein the protagonist appears to be caught within the nightmarish confines of some supernatural netherworld. In Lacan's view, this arrangement is dictated by the presence of pure signification (the possessed girl) and constituted to the subject in the manner of a choice.<sup>46</sup> Žižek extends Lacan's reading of this encounter with the pure signifier by suggesting that the purloined, returned letter, the reverse form of the recipient disclosed by the receiver, is not the face of their death, but the face of their being-for-death. But it returns in a form no longer determined by its place in the symbolic network:

When the letter arrives at its destination, the stain spoiling the picture is not abolished, effaced: what we are forced to grasp is, on the contrary, the fact that the real "message", the real letter awaiting us is the stain itself. We should perhaps reread Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" from this aspect: is not the letter itself ultimately such a stain – not a signifier but rather an object resisting symbolisation, a surplus, a material leftover circulating among the subjects and staining its momentary possessor?<sup>47</sup>

In his seminar, Lacan designates the envelope as the remainder. In *The Exorcist*, that which stains life is the undead creature, the living corpse. The netherworld instigated by such an abominable presence can never entirely be effaced. The frightening composite of Regan's body and the stain it leaves behind is the totalising limit, the precipice separating

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<sup>46</sup> Lacan and Mehlman, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 10.

the Real from reality. More than the materialised instruction of the signifier, it is the uncanny object-form of the subject's "symbolic destiny".<sup>48</sup> As the "infallible addressee"<sup>49</sup> of this object, the only way out for Karras is in. In martyrdom and self-sacrifice, the subject completes the act that cancels what Terry Eagleton describes as our symbolic disposition, the fact that our subjectivity is suspended between an excess and deficiency of meaning every time we speak.<sup>50</sup> Suicide is thus the aggregate of each position the demon has required Karras to take along the signifying chain as priest and analyst. He is finally condemned.

How does film express the stain of the Real and its ensuing complication of intersubjective relations? By giving us objects (some innocuous and some obvious) that hold the gaze of the protagonist, a fascination that in turn transforms these things into deathly omens. In Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010), such images disrupt the progression of a talented young ballerina (Nina, played by Natalie Portman) fast-tracked to success by winning the principal role in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, luring the narrative into uncertain, ominous territory. Nina slips into the role of the virginal white swan with practised ease, but experiences a debilitating resistance when dancing its antithetical counterpart. Her fellow dancer, Lily (Mina Kunis), has no such qualms, and fearlessly embodies the "black swan", becoming her fatal rival. What would otherwise be a story of triumph for the protagonist (from fear, from Lily, from her over-bearing mother) is derailed by the increasing supernatural hallucinations she experiences, dissociative moments wherein her doppelgänger approaches her in a deserted street, and her skin itches with what appear to be budding, serrated wings. Eventually, in everything she sees,

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<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Demons', *Blackfriars*, 82.969 (1997): 506.

there lingers the heavy suspense of some excessive and maniacal violence. These stains occur beneath the level of narrative meaning, belonging to the order of the image, a series of objects and things that leak through Aronofsky's *mise en scène*, seeking out, and sought by, Nina, and thus arresting our gaze. Some dreadful fate quickens in the smallest peculiarity, in the space of single, fearful glance. As Žižek observes in Hitchcock's films, "a trifling slip, a tiny cut on the ring finger, can well condense an entire chain of articulated reasoning about the subject's most intimate fate."<sup>51</sup> These stains arrest the gaze, and emerge on screen like vibrations across a mirrored pool of water. The scene is not effaced by their intrusion, but momentarily provoked. Žižek writes:

The transfixed gaze isolates a stain of the Real, a detail which "sticks out" from the frame of symbolic reality – in short, a traumatic Surplus of the Real over the Symbolic; yet the crucial feature of these scenes is that this detail has no substance in itself – it is, so to speak, "substantiated", caused, created, by the transfixed gaze itself.<sup>52</sup>

Nina's encounters, like Karras' quarrel with the demon, are not simply encounters with a mirror image or a double. They occur as instances in which the protagonist's own narcissistic, tragic constitution in the symbolic order can be glimpsed. The threshold separating life from death, the diegetic reality from the off-screen, comes to the forefront. What returns the gaze of the spectator is an emptied point of view.



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<sup>51</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, United States of America: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Writ Large', pp. 235-6.





**Fearful symmetry: the gaze qua object stain in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010).**

Nina sacrifices herself in exchange for the ideal. She consequently embodies a terrible composite of being. Materialising on screen as the hallucinatory object, she takes flight beyond the horizon of the symbolic. Her transformation is presented as a kind of dying, since, unincorporated, and therefore impossible to possess, she has no other choice available but to literally enact Tchaikovsky's finale, flinging her body over the cliff-face, the blood from her self-inflicted wound swallowing her form as seamlessly as the screen dissolves to white. What's left is noise, an evacuated frame. Karras adopts the role of analyst with a similar, foreboding determination. Charged with Regan's encryption, it is he, and not the tormented girl, who ends up subjectivised and hystericised by the

encounter with this hermeneutic, demonic form. Possessed, Regan is both anarchic energy and noise, both impasse and entrance to signification. Removes first bit As identified by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, the demon can be seen as a phobic object. Regan's transformation is a condensation of unlocalised fears, not a display of anything but, conversely, an intolerable assemblage of drives:

The statement, "to be afraid of horses," is a hieroglyph having the logic of metaphor and hallucination. By means of the signifier of the phobic object, the "horse", it calls attention to a *drive economy in want of an object* - that conglomerate of fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration, which, properly speaking, belongs to the unnameable. The phobic object shows up at the place of the non-objectal states of drive and assumes all the mishaps of drives as disappointed desires or as desires diverted from their objects.<sup>53</sup>

The demon is a myriad of images taxed by mis-representations and symbolic detours. Regan's subjectivity is essentially displaced in the possession. This reconstitutes her body as the phobic object in the textual web of Karras' introjections. Abject, unapproachable, living and dead, mother and other, the demon gives shape to the agony of an original want that is tied to the dead mother. The infantile wish to reunite with his mother resurrects her, in Hitchcockian fashion, as corpse. And so like a wicked marionette, Regan rises, from the darkest recesses of Karras' mind.

In drawing upon the most dreadful resources to shock audiences (the defilement of an unsuspecting adolescent girl), it is difficult to see past the image once it is exhibited. We are simultaneously readying ourselves to avert our eyes as much as we are awaiting its obscene culmination. Cherry attributes this fascination to the monstrous-feminine form that Regan becomes. She emphasises the spectacle of the young girl's possession as an excessive display of emergent female adulthood coded as unclean and abject.<sup>54</sup> She observes that:

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<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, p. 115.

Since the uncanny in horror cinema gives rise to the uncomfortable experience of cognitive dissonance where something can be attractive and repulsive at the same time, it further suggests that the gross-out effect of explicit horror is crucial to this discussion. This is clear from *The Exorcist* with its scenes of excessive vomiting and head spinning...these scenes might very well create revulsion in the viewer, but they are also compelling...While images of abject bodies can be found in all sorts of horror films, it is worth taking account of the fact that *The Exorcist* (and *The Brood*) are both centred around the female body and reproduction...since Regan is the right age to be entering puberty and the blood when she masturbates could be read as menstrual blood from her first period.<sup>55</sup>

Such a substantive reading leaves little room to account for the cognitive dissonance provided by Regan's corpse-like appearance. Grotesque sexual gestures are one performance in the demon's polymorphous repertoire. In its monstrous iconography, the possession is materiality and language. Taken together, the crude reveals of this putrid, broken body present the central, compelling conceit of the text. The paradox is that our attention is turned away from Regan and directed, instead, toward the character that bears witness to her ordeal. Regan's bodily suffering is a spectacle that invites a cathexis of looking because it is, as Badley translates, a presence rooted in transgression.<sup>56</sup> If such a spectacle exists in horror, it follows that the sight invites a cathexis of looking. The act of bearing witness to the ensuing atrocities is a terrifying feature of *The Exorcist*. The preoccupation with what faces the protagonist, what lurks behind doors and in the darkness, is powerfully positioning and generates a self-reflective undercurrent on screen. However, what the film turns upon is the dreadful impossibility that the source of these atrocities, this inhuman, abysmal monster, possesses the agency to look back. And the unfathomable creature returns the gaze, but more specifically, it is perceived to be gazing intently at us.

In horror, the stain appears as a horrific materialisation of absence in the very texture of

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<sup>55</sup> Cherry, *Horror*, pp. 111-2.

<sup>56</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 10.

the symbolic. In *The Exorcist*, the stain is the lifeless creature existing to return the gaze of the protagonist. Cinematic forms dislodge from the instructions of the narrative, insisting and exaggerating what the protagonist already knows but cannot say. Badley summarises this as the “violent saturation” of fantastic, gory figures:

The most primitive of languages, horror simultaneously alters identity and proclaims the subject’s reality. Yet even while expressing alienation from the body, it is a kind of writing from the body – based in its consciousness of the body on the one hand as prison and, on the other, as medium.<sup>57</sup>

The consensus in Badley’s study is that the subject of horror often coincides with the medium, literalising itself in the textual event.<sup>58</sup> Karras is a dying protagonist because he knows he is going to die, but how this certainty is conveyed to the audience, as a kind of textual inevitability, is the product of a particularly filmic phenomenon where images, motifs and metonyms turn the body it threatens (Regan’s) into the very spectacular embodiment of the priest’s being-toward-death. Granted, this prediction is easy to make when we consider the monster that lies in wait beyond the door. At its most rudimentary level, the content is shockingly demonstrative, relying on vivid instances of abuse and degradation intensified by a guttural, piercing musical score and sharp, scissoring editing. In drawing upon the most dreadful resources to shock audiences (the defilement of an unsuspecting adolescent girl), it is difficult to see past the image once it is exhibited. We are simultaneously averting our gaze from it as much as we are anticipating its obscene culmination. This is part of the gimmick of the grotesque at play in *The Exorcist*. Uncompromisingly violent, Regan’s body commands attention and yet it is her very changeability that ensures continual evasion of clarification. Her putrid, broken body forms the central conceit of the text. Beset by such abjection, Karras is also unmistakably implicated in it. His only strategy is to take on the role of the analyst or interpreter, a role continually and fatally frustrated by the very existence of such a presence whose demands

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<sup>57</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 36.

are not symptomatic of Regan so much as the destabilised subject/object boundaries that pertain to Karras himself. The abject cannot be encountered or assimilated or treated. Such a cadaver does not signify death. Kristeva conceives of this kind of abject form as a theatre of what the body rejects – has to reject – in order to extricate itself from the threshold of mortality.<sup>59</sup>

Regan is monstrous iconography, beyond characterisation yet painfully realised in the most violent moments of her transformation. The demon that inhabits her is a mocking ventriloquist of each character's regrets and secrets. Its voice slips seamlessly into the heavily accented vernacular of Karras' deceased mother, or the old beggar he passed in the subway. The experienced, aged Merrin warns his consort of the deceit flavouring the demon's speech. His words, he cautions, are as much a trap as the hollowed out shell of a girl that has become its vessel. *"He is a liar. The demon is a liar! But he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is psychological, Damien, and powerful. Do not listen. Remember that: do not listen."* It is Karras' duty as priest and psychiatrist to do the opposite. He holds firm to his belief that Regan's psyche has in some way splintered, that the direction of the attack is inward, without the intent to harm. *"I think it might be helpful,"* Karras offers, *"if I gave some background on the various personalities Regan has manifested. So far I'd say there seem to be three. She's convinced-"* Merrin cuts him off: *"There is only one."* This apprehension is the source of Karras' dread. The monster addresses one person in particular and Merrin has unwittingly confirmed that it is Karras. The scene is significant because it unmasks the scepticism that Karras harbours towards the exorcism ritual as a fear, not of failure, but for the sacrificial gesture that will be required of him in order for it to succeed. In the end, the demon dispenses with Merrin.

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<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

As Karras tries in vain to revive his elder, it watches sightlessly, waiting, laughing and goading him to attack. This is horror's communication with and through the body that

Badley identifies as a metaphoric for the schism between the self and other:

The most primitive of languages, horror simultaneously alters identity and Proclaims the subject's reality. Yet even while expressing alienation from the body, it is a kind of writing from the body – based in its consciousness of the body on the one hand as prison and, on the other, as medium, as expressions and means of transcendence...horror allows us to re-experience being and transgress its limits at the same time.<sup>60</sup>

In and of itself, Regan's hysterical body speaks of Karras' physical demise. Here, dread is not something that merely prefaces terror, but perhaps what terror comes down to, in the end, confronting something other and something terribly intimate all at once.

Karras' inertia stems from his Saturnine temperament, itself brought upon by the tragedy of his mother's death. As Sontag reminds us, the Saturnine temperament is melancholic because it is haunted by death, an exposure that ensures they are best attuned to its presence in life:

The deep transactions between the melancholic and the world always take place with things (rather than with people)...these are genuine transactions, which reveal meaning...It is the world which yields itself to the melancholic's scrutiny, as it does to no one else. The more lifeless things are, the more potent and ingenious can be the mind that contemplates them.<sup>61</sup>

The intensity of Karras' contemplation of the possession, his fascination and study of Regan, mirrors this Saturnine attitude. As psychiatrist, he is charged with deciphering Regan's symptoms, all those strange aphorisms and fragments of speech he finds so personally incriminating. When violence is exacted on him by the demon/child it is the kind that Schopenhauer describes in *The World As Will And Representation* as “the violent destruction bursting, bursting in from the outside, of the fundamental error of our

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<sup>60</sup> Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, pp. 119-20.

true nature, the great disillusionment.”<sup>62</sup> At the bottom, we are something that ought not to be, he argues, and therefore we cease to be. This is the perplexed conclusion that Karras reaches, the only conclusion he can make in the terror of Regan’s room, a world where fear runs deep, far deeper than what his vision can comprehend. Terror is noise, speed, dissimulation, and an assault on the senses so strong it all but exceeds the cinematic frame. In this way, the advent of terror in such violent destruction surpasses mere allegory in *The Exorcist*. For Karras, Regan’s message is final. Sacrifice is the only response. There is an extravagant victory (since Regan is saved) but also a fatal capitulation (since Karras dies).

Regan’s deterioration (a process Friedkin’s direction seems to relish) externalises Karras’ yearning for self-annihilation. The brutal character of this process is significant, but more than that, it is the director’s emphasis on Karras’ spectatorship that figures significantly in the way the possession conflict is dramatised. Karras’ inert and transfixed gaze works to implicate the audience who, like the protagonist, are invited to witness the carnage visited upon Regan’s body. It is Karras’ fearful, fixated gaze that allows us to look beyond the otherwise blinding display of the child’s victimization. Without his palpable anguish on display, it would be difficult to progress beyond a mere registration of what is taking place on screen toward an acknowledgement of the dreadful exchange of responsibility and guilt at play in the exorcism. Even as it trembles in the face of the demon/child, Karras’ proximate vision is a crucial physical response that apprehends the deadly space in between him and the monster as something actual and irrepressible, embodying in our place a primordial, anxious subjectivity, what Perez proposes is the self confronting

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<sup>62</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Representation* [1819-1844], E. F. J. Payne, trans, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 507.

death, called to answer the pressure exerted by the deadly space in between by filling it.<sup>63</sup>

Jacques Derrida explains this type of confrontational apprehension as the very experience of mystery, a strange contract that binds silent fear with infinite responsibility and the demonic/sacred secret:

We are afraid of fear, we anguish over the anguish, and we tremble. We tremble in the strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, some trauma has already affected us) to a future than cannot be anticipated...apprehended, yet, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely as unforeseeable, unpredictable...I tremble before what exceeds my seeing and my knowing although it concerns the innermost parts of me.<sup>64</sup>

If we are to presume, then, that this “one” demon functions as the feature and interface for the terror that supposedly lies at the outskirts of being, then it is always someone’s terror that is being referenced in the horrific spectacle. Whether the fear of non-being, or the fear of the corpse, these anxieties are intimated from the start (Merrin's past with Pazuzu in Iraq, the death of Karras’ mother), and are reiterated throughout, interacting, exchanging and reverberating across the visual landscape of the film. Called in some inexplicable yet unmistakable way to confront its deathly presence, Karras is also the unnamed “one”: the one the audience and the demon have been expecting. The death that threatens Regan becomes synonymous with the death that hounds Karras, the death he must ultimately meet, and the death the narrative requires for it to return to its original stillness. He re-appropriates the meaning and converts it into his singular responsibility. Once re-defined and acknowledged as such, the demon/child remains a trope. It remains the repetitious spectre of what can never be faced directly. As Derrida argues, each time the self anticipates death by conferring upon it a different value, it is merely giving itself or re-appropriating what, in essence, cannot be appropriated.<sup>65</sup> Mired as it is in this logic, the ideological “battle” between good and evil acquires a necessarily personal and

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<sup>63</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 142.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 55.



ambivalent dimension, at the centre of which is Karras.

When Merrin discovers of the Christian medallion (depicting Mary and the baby Jesus), he deduces that the object is unusually placed in a pre-Christian location. This sequence is significant because it is the first instance of trembling in the text. Clutching at the medallion, Merrin's hand visibly shakes. Trembling recurs. He subsequently discovers another inauspicious artifact and his scrutiny over its appearance triggers a shift in the narrative via its emphasis. The repeated presence of these motifs is like a convulsive force driving everything onwards, whilst concurrently tainting the sequence through the mysterious reappearance of artifacts and objects. In Derrida's understanding of how secrecy functions in narratives, the amulet is the physical signature of a fear that we have already experienced, the "double secret" or "déjà vu" sensation that undoes seeing as knowing.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, trembling is extra-diegetic, a reaction to the uncanny presence of things. As Mulvey notes, Freud's estimation is that uncanny effects are associated with the problem of death, more specifically the problem that arises when what it already deceased returns to haunt the present, perpetuating the power of the irrational over the rational.<sup>67</sup> Dread arises in *The Exorcist* when the irrational overrides the rational. Mulvey reiterates that the traces of things long dead and long buried can invoke an involuntary shudder when they intrude with suddenness upon the present.<sup>68</sup> Back in curator's office, Merrin inspects the ancient emblem of Pazuzu. He is told: "*Evil against evil*". The swinging pendulum of the clock behind him stops. The curator knows Merrin will be returning home to the States and expresses his regret at his departure. Merrin replies: "*There is something I must do.*" Perhaps it is something he has done before. He leaves,

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<sup>66</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 37.

passing by prostrate Muslims worshipping in a dark passage. When he emerges in the narrow, sunlit street, he is nearly run down by a fast-moving carriage carrying an old woman in a black droszky. After driving his jeep to the ruin of a temple, he approaches the full-sized statue of Pazuzu. Nearby, two dogs begin fighting one another, echoing Merrin's suspicions that an old and unspeakable evil has been set loose with the reappearance of the amulet. The soundtrack emphasises this with a lone, piercing chord. As if it were the very sound of that evil taking flight, the camera zooms in on the face of the open-mouthed demon. Its gaze is registered. Dust scatters: it is formless, out of reach.



**Father Merrin and Pazuzu in *The Exorcist*.**

*The Exorcist* is a tale of exile and return. Brutal and ominously suggestive images conspire towards these ends, expressing a kind of suffocating, repetitious loop seeking urgently for purgation. The price of this purgation is made explicit in the confrontation that takes place between Karras and the demon. The demon naturally exploits Karras'

guilt and grief, and his propensity to release these emotions in a sacrificial negation of self. The problem of the demon's irrational appearance is that while it converts Karras' excessive guilt and grief into a virtuous disposition, it is nevertheless a disposition that can only express itself in death. Maintaining this division between the sacred and the profane comes at a costly price for Karras. The child must be saved though something (someone) must be sacrificed in order to achieve this. His redemption is through death, or rather, in reconstituting himself as a dying subject. Karras has carried this knowledge all along. In this light, his "choice" to sacrifice himself for Regan's life is not so much a decision born of free will as redemption's impossible substitution in death. Dying is taken upon oneself, Derrida writes, but dying can never be borrowed, transferred, promised or delivered.<sup>69</sup> It is absolute sacrifice, wherein:

I respond to the one (or to the One), that is to say the other, only by sacrificing to that one the other. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all others...And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it.<sup>70</sup>

Žižek offers a psychoanalytical account of the economy of sacrifice in contemporary narratives in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* The sacrificial situation, he believes, defines the very status of subjectivity.<sup>71</sup> At the crux of what Freud calls the "discontent" pertaining to culture is the guilt constitutive of the subject. For Merrin, the unsatisfying outcome of his last exorcism has meant a life led waiting for the day he would be called to battle with the demon again – a battle with potentially fatal consequences. Karras himself searches desperately for a way to atone for his grievous shortcomings, finding the answers in neither his faith nor his medical vocation. For Žižek, such characters make a choice for the greater good that is not really a demonstration of exalted free will so much as a

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<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 45.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 86.

negative gesture of withdrawal.<sup>72</sup> These are the gestures than Karras is consigned to make in the wake of Regan's destruction, in the vortex of summons that is Pazuzu's deathly her gaze: the withdrawal, the negative gesture of sacrifice.

Regan's condition escalates out of control, unfolding in a manner similar to the indignities suffered by Karras' mother in the hospital. The more excessive Regan's predicament becomes, the more the cinematography (through the placement and reiteration of images) frames the inevitability of Karras' sacrificial act as a renunciation of guilt. During one of her mother's dinner parties, Regan is depicted mingling happily among other guests. Her mother inquires somewhat oddly of Father Joe Dyer, Father Karras' superior, about St. Michael's next door and the "intense-looking" young priest she often sees there. Father Dyer explains his tragic circumstances: "*Our psychiatric counsellor. He had a pretty rough knock last night, poor guy. His mother passed away. She was living by herself and I guess she was dead a couple of days before they found her.*" Chris is transfixed by the anecdote and appears to tremble. Shortly after, Regan wanders downstairs from her bed in a trance-like state, faces the party and informs a guest, who happens to be an astronaut: "*You're gonna die up there.*" That same night she cries for help from her room. The same grating noises heard previously in the opening of the film (as the demon ostensibly "lands" in the MacNeil attic) recur. Another moment of trembling is registered as the camera reveals the mother's horrified reaction to Regan's involuntary shaking. Friedkin then cuts to Karras' dreamscape. Montages of images pass by, flashing through his consciousness. The brief sight of his mother mixes with all the surreal and darkly suggestive icons of Father Merrin's time Iraq. The Christian medallion free-falls above a richly textured Iraqi tapestry and a ferocious dog runs towards the

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<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 87.

camera. Karras' mother stares straight ahead and the pendulum of the curator's clock swings. She emerges from a subway station and Karras waves from across the street. The mother calls out, soundlessly. A ghoulish demon crouches in the darkness. Karras waves frantically as his mother turns from him, descending the steps. The medallion lands on the Georgetown steps. In the background, Regan screams.





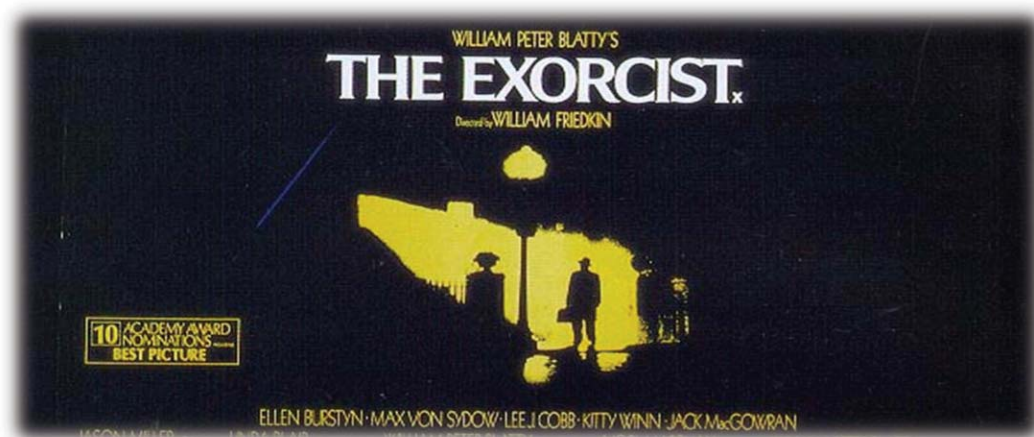
**The nightmare montage in *The Exorcist*.**

As a Saturnine figure, Karras has “known” all along about his sacrificial end. In the wake of his loss, all occurrences appear prescient of this final act. Sontag refers to this condition as a state of perpetual crossroads for the Saturnine character, where the self is a text in a constant state of dissimulation, and one is always in arrears to it.<sup>73</sup> Repetition, doubt, guilt and obligation are the coordinates that orientate Karras’ world. The same images feature: cruelty, sickness and impoverishment. Walking through the corridors of a dilapidated psychiatry facility, Karras enters a locked ward to greet his mother. The other patients, disfigured and ghostly, rise from their beds to claw agitatedly at his clothes. With tears in his eyes, his haggard mother blames her son for her imprisonment. “*Dimmy? Why you do this to me, Dimmy?*” Like Regan, straps restrain her arms in bed and she thrashes against them, turning her head away from her son’s entreating hands. Karras implores his uncle to move her to a different hospital. “*Couldn’t you put her some place else?*” he pleads. “*Like what?*” his uncle says. “*A private hospital? Who got the money for that, Dimmy?*” The screeching soundtrack resumes. Karras trains viciously in a

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<sup>73</sup> Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p. 117.

boxing gym: raging against all the demons in his life, guilt-ridden yet plagued by the inertia of his fears.



**The original 1973 movie poster for *The Exorcist*.**

“It is from the perspective of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity” Derrida writes, “that I feel called to responsibility.”<sup>74</sup> Within the imbroglio of Pazuzu's attack, Karras finds a way to redefine himself by assuming the identity of the sacrificial agent. This identity is fundamentally elegiac. Karras’ pathology is that he suffers the ontological split enforced by the awareness that this particular kind of death-awareness has caused. He is simultaneously exalted and haunted the sight of the demon child. Remove the myopic frame of genre from *The Exorcist*, and we find a journey narrative propelled by the very private turmoil of a man who meets the gaze of an irrational and impossible subjectivity. The more Karras looks at the demon/child, the more convinced and terrified he becomes at the prospect of his death. Dying, that which can never be borne, borrowed, delivered, promised or transmitted, is illogic. It is always a matter of seeing coming what one can’t see coming, Derrida explains.<sup>75</sup> Friedkin’s images contain in themselves this uncanny apprehension of death. The original 1973 movie

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 42.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 43.

poster pointedly illustrates this fateful appointment with a man's solitary figure, backlit, facing the menacing exterior of the MacNeil townhouse. The figure looks up, captured by the eerie yellow light that descends from an upstairs room. It appears as if the man has arrived. Something of the solitary, transfixed figure from the movie poster carries over into Karras, and to the film itself. The camera moves from the same shadows, its pace stealthy, weighted with the intent to return, to stop. The corresponding alignment of Karras' position (as witness) with ours (as spectators) in the fatal encounter with Pazuzu thus enables a glimpse of an unspeakable intentionality, at once terrifyingly dissimulating and powerfully individuating, but in the end, unintelligible, throwing us back onto ourselves, back to the final, distanced shot of the priest flinging himself from the window of Regan's room when the demon enters his body. It is this dying protagonist, and the dying protagonist alone, who suffers this hostile and unintelligible relation.



## CHAPTER FOUR: COMEDY AND DYING

The end of reason, which exceeds reason, is not opposed to the overcoming of reason! In the violence of the overcoming, in the disorder of my laughter and my sobbing, in the excess of raptures that shatters me, I seize on the similarity between a horror and a voluptuousness that goes beyond me, between an ultimate pain and an unbearable joy!

Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 1961.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus describes the juxtaposition of humanity and the world as wholly absurd. The latter's resistance or indifference to the former is inevitable, a tragic realisation provoked and sustained by the warranty of death. Death's anteriority is the threshold that the body pre-emptly, which no logic and reason can resolve. Camus declares from the outset that this threshold is impervious to all knowledge on earth, adding that mortality itself gives nothing to assure us that the world is our own.<sup>1</sup> The limited universe returns us to ourselves, reminding us that the world is not fashioned for us, but an object, separate, and therefore incapable of yielding to our requests. Camus concedes that we are isolated and estranged without remedy once death-awareness takes hold. Armed solely with approximations and hypotheses that negate themselves the moment they are asserted, we wander – he argues – across a desert of uncertainty<sup>2</sup>. Yet, importantly, for Camus, we are also strangers whose fate assumes its (irrational, unbearable) meaning because of the negations of the unintelligible and objective world. Life occurs to us as ridiculous, banal. What, then, is the point? Camus' entire essay is a reflection on the very serious matter of this predicament. Within, he outlines a definitive choice between suicide and rebellion, a choice this chapter finds the fictional comic personae on screen to be similarly afflicted with.

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 19.

The subject of this chapter is the dying protagonist within the cinematic genre of comedy. Whether suicidal or dangerously masochistic, this protagonist has its origins in the disposition Camus extracts from Sisyphus' tale, a disposition born of the irreconcilable apprehension of death-awareness. In the face of the life's excessive futility, the comic protagonist faces the same predicament as Sisyphus in his exile from the world: to persist or concede. The existential quandary outlined here has its foundation in the Cartesian *cogito* and the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Camus, however, emphasises the ethical quality of the realisation as opposed to the suffering and isolation it might induce. If we are struck tragically by life's absurd proximity to death, we are not necessarily dispossessed of choice. Caught between the longing to understand and the pointlessness of such efforts, an authentic relation to the world can be reclaimed for that person regardless of any external validation.<sup>3</sup> Banished underworld for his sins and condemned to roll a boulder up a hill, Sisyphus' punishment seems like pointless drudgery. In Camus' reading, however, it is the manner with which Sisyphus undertakes his task that is exemplified. Thrust into the harsh paradox of such an existence, he nevertheless occupies himself with the work of rolling the boulder up its perpetual incline. The rock becomes Sisyphus' "thing", and in making it his "thing" he finds an authentic attitude emerges that allows him to countenance the absurdity of his fate.<sup>4</sup>

The paradox and challenge of conducting a meaningful existence once death-awareness has transpired, is a dilemma the comic protagonist in the films of Gene Saks, Woody Allen, Harold Ramis and Hal Ashby particularly struggle with. Like the silence Sisyphus

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<sup>3</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 118.

hears in his pause before pushing the boulder again, the world is resoundingly unresponsive to their efforts. If the absurd is the general datum of day-to-day life, then it is the quality of one's actions within this impossible context that determines the choice between survival and suicide. Sisyphus continues to exert himself, knowing his fate belongs to him. Despite the endless duration of his exile, his repetitive work encapsulates rebellion, self-preservation and a yearning for clarity amid chaos, the echo of which can be traced throughout the performance of protagonists in comedic genres, within characters that witlessly defy obstacles, springing back unharmed and unrepentant from the brink of catastrophe. The cast of *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) typifies the more outwardly scornful side of Sisyphus, if not his propensity for reflection. Narcissistic and shrewd, these four New Yorkers jostle and scheme for petty victories, showing momentary glimpses of awareness in the errors and offences they commit and suffer. In a world where moral codes of conduct apply, Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer strive recklessly to exempt themselves. Kramer, through clownish bravado, Elaine, with her conceited, breezy charm, George, through outrageous lies and manipulations and, lastly, Jerry, whose overall attitude can be summed up in an apathetic shrug, a gesture which serves to explain, absolve and express his distaste for the awkward emotions and recriminations that follows him. The cross that these characters bear, and the rock they stubbornly push, is the apprehension of the world's arbitrariness, and the absurdity of their roles within it. *Seinfeld's* finale saw allegation after allegation slung against the foursome, an endless parade of ex-lovers, ex-friends and innocent bystanders, each with their own vendetta to exact in court. Despite their guilt, they are largely unconcerned and instead expend their energy bickering over trivialities in a prison cell, as if they were still in Jerry's apartment.

What we might infer from this conclusion is, as Camus infers from Sisyphus' tale, the rock still rolling, of a fate unceasingly claimed from within, not without.<sup>5</sup>



**Judgement day for the cast of Seinfeld (1989-1998).**

*Seinfeld's* anti-heroes exist for no one other than themselves. Collectively, they display an instinct for self-preservation and a perverse insistence upon authenticity, one that could easily turn grim in other contexts. The more pointless the world appears, however, the more stubbornly (and comically) these characters adhere to their routines and personalities. The wild and anarchic universe is the only one, Camus writes, and once this view is accepted, an absurd creature is born, one whose existence will henceforth be unceasing.<sup>6</sup> If Sisyphus and *Seinfeld's* unceasing energy has its flipside, the most obvious example would be The Joker, as exemplified by Heath Ledger's performance in Christopher Nolan's, *The Dark Knight* (2008). What makes The Joker confronting rather than comedic is that he delights, utterly and indefatigably, in his chaotic non-relation to the world. His lust for mayhem and destruction is as unsatisfied as the vengeance his nemesis, Batman, so doggedly seeks. The quality that separates him from Sisyphus's absurd persona is his incapacity for reflection, something his unpredictable behavior negates at every opportunity. The Joker's quarrels with the world are disconcertingly

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<sup>5</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 119.

opaque. The Joker simply “does things”, and in doing them, his character consolidates a more secular view of evil that is impervious to rehabilitation and defeat. It is no small coincidence that The Joker dies by his own hand as opposed to the hand of Batman. After the act of suicide, a sense of crude but undeniable rebellion lingers that aligns his character with the careless disinterest of Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer, and the silent willfulness that Sisyphus momentarily displays in the pause before he turns to the rock again. Unbound by morality, the Joker’s final moment favours him with an awful, if compelling, exultation.



**Deadly serious: The Joker in Christopher Nolan’s, *The Dark Knight* (2008).**

This sense of exultation intrigues Camus, describing Sisyphus as much made by his passion, as by his tortures. “Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world when he will have to push it up again towards the summit,” he observes, “it is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!”<sup>7</sup> In visiting dying characters on screen in their more nakedly absurd incarnations, this chapter seeks to bring to light the kernel of

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<sup>7</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 119.

Sisyphean rebellion that exists within their exaggerated and often reckless behavior. To a certain extent, apprehension of the absurd is easily enabled by the very conditions of the genre, in that the world depicted is intentionally askew. The hyperbole characteristic of these comedies accounts for and expounds upon the fruitless, often insatiable pursuit of death's meaning undertaken, variously, by each protagonist. Death threatens keenly, nonetheless. Whereas Van Sant's fated youths are touched by the bare interminability of such a threat, the incursion is shockingly literal in these comedies and all the more serious for it. Strife is set in motion and the choice to abide or resist is ludicrously hastened. As Camus has pointed out, the absurd is both the definite awakening and the provocation of what might follow.<sup>8</sup> Comedies that feature dying protagonists situate their action (and generate their laughter) at this juncture: between the enjoyment of rebellion and the potential capitulation of suicide.

The comically erroneous situations that will be explored in this chapter are met by protagonists that appear to bear little resemblance to the kinds of conditions suffered by the central characters in the works of Amenabar, Van Sant and Friedkin. Yet while the same misfortunes that befall characters in more melodramatic contexts provide the source of amusement in comedies, suffering is still present and felt. More than in any other context, it is within the comic that the asinine imperviousness of the world prevails. The comic protagonist is condemned to endure the sudden, complete or insidious intrusion of the world's superficiality. This scenario is played out, quite literally, in Marc Foster's, *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), whose protagonist, Harold Crick (Will Ferrell), an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service working in New York, happens upon the knowledge that he is a character in a novel written by Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson), a novel that she

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<sup>8</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 11.

plans to conclude with his death. By some inconceivable means, her narrative “voice” becomes apparent to (i.e. heard by) Crick. It precedes his every thought and gesture. The question of whether Crick has been behaving in unknowing accord with her narration, or if the narration has unknowingly recorded a real person, remains significantly unanswered in the text. The profundity simply takes place. Despite the havoc it wreaks in Crick’s life, he blithely adjusts to the intrusion. Harold turns to English professor, Jules Hilbert (Dustin Hoffman), an avid fan of Eiffel’s literature, to determine whether his life (and Eiffel’s story) will be a tragedy or comedy. Ferrell’s performance answers this question for us. At first, he is the deer-in-the-headlights, perplexed by the unexpected turn of events. Left with no other choice, he concedes to Eiffel’s authority, and the story of an ordinary man who finds out he is a character in a novel fated to die converts into the story of man who must negotiate the absurd datum of everyday existence in order to survive.



**Harold Crick in *Stranger Than Fiction* (dir. Marc Foster, 2006).**

The presentiment of mortality in this way cannot be allayed by intellect or wit. As Crick

demonstrates, even compliance is taxing, when the requirements are so ludicrous. Crick, however, typifies the unlikely sense of rebellion the comic dying protagonist finds in his Sisyphean obedience. By submitting to their fate, the work of dying becomes the very work of existing. The aim of this analysis is to examine the logical non sequitur this performance of dying harbours. Since to show death as a living, legible thing endeavours to make visible and understandable that which signals a complete disappearance from the world, the very emergence of the comic performance, and the pleasurable amusement we find in its display, references an epistemological absurdity. What films of this order thus provide is a different expression of the irreducible conundrum that death poses for cinematic representation. The films that will be discussed, and their respective protagonists, therefore share with the other works addressed in this thesis a determined attempt to interpret and animate the presentiment of death through a performance that both illuminates and disrupts the fundamental logic of cinematic images. The performance of the dying, condemned subject in comic contexts will be shown to articulate an absurdity founded on a larger conceit: that however profoundly or cleverly a film “thinks” through its images, however actual this image may be, in the matter of death and dying the medium raises questions which the language of cinema is inherently, and laughably, unable to resolve.

The performance of dying is an especially drawn out affair within the bounds of the comic. In order to illustrate this, it will be necessary to define what the conceptual space of comedy is, and the kinds of heterogeneous effects the genre enforces upon the dying protagonist situated within them. Elaborating on what comic narratives oppose (i.e. the tragic) will be part of this project. For the majority of this chapter, however, the comic will be considered an umbrella category, a genre that Umberto Eco argues outlines in his



essay, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', as encompassing a range of different themes and attitudes variously described as ironic or humorous.<sup>9</sup> By looking at the genre from Eco's point of view, the specific comic operation at work in the performance of this dying protagonist can be uncovered. Semiotically speaking, Eco observes, the comic takes place at the level of narrative structures, and thus its humorous, ironic and satirical effects occur at the interstices between narrative and discursive structures.<sup>10</sup> Because the comic deals in exaggeration, anarchy and excess, its nature is essentially carnivalesque, capable of generating disparate effects often converse to the original demands of the narrative.<sup>11</sup> In comic films of the dying protagonist, hilarity often gives way to amusement, pity and melancholy. Once a rule has been broken, fortunes reversed and the world turned on its proverbial head, we move past the act of simply perceiving the comical situation and discover, as Eco observes, the sentiment of comic effect.<sup>12</sup> The exact status of the contraventions initiated by comic theatrics can shift in register from amusing to somber. Deciphering the comic sentiment, however, does not automatically efface the comical nature of these films, nor does it merely repair the broken social frame. This chapter thus extends Eco's perspective to this subset of films by exposing their comic effects as sentiments capable of depicting the panic at the root of the dying protagonist's personae.

As discussed in previous chapters, dying protagonists on screen are torn between accepting and defying their fate. What results is a performance that extends the possibility, and remarkability, of living alongside the intractability of imminent death. The kinds of theatrics exhibited by dying protagonists in comic contexts emerge out of a

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<sup>9</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', *Carnival!* Thomas A. Sebeok, ed (Berlin and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 8.

similar predicament, though their nature is more outwardly reactive. As such, the contention of this chapter is that the comic effect of this type performance is humorous. The more ridiculous and outlandish these protagonists become and the more obstinately the world rejects them, the more humour seems to register a sense of profound uncertainty. For Eco, this sentiment is unavoidable because humour is a supreme philosophical game that calls into question not only the laws undermined in the comic operation but the indeterminacy of living without any law at all.<sup>13</sup> Indeterminacy is as much a physical condition as it is an intellectual dilemma in the films of Ashby, Allen, Saks and Ramis. The performance of their dying protagonists expresses this indeterminacy. Slapstick, jest, and parodying gestures all have the effect of expressing a kind of subjugation in time, where existence resembles an unending cycle of disarray and confusion. The exaggeration and repetition typifying these theatrics can also, in the same gesture, resemble anarchic rebellion. In this respect, the comic dying protagonist reflects the Sisyphean attitude of toiling happily against the odds. Examining the diverse effects of comic theatrics in turn requires some further deliberation on the capacity of performance – the acted self – to carry ontological assertions. In his reading of one of the five surviving works by first century historian, Tacitus, Roland Barthes advances the position that performance always surpasses its source. Barthes focuses on his last and incomplete work, *Annals*, and the scenes of suicide and murder recorded in first-century Rome. The work begins with a memorable depiction of the emperor Nero playing a musical instrument while the city burned. The fascination for Barthes is not the historical content so much as the style of prose employed by the historian to document this period of madness and bloodshed. Barthes' essay, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', outlines a uniquely *Tacitean* world where events are transformed by virtue of their exaggerated

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<sup>13</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 8.

description. As a result, the act of dying is glorified by its presentation within the text as the only protest available to the person living under the cruel regulations of the empire.<sup>14</sup> Barthes makes several observations that will be applied in this chapter to evaluate the nature and function of this particular class of dying protagonist, and their presentation within each film. Firstly, Barthes argues that Tacitus' descriptions paint suicide and murder as interchangeably subversive acts that negate oppression.<sup>15</sup> The prose thus has the effect of distilling such acts to the point where, as he writes, "death is always a dying; it is almost never an effect; however rapidly evoked, death appears as a duration, a process to be relished."<sup>16</sup> What the comic context achieves is a similar Tacitean conversion, whereby death is tantamount to its hyperbolic presentation on screen. The suddenness and anteriority of death are thereby compensated by a performance that endeavours to encounter it directly, albeit absurdly.

Barthes' observations encapsulate how cinema, through the appearance and performance of dying protagonists, visualises and conceptualises death. An underlying contradiction, however, enables this cinematic protocol. This contradiction is made particularly apparent in comic contexts. In films of the dying protagonist, this contradiction is made particularly apparent by featuring a character that submits to death's futility in a way that reifies their aliveness. Because the dying protagonist suffers the crisis of being and potentially not being, the protocol maintains fantasmatically the paradoxical existence of death in the midst of life. The procedure also depends on the medium and form of film, as much defined by its imaginative possibilities as its representational limitations and time constraints. Both the film and the life of the protagonist are expected to conclude.

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 163.

Whether these ends are found in death is beside the point. Films of the dying protagonist fantasmatically maintain the existence of death as a dying, a suspended duration or process to be relished on screen. This fantasmatic interim of dying has its basis in Henri Bergson's philosophy of Duration and the mechanics of time in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Bergson's ideas intersect here because they attempt to visually re-image Duration as an ineffable, impervious complexity. Using the analogy of an elastic band tethered to a point and then stretched, Bergson suggests that time, as experienced by humans, is not something that "passes" but which is subject to intensification and relaxation, and like a rubber band, as it lengthens it becomes tenser.<sup>17</sup> According to Bergson, Duration itself can only be understood through "intuition", a method he defines as the integral act of sympathy through which we apprehend duration as the inexpressible substance of the object itself.<sup>18</sup> Camus similarly refers to the critical "density" of time, that moment when strangeness creeps into everyday life and we are seized by its sudden burden.<sup>19</sup> In spite of our death, life goes on. The cruel mathematics of the world is, as Camus infers, that though this prospect alarms us, making our existence as fraught as a stretched elastic band, time works out the problem and the solution comes afterwards.<sup>20</sup>

From Tacitus, Barthes suggests that there is pleasure to be found in what he terms the *praxis* of dying.<sup>21</sup> In the realm of the comic, the *praxis* of dying poses the tendentious jokes that Freud identifies as "means of psychological relief".<sup>22</sup> Such jokes allow for a

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* [1946], Mabelle L. Andison, trans (New York: First Carol Publishing Group, 1992), p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, p. 162.

<sup>19</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Joyce Crick, trans (Penguin: London, 2002), p. 124.

momentary suspension of the repressions that bind out more cynical or aggressive instincts. For the dying protagonist in the comical film, such jokes disclose their more outwardly reactive and scornful disposition to life's misfortunes. The figment of this subject's liberty and uniqueness is thereby realised in the personae and performance of dying. Each act of aggression, rebellion and miscalculation committed along the way is relished by virtue of its exaggerated and privileged display. Protagonists such as Harold and Maude (*Harold and Maude*, dir. Hal Ashby, 1971), Phil Connors from *Groundhog Day* (dir. Harold Ramis, 1993) and Felix Ungar from Gene Saks's 1968 feature, *The Odd Couple*, employ a praxis of dying that incorporates both the potential for, and futility of, emancipation. Throughout *Harold and Maude*, we encounter two apparently conflicting but interconnecting philosophies on death. Both are characterized by performative excesses, from the hoax suicides continually staged by the young, morbid Harold, to the law-breaking seventy-nine year old Holocaust survivor, Maude, who busies herself by lavishly preparing for her last days. The tomorrow that refuses to happen for Phil Connors demonstrates the manner by which a metaphysical practical joke forces the protagonist into a literal state of indeterminacy. Phil adopts the personae and performance of a dying protagonist through outlandish acts and his growing sense of hopelessness. Felix is mocked by a world that appears solely preoccupied with marginalizing his existence, then making light of his subsequent death wish. Under persecution, Felix finds himself as entrenched as ever in the rules and contraventions of his society.

Characters such as these are condemned by circumstance and choice to a lonely existence. It is the fantasmatic duration of this alienation that equates to the praxis of dying in these films. The praxis in turn forwards a notion of dying that equates to an existential fantasy

of self-abandon or the anarchic loss of self. Within the comedic genre we thus find an element of masochistic self-sacrifice that emerges as a reaction to faceless and anterior prohibitions. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben looks at the history of the original political ban, examining instances of refugee camps, death rows and Auschwitz to outline a category of existence, or “bare life”, that arises as a response to the perpetual threat of death.<sup>23</sup> What is captured in the sovereign ban, or “pure law”, he argues, is a human victim that may be killed but not sacrificed: *homo sacer*.<sup>24</sup> Agamben gives the term “bare life” to this category of existence. It is bare, sacred life that is produced by the sovereign ban, but it is a category of subsistence he contends can live with death, or at least access a mode of being between life and death analogous to the experience of the Musselmen of Auschwitz.<sup>25</sup> Connors’ limitation in time and space in *Groundhog Day*, indeed his entire performance, can be viewed as the comic equivalent to Agamben’s “bare life”. *Groundhog Day* is the pure law that traps the protagonist in the confines of a physical world that no longer, for any apparent reason, makes sense nor concerns itself with the welfare of its constituent. The body of the protagonist undergoes repeated and punishing failures in its quest for liberation. When we consider these efforts as a series of negations that allow for the affirmation of some semblance of resistance, Connors’ performance takes on an undeniably rebellious aspect. What emerges from failure is the semblance of life that strives to exist alongside the ubiquitous threat of extermination. The elaborate suicides conducted throughout Harold and Maude can be similarly read as products of the protagonist’s free will asserting itself under intolerable restrictions. The point to be made is that Harold’s staged suicides are humorous not because they are wholly unserious or inconsequential, but because of their earnest

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<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 112-3.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 131.

execution. His exploits acknowledge the serious business of living in full cognisance of life's absurdity. But it is a malady he also seems to relish. The fact that this exposes the sadism at the core of this kind of comedy is not the only conclusion that must be entertained. There must also be the potential that suffering co-exists with rebellion in assuming the comic version of "bare life". There must also be the potential that suffering co-exists with rebellion in assuming the comic version of "bare life".

Comic suffering therefore distinguishes itself from its counterpoint in the tragic, though the former is no less involved with the painful finitude of life. In tragedies, the threat of death arises to drive the tragic protagonist toward a sacrificial confrontation with their own failures. This leads to the most obvious distinction between the tragic and the comic protagonist: one dies, the other survives. Not surprisingly, this conclusion is often generalised as a "happy ending". The field of comedy in these films is much more fluid in addressing death, however, and it will be argued that their attendant images on screen have more to do with the consequence, not the source, of mutability's ineluctable and corrosive intrusion upon life. As such, these are not films that lack serious consideration, merely submitting problems to whimsical solutions, but films about the agonising materialisation of pure law into everyday life. Within each film, pure law upsets the very trajectory of the protagonist's existence. The suffering that transpires as a result elucidates the impracticality of confronting the source of pure law directly, of being unable to reason with it or make sense of its prohibitions. Harold completes one mock suicide after another to the increasing indifference of his mother. Phil Connors has a thousand opportunities to create the perfect day and yet, *Groundhog Day* after *Groundhog Day*, he fails to win the heart of his colleague. Comedy allows for the expression of the repetition compulsion at the heart of subjective stasis, the humorous effects of which

shape its sympathetic dimension.

It seems natural to credit tragedy as the preferred mode for the authentic portrayal of dying on film. After all, what this genre promises is easily defined and fulfilled by its premise: death is fearful, and its immanence the result of a fatal error of judgment on the part of the protagonist. According to the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, this tragic flaw, or hamartia, necessitates suffering and actions that are grave, absolute and of a certain magnitude.<sup>26</sup> The exigency of this suffering secures the protagonist's narrative destination: toward ruination, pain, in short, the unhappy ending. In its most genuine sense, the hamartia is not simply a character flaw but the very thing that enables the tragic figure to acquire import and act heroically. The hamartia initiates the drama of adversity, and determines the way in which the players in this drama are assembled and received. Aristotle argued that it is precisely because tragedy shows suffering, as opposed to simply relaying it, that it achieves its universal, causal logic, its ability to culminate, by means of the pity and fear it dramatises and elicits, in the cleansing of afflictions, or catharsis.<sup>27</sup> The tensions built up along the way are invariably released within the work itself. The exponents of tragedy, from Euripides and Shakespeare, to the loose, modern literary equivalents authored by Dostoyevsky, attest to the distinct universality of the genre's cathartic qualities. The surety of death is an unbidden consequence of the hero's hamartia. It is a product of human error, not oblivious to it.

In formulating a more judicious and expansive reading of dying characters within the province of the comic, it follows that a number of distinctions between this genre and its

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<sup>26</sup> Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis*, p. 89.



tragic counterpart should be investigated and elaborated upon. The intent, however, lies beyond qualifying the authenticity or effectiveness of one representation of suffering in the face of life's end, and outside the kind of binary frameworks that suggest the comic is, as in Shakespeare, merely the reversal of misfortune into triumph. Classical definitions of tragedy certainly connect death with an incursion of misfortune, but also touch upon the spectacle of human suffering required in order to enact the cathartic resolution. A particular heroic performance of dying has become the genre's emblem. Tragedy is signified by this neat catharsis of emotion, by a sense of universal culmination and comprehensibility. When tasked with the serious business of dying, the ill-fated protagonist within comedies presents as an initially disproportionate figure. Within, the potentiality of death remains a baffling conundrum, not so much an impediment that can be surmounted as an accidental intrusion that prompts a host of irreverent responses from its unsuspecting victims, responses ranging from slapstick terror, flippant derision and dithering incomprehension. Ultimately for Aristotle, it is difficult to imagine any serious intimation of actions from a comedic character because this person is essentially inferior.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Freud's insights on humour rescue comic procedures from the domain of low art by delineating their psychological complexities. In his estimation, laughter and obscenity are operations that transpose our inhibitions, frailties and deformities, and indeed form part of the very procedures in a narrative medium that make the intellectual world accessible to aesthetic contemplation.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the comic mask is not really a mask at all, but a textual strategy that enacts, by way of performance, the potential arbitrariness of any ontological platform we choose to stand on.

The various textual strategies and effects that pertain to the comic become more amenable

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<sup>28</sup> Golden, *Aristotle On Tragic and Comic Mimesis*, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Subconscious*, p. 4.

to interpretation when, as James Feibleman proposed in his treatise on comedy and philosophy in 1938, we consider its ability to exemplify the possibility that nothing actual is wholly logical.<sup>30</sup> Feibleman explains that the comic parodies causality by foregrounding the emergence of some elemental contingency:<sup>31</sup>

A man sits down but the chair has been snatched away and he falls on the floor. As crude as this is, it is true comedy. But the attempt to hold comedy down to the failure of expectation follows from the wrong interpretation of what is involved. First of all, comedy does consist in the absence of something which is expected, but it can also consist in the presence of something where nothing is expected. Always, however, the situation must illustrate the absence of what ought to be, if it is to reveal comedy.<sup>32</sup>

Like the background that continually runs out and changes for the unsuspecting Daffy Duck in the Looney Tunes cartoon, *Duck Amuck* (dir. Charles M. Jones, 1953), the jarring absence of causal logic demonstrates one of the enduring dilemmas of contemporary comic characters. The story is simple, if resolutely, absurd. A large pencil or paintbrush initially comes into frame to make alterations to the scenery. The animator proceeds to manipulate the backdrops, painting Daffy nonsensical colours, muting his voice and replacing it with random sounds, redrawing and redoubling him and so on and so forth. Daffy is by turns panic-stricken and incensed. Regarded as one of the most surreal experiments in animation, this *Merrie Melodies* vignette portrays, through Daffy's torment, the plight of an isolated figure trying desperately to comply with the demands of some malicious dictator (which is revealed to be Bugs Bunny). The traces of this cartoonish archetype can be found, some fifteen years later, in the slapstick persona of luckless Felix Unger, the odder half of Neil Simon's, *The Odd Couple*. Simon's screen adaptation begins with a protagonist so perplexed by his immediate surroundings that even the simple act of drinking in a bar flips a disastrous tripwire of events. Newly

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<sup>30</sup> James Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', *The Journal of Philosophy* 35.16 (August 4, 1938): 421.

<sup>31</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 422.

<sup>32</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 422.

separated from his wife, Felix is resignedly suicidal. After several, frustrated attempts to end his life, he drifts aimlessly through a faceless and disinterested Manhattan. This is the trick played on Felix: that despite all that life has inflicted upon him, his misery simply has no impact on the world at large. He remains at the perpetual mercy of an uncaring city that appears to take delight in exacerbating his already alarming inferiority complex.

When booking into a hotel to presumably jump off one its window-ledges, he is offered the third floor, to which he plaintively asks: “Haven’t you anything higher?” It is difficult not to empathise with his character in the same way we might empathise with the helpless Daffy as he suffers all the indignities of being poked and prodded by his unseen antagonist. By the same token, Daffy’s very status as a cartoon figure warrants that he can be treated this way. And yet the situation seems unfair. Felix incurs much of his own trouble but manages to elicit our sympathies as he unknowingly stumbles into the same dysfunction he seeks shelter from. Instead of finding refuge in the Riverside Drive bachelor pad of his friend and fellow divorcee, Oscar (Walter Matthau), he happens upon another failing marriage of sorts (both characters not-so-inadvertently call each by the names of their respective ex-wives). It is the protagonist itself (duck, middle-aged divorcee) that constitutes the presence that exists contrary to expectation. Daffy quacks obscenities until reduced to a disembodied voice on a page. Some aspect of Daffy remains, protesting. For all his determined efforts, Felix should be dead, and yet he is not. Repetitious behaviour contains in itself a kernel of spirited resilience.





**Felix Ungar: the affliction of perpetual dysfunction.**

According to Freud, this factor of bafflement is an example of a true joke, the comic effect wherein the difference between sense and nonsense becomes not only transparent but also significant.<sup>33</sup> We discover a truth in it, Freud suggests, and this is the basis for our feeling of comedy: it consists in our immediate transition from accepting as true and granting meaning, to our impression of relative nothingness.<sup>34</sup> Understatement and exaggeration begin to look like two sides of the same coin. Daffy Duck wails at the injustice of an invisible tormentor that threatens his presence. We encounter Felix in the wake of great personal loss and his lethargically executed suicides are shot in such a way as to repeatedly underscore this. Felix goes against the grain of everyday life, yet no one notices his pain. To emphasise this, the camera remains static the majority of the time it records him. A mournful Felix licks the envelope of his farewell note before straining to open the window out of which he intends to plummet. He eventually puts his back out and collapses on the bed in a gasping spasm. The shot keeps its distance and the scene transitions smoothly into the next. The credits and jaunty theme music resume. The same laughter provoked by Daffy's indomitable yet useless resistance is matched by the situational humour of Felix's stymied suicide. Humour validates the performative or illustrative dimension of the comic effect as a response to an unexpected something (in this case, an undifferentiated misery). Both predicaments point to the same modern,

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<sup>33</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 6.

existential condition: how to confront the threat of unseen torment, of relative indifference? What happens when, without cause or warning, the very laws that have hitherto functioned start to dysfunction? The adversary is necessarily separate and more clearly distinguished in tragedies. Whether the result of the protagonist's error, the threat is direct and in its directness, can be confronted. Villains, evils, and flaws have recognizable countenances. The central dilemma shown by the exaggerations and understatements of the comic figure is that the action or disarray is already in place and now seems unstoppable. The hamartia, or tragic flaw, is both elsewhere and everywhere, wholly external and intensely personal.



**Exaggeration and comedic distress: (above) Daffy Duck in *Duck Amuck* (1953) and (below) *The Odd Couple*.**

If a comic character can be said to suffer it is perhaps the caricatured lack of agency which points to the primary source of their turmoil. More than just a grotesque mask effacing suffering, the comic character often defers to jest, nonsense and obscene

profanity as the only responses left to them within the confines of a radically de-centered existence. Not typically regarded for their resourcefulness in the face of mortal danger, If such figures do cast themselves into the abyss they do so with mordant abandon, the decision itself already compromised by humiliation or hopelessness. This is the premise for the majority of Woody Allen's earlier comedies. Boris Gruschenko (Allen), the "hero" of his 1975 film *Love and Death*, embodies this kind of fish-out-water persona whose internal dilemmas are treated with more gravity than the threat of actual violence. In the aforementioned film, Boris is unfazed by the looming inevitability of Napoleonic war. Instead, he is stricken by the prospect of succumbing to the petty ordinariness of battle before figuring out his philosophical viewpoint, and convincing his cousin, Sonja (Diane Keaton), to marry him. In one scene, he poses the question of God to Sonja:

Boris: *What if there is no God?*

Sonja: *Boris Dimitrovich! Are you joking?*

Boris: *What if we're just a bunch of absurd people, who are running around without rhyme or reason?*

Sonja: *But if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living, Why not just kill yourself?*

Boris: *Well let's not get hysterical; I could be wrong. I'd hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they found something [points upwards].*

To have to concede that mortality might be nothing more than the intervention of dumb luck, a banana peel over which one might grievously stumble, represents a fate worse than death for Boris. Exaggeration and understatement work in unflinching tandem to underscore the glaring myopia of this kind of existentialism, the tension that exists between the desire to understand mortality and the irrepressible fact of our exclusion from such knowledge. As Sanders H. Lee points out in her exploration of the philosophical horizons of Allen's cinema:

Perhaps the greatest tension in Allen's work is based on the desire of many of his characters to ground their lives in a set of traditional ethical values for which they simultaneously and sadly acknowledge the lack of an ontological

foundation. This tension could be called “the existential dilemma”.<sup>35</sup>

Simon’s characters are mired in the same crisis of being. Felix laments at the imperviousness of the world and the pointlessness of his life, whilst his every botched attempt at exiting it works to cement his place in within its heedless order. The world does not yield to the demands of Boris’ intellect. The humiliations he suffers as a result, whilst amusing in its frequency, amounts to a kind of carnival of physical and psychical torture. Much like Felix, he twitters about for most of the movie in an agitated, overwrought stupor, though his behaviour is not entirely unsympathetic. There is something of the suffering idealist elicited by both these performances, an idealism continually sabotaged by the realities of existing, in their particular way, in a world that seems all too eager to dismiss them.



**Boris Grucshenko in *Love and Death* (1975).**

The “simultaneous and sad acknowledgement” that Lee observes in the antics of Woody Allen’s protagonists could very well describe the comic enterprise in every film discussed thus far. Expectations are always derailed by the presence of the absurd, and derailed in

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<sup>35</sup> Sanders H. Lee, *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed: Anguish, God and Existentialism* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002), p. 7.

such a way as to make obvious the uncaring and unpredictable nature of whatever fictional universes these characters reside in. But how does a sentiment of sadness come to accompany this comic operation, those instances of humiliation, embarrassment, even irony, that draw our attention to the fallacies of the protagonists' ideas and attitudes concerning death? Can such a feeling be prompted if, as Henri Bergson suggests, the comic person is unconscious, and becomes exponentially more comical the more ignorant they are of themselves?<sup>36</sup> Unlike Macbeth and so many heroic figures before him, Allen's Boris seeks solely to avoid confrontation, vowing to "do more" than is humanly possible to dodge the bullet. By comparison, Boris is a coward, and his delusions of grandeur only add to his "anti-hero" status in the text. His actions, however, are nothing more than the product of being in the wrong place at the right time until this time, essentially, runs out. His eventual execution is itself a cruel displacement of expectations, having been told, by way of a clairvoyant vision, that this will be a death he narrowly escapes. Feibleman addresses this programmatic literalness as a familiar tactic of the comic, where the usual limits of actual things and events are exceeded to express their arbitrary and contingent nature.<sup>37</sup> Allen's flighty performance hardly presents itself as a model of successful intellectual emancipation, which is entirely beside the point. Like Felix, Boris insists upon external prejudice when much of his turmoil could easily be attributed to his neuroses. The point to be made is that these characters are resolutely insistent. And it is a habit they suffer. War is ever encroaching and yet Boris clings as desperately to his distorted romanticism as he does the canon muzzle he cowers inside when the battle finally sweeps into town. Even at the moment of execution he finds time to consider another preposterous notion: "*Every man has to go sometime . . . but I'm different. I have*

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<sup>36</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, trans (London: MacMillan, 1911), p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 423.



*to go at 6 A.M. It was 5 A.M., but I have a good lawyer.*" The incongruity of such stoicism coming from a character as physically feeble as Boris is the comic operation at work, foregrounding illogicality with a visual incongruity. The juxtaposition of Felix's obsessive compulsiveness with his clumsy suicide attempts is another example of this. In this way, Boris and Felix resemble Bergsonian "dreamers": childlike idealists who communicate their own persistent rebellion to their fates by proxy of a performance of chronic inadaptability.<sup>38</sup>

Exaggeration illustrates this chronic inadaptability. It points to a human body not so much in excess of its surroundings, as fundamentally incapable of assimilation (i.e. wartime St. Petersburg, Oscar's squalid apartment). However, for exaggeration to be humorous, Bergson argues, it must not be explicit but implicit in the act of caricature and always at the expense of the body it afflicts.<sup>39</sup> The greater the effort Felix employs to casually converse with Oscar's neighbours, the Pigeon sisters, the more pain he suffers. His smile grimaces and every sentence uttered is torn apart by excruciating pauses. He sweats. Put simply, he is a protagonist whose entire being is at odds with the situation it finds itself in: the one from which he flees, which is also the one to which he aspires. In Bataille's account of bodily excess, the exaggeration of laughter, tears and terror, taken together represent what he refers to as the body out of control.<sup>40</sup> Bataille groups these impulses – whose cinematic forms are the body genres of horror, porn and comedy – together as movements of the human condition that introduce into society "their immense disorder and their avid vulgarity."<sup>41</sup> But how can the vulgar impart poignancy in the comic

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<sup>38</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed and trans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 32.

context? Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that carnival humour achieves its universal legibility because it takes as its subject death, decay and all that amounts to fear in everyday existence, turning them into amusing or ludicrous incongruities.<sup>42</sup> These incongruities are neither specific to one scenario nor to one type of person, but to humanity in general. Bataille similarly argues that there is sovereignty in comedy above all forms of art, which exceeds the logic of reason and meaning to the extent that it operates outside the system of philosophy.<sup>43</sup> Comedy returns us to the frailties and thwarted impulses of the body, and in doing so it reveals, as Peter Klossowski theorises in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, that physical existence is a product of chance, a locus of individuated impulses whose sole objective is to de-individuate in death.<sup>45</sup>

According to Bergson, our imagination has a very clear-cut philosophy that finds accord in comic enterprises, more specifically, in what comic exaggeration achieves at the expense of the body it degrades.<sup>46</sup> In his view, whatever be the doctrine to which our reason assents, it spies in every human form, however pitiable, the effort of a soul which is futilely shaping matter, a soul which aspires to immateriality, to what is called gracefulness.<sup>47</sup> But Bergson is quick to concede that matter is obstinate:

It draws to itself the ever-alert activity of this higher principle [of immateriality], would fain convert it to its own inertia and cause it to revert to mere automatism. It would fain immobilize the intelligently varied movements of the body in stupidly contracted grooves, stereotype in permanent grimaces the fleeting expressions of the face, in short imprint on the whole person such an attitude as to make it appear immersed and absorbed in the materiality of some mechanical occupation. Where matter thus succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the

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<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky, trans (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, L.A. Boldt, trans (Albany: State U of New York P, 1998), p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 28.

<sup>47</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 28.

expense of the body, an effect that is comic...It partakes rather of the unsprightly than of the unsightly, of rigidity rather than of ugliness.<sup>48</sup>

The same rigid automatism characterizes the ceaseless activity of Sisyphus. But what distinguishes Sisyphus is his consciousness. He returns to his task scornfully, straining with his cheek tight against the stone, his efforts measured by nothing but skyless space and time without measure.<sup>49</sup> It is this conscious struggle, where the tension between the desire for immateriality and the resistance of the body is felt, that produces philosophical effects in the comic enterprise. The professional Allen archetype, typified by Boris, relentlessly pursues his intellectual aspirations, possessing grand ideas mismatched by his physical and social status. Upon meeting death at age twelve in one of his many hallucinations, his vision of the Grim Reaper is another incongruous reversal of stereotypes, a suspiciously ordinary man wearing a white sheet. To extend the incongruity further, the one question Boris asks of the afterlife is facile, yet serious: “*Are there any girls?*” The laughter provoked by such a reversal of expectation is immediately directed at Boris’ acutely dramatised idiocy. (“*I got screwed!*” Boris laments when divine intervention refuses to intervene on the occasion of his death). However, the humorous sentiment does not arise solely as a response to the protagonist’s perceived shortcomings. This is the variety of laughter that Bataille considers across the breadth of his writings, laughter that exposes the relationship between reason and unreason and the unknowing that constitutes the basis of comedy. In his essay, ‘Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears’, Bataille surmises that the unknown makes us laugh: “That which is laughable may simply be the ‘unknowable’”.<sup>50</sup> It is also the absurd, the terrible, and the unfortunate. Bergson’s theory of laughter would put forward the argument that Boris is laughable because the

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<sup>48</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>49</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears’, Annette Michelson, trans, October 36 (Spring 1986): 90.

inordinate methods he takes to cheat death eventually become mechanical, like an automaton, having the simultaneous effect of rendering humorous the performance and the sad deflection of life that it requires.<sup>51</sup> The by-product of all these exertions is pain.



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<sup>51</sup> Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 29.

### **The exertion of inadaptability: Felix in *The Odd Couple*.**

As thoroughly actualized representations that circumscribe the viewer within the therapeutic objectives of the text, tragic figures are more readily diagnosed by, and subjected to, the demands of philosophical reason. Within this therapeutic paradigm, particularly as outlined by Richard Almond in 1996, the protagonist plays out their misgivings and mistakes through a process of interactional moves.<sup>52</sup> The outcome of these interactional moves, Almond claims, is redemptive, as the character discovers their subjective limits, grieves, and then exacts their own reparative closure.<sup>53</sup> The “tear-jerker” film, with its melodramatic treatment of the trials of the terminally ill and morally condemned, is one example of a tragic, therapeutic narrative. Whether or not the “tear-jerker” provides the illusion of noble delicacy in the face of misfortune, our repeated encounter with its protagonists secures the ultimate emotional accord. In the triumph of a happy ending or the sweet desolation of an unhappy one, the tragic figure, through their visual appeal and emotional transparency, intimates in each case the impossible verification of emotional investment within the text. The emotional indeterminacy of comic figures has insured a broadly categorical dismissal (as rogues, clowns, misanthropes, twits and fools) or a converse tendency to articulate a specific discursive activity, and in doing so unearth the psychological defense that necessitates their comic masks. At worst, these readings supplant the comic with the tragic. At best, they are an attempt to theorise the ambiguous workings of comic effects, and the affinity the comic shares with the absurd, the unthinkable, the irrational and the impossible – much of what underpins philosophical and theoretical configurations of death and dying.

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<sup>52</sup> B. Almond and Richard Almond, *The Therapeutic Narrative: Fictional Relationships and the Process of Psychological Change* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 204.

<sup>53</sup> Almond and Almond, *The Therapeutic Narrative*, p. 204.

While Woody Allen has made a habit of tackling bourgeois suffering with his trademark wit, the subject has not always been the source of such ironic disdain in modern cinema. The dithering neurosis that burdens Felix Unger is of an undoubtedly different order to the naivety and self-delusion that typifies Boris. Boris is willfully resistant. Felix, on the other hand, is genuinely dismayed by his inability to feel or act in any other way. “*I can’t help it,*” he matter-of-facts to Oscar, “*I drive everybody crazy.*” Oscar is quick to supply that this is because he can’t “leave himself alone.” Felix is a creature of compulsive repetition. It follows that his depression would be underscored by the same rampant perfectionism he has hitherto devoted to every other aspect of his life. Every pained expression on his Muppet-like face conveys the desperation of a man tired of the hassle of existing. He wants badly to die but is plainly unable to do so. Put simply, death doesn’t work, though by all accounts it should. Cause has no effect. This is when the subject of death lends itself to absurd, comical contexts, being as it is, to use Barthes’ vernacular, never algebraic, but an element of the utmost unreason.<sup>54</sup> Felix is suspended in this unfinished state without explanation or compensation. The humour of his situation stems from the fact that, as Freud points out, nonsense is unleashed and the comic conditions work to protect this nonsense from rational criticism.<sup>55</sup> We witness him opening the window in his hotel room then pulling a muscle in his back. He goes to a bar and when he throws back a shot, he injures his neck. He limps to a bridge and contemplates jumping off. His slack-shouldered posture is one of dispirited exhaustion, as if to say: “Why bother?” The unfairness of such a predicament is not spared or lessened by its pathetic nature, which remains paramount to the emotive reach of Simon’s text. What makes us

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<sup>54</sup> Barthes, ‘Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque’, p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> Freud, *The Joke and its Relation To the Unconscious*, p. 161.

laugh is that the world's nonsensicalness is suddenly transparent. What ushers in that accompanying twinge of sadness, is that this world now obviates any and all attempts to understand it. As Felix quips, he wants to kill himself and his wife is redecorating. Felix's aborted suicides initiate the comic operation but the humour resides in what occurs after. He becomes an automaton, diligently organizing Oscar's apartment and daily routine. It is behaviour both ridiculous and sad, simultaneously rallying and submitting to the futility of present circumstances.

Eco observes that humor undermines limits from the inside.<sup>56</sup> Humour arises from, and circumscribes, the comic procedure. It attaches to the carnival when the carnivalesque performance exposes absurdities, when it occasions an oftentimes excruciating and unexpected awareness of that presence that exists contrary to expectation (i.e. the body). The carnivalesque is itself the result of what failure plunges into chaos and absurdity. Though habitually characterised by its transgressions and deviations from social norms, comedy in this way also contains the potential to be pragmatic, producing effects that affirm the logic of seemingly arbitrary mishaps and mistakes. What this chapter proposes is that humour affirms the logic of unsuccessful acts, in this case, suicidal ones. Felix, for example, utterly fails in all his endeavours to relieve himself of himself. The very sight and sound of his tics, the exuberant noises he makes when either clearing his sinuses in a diner or moping theatrically around Oscar's apartment, carry carnivalesque energy into a controlled bourgeoisie world. Felix rebels by virtue of this exaggerated version of himself. Harold, by contrast, takes this kind of performance to the extreme. His suicides are never threatening. Rather, their signature is ironic. Harold plays at suicide with such commitment and preciseness that the fact he doesn't die reveals the negation of a more

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<sup>56</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom', p. 8.

essential negation within the world and at the basis of these acts. Bodily impulses and consciousness war behind Harold's meek exterior. He strives to understand himself by flirting with death, itself a fallaciously constructed and interpreted ontology.

Harold enjoys the singularity his suicides grant him, though they do little to abolish his yearning for meaning. In Camus' estimation, such a character does not understand the leap that suicide requires:

He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels – his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything. Hence what he demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal.<sup>57</sup>

When Harold meets Maude, who lives entirely by appeal to the world around her, two responses to the indifference and absurdity of human life are embodied. Maude has planned as meticulously as Harold for suicide, but her intention is to literally negate her existence in the world. Maude is wild and reckless, and her outrageousness differs greatly to Harold's innately cautious personality. For Maude, the nearness of death makes clear sense of her experiences. A great seriousness underlies her suicidal ebullience. American writer and theologian, Conrad Hyers, argues that comic effects provide insights that are the product, not of an argument going somewhere or having been somewhere, but of a procession brought to a sudden halt and plunged into laughter and absurdity.<sup>58</sup> There are many, albeit extreme, instances where this occurs in *Harold and Maude* and they belong predominantly to Harold. Like *The Odd Couple*, the film begins with an attempted suicide set up to resemble a kind of fantasised funeral. The diminutive Harold (Bud Cort), whom his own mother informs us to be abnormally "predisposed" to the absurd, walks around a

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<sup>57</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> Conrad Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1974), p. 156.



dark and cavernous study. He wears a suit, writes a nametag for himself, lights candles and sets the soundtrack before quietly climbing a stool to tie a noose around his neck. His already pale face turns blue from the force of asphyxiation. In the meantime, his mother bustles in and out of the room without so much as a startle. The act refuses to impress or even frighten his mother, clearly the object of this elaborate enterprise. Rather than ask what might be wrong with Harold, she inquires if he thinks he's being funny. Judging from the smile that surfaces amidst the pain of nearly choking, it is clear that Harold does. We are invited to take both pleasure and unease in Harold's antics because the context is so decidedly absurd and yet the spectacle of his elaborate prank, a spectacle that takes us no further than Harold's smirk, plunges us into uncertainty. The film does this without ever having to reveal the psychological content that may or may not architect the suicidal impulse. Before he encounters Maude, the absurd - that which Camus elaborates as so obvious and yet so hard to win - is preserved and finds its home in Harold.<sup>59</sup>



**The fantasised funeral in *Harold and Maude* (dir. Hal Ashby, 1971).**

Despite their outward aggressiveness, Harold's suicidal tendencies find an accurate corollary to Freud's interpretation of un-tendentious, or innocuous, jokes. Freud theorised that innocent jokes differ from tendentious jokes by virtue of their more subtle references

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<sup>59</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 50.

to absurdity.<sup>60</sup> For all the effort required of Harold to contrive his “deaths”, they reveal a minimum of information about his psychological disposition beyond vague suspicion that he is either unhappy or bored, or both. Neither conclusion is verified in the film as the actual thought-process behind such behaviour. This does not necessarily mean that Harold’s “deaths” are aimless. It might suggest that what underscores them is a definite sense of hopelessness. There is method to Harold’s madness to the extent that the method itself provides the measure of psychical release. Freud argues that the apparent purposelessness of the abstract joke, with its capacity to intimate a range of possible intentions and motivations, is always an activity of psychical expenditure.<sup>61</sup> He writes that:

The activity of joking cannot be said to have no aim or purpose, for it has set itself the unmistakable aim of arousing pleasure in the listener. I doubt that we are capable of undertaking anything that does not take some intention into account. If we are not actually using our psychical apparatus to realize one of our indispensable satisfactions, we let it work towards pleasure, we try to obtain pleasure from its own activity.<sup>62</sup>

Arthur Rankin finds a similar correspondence between innocent jokes and incongruous or absurd expressions in his paper on the use of doubling in Chaplin’s, *City Lights* (1931) and *The Idle Class* (1921). He observes that Chaplin’s comedy blends the tendentious with the innocuous in his characterization of the tramp (played by Chaplin) and the comic technique of mistaken identity that is utilized throughout both films, creating a cinematic world that has human appeal while also maintaining social criticism.<sup>63</sup> Rankin sustains Freud’s distinction between abstract and tendentious jokes throughout, a distinction that identifies three categories of tendentious jokes – obscene, hostile and cynical - that work

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<sup>60</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its relation to the Unconscious*, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 93.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Rankin, ‘Tendentious Innocence: Chaplin’s Use of Doubling in *City Lights* and *The Idle Class*’, in *Senses of Cinema*, 45 (October-December 2007)

<[http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature- articles/charlie-chaplin-doubling](http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/charlie-chaplin-doubling)>

specifically to displace some form of aggression and reinstate social stability.<sup>65</sup> Rankin reads the misidentification of the Tramp for millionaire as propelling the humour of the film since it is the audience and not the protagonist that understands the significance of what has been misconstrued.<sup>66</sup> He stresses that is it the audience's intense relationship with the "surrogate" character of the Tramp, and his experience with and victory over ordinary social and physical reality, which provides the opportunity to form a sympathetic identification with this comic figure.<sup>67</sup> The scope of Ashby's film also allows for the expression of both tendentious and un-tendentious jokes, though it draws on the opposite reserves for sympathy in order to achieve this. By comparison, Ashby's vision of the comic is unconventional. The tendentious potential for social critique is continually subdued by the film's inherent irreverence. When Harold meets the seventy-nine year old Maude, her lack of sensibility does not have the expected effect of tempering Harold's more aggressive yen for subversion. Their subsequent love affair is yet another example of what could easily be emphasized as an obscene or satirical subject, or an extension of Harold's rebellion against societal norms, turning into a more speculative development that plunges the audience, once again, into uncertain depths. Criticism is certainly leveled against such taboos; however the integrity of these characters is never sacrificed for the sake of political commentary. The expected outcome is derailed. Harold falls in love with Maude but love does not conquer all. Maude commits suicide regardless.

Rationality finds little purchase in Ashby's cinema. The reckless and freewheeling

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<sup>65</sup> Rankin, 'Tendentious Innocence: Chaplin's Use of Doubling in *City Lights* and *The Idle Class*' <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/charlie-chaplin-doubling>>

<sup>66</sup> Rankin, 'Tendentious Innocence: Chaplin's Use of Doubling in *City Lights* and *The Idle Class*' <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/charlie-chaplin-doubling>>

<sup>67</sup> Rankin, 'Tendentious Innocence: Chaplin's Use of Doubling in *City Lights* and *The Idle Class*' <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/feature-articles/charlie-chaplin-doubling>>

behavior exhibited by Harold and Maude transpire in a private space wherein psychological motivations are fleetingly glimpsed and exaggeration translates to stylistic understatement. Nowhere is this ineffable and tenuous connection more explicit than in the moment when, after running from the law and stealing cars, Maude confesses to her young accomplice: “*I like you, Harold.*” The reasons that bind Maude to Harold and vice-versa are largely withheld, contained within this slight, yet candid statement. The entire thematic backdrop relates to a kind of implacable, unstoppable longing for meaning, as if Harold’s life were itself a foreshadowing of the tragedy he will indirectly encounter by way of Maude. The hearse he converts from a sports car (a present from his mother) eventually becomes the ambulance that ferries her to the emergency room after her planned overdose on her eightieth birthday. Our feeling of comedy in these films is a similarly manifold phenomenon: a sense of exultation and uneasiness, tinged with melancholy. Harold’s suicidal pretenses elicit this sentiment, suggesting not just the possibility but also the feeling of life’s absurdity and an exuberant sentiment of liberation, a sentiment that is intensified by its inevitable negation. Camus points out that just as becoming aware of the absurdity of life inspires reckless the immersion into it, there remains that single, inconsolable fate whose outcome alone is fatal.<sup>68</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that there exists a clear distinction in Ashby’s film between being suicidal and committing suicide, a demarcation that, in the end, can do nothing but separate Harold and Maude.

From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the tragic figure is driven by ego to seek meaning in the encroachment of mortality. What is presupposed by this tactic is that there is any meaning at all to be garnered from the fact of our finitude. Conversely, the comic takes a

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<sup>68</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 114.

more irreverent approach to our inherent limitations; in other words, it lends the disdain for death an irreverent quality. Freud wrote of the significance of this comic detour in a late essay from 1927 entitled 'Der Humor'. Within, he considers humour from the perspective of feeling, establishing the contribution made to the comic by the superego.<sup>69</sup> In humour, the superego surveys the ego from a privileged position, turning the ego itself into a fallacy.<sup>70</sup> The dryly omniscient narration throughout Wes Anderson's 2001 feature, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, lends otherwise disquieting human emotions a peculiar and arcane character. It reminds the viewer that these are fictional characters from a fictional book, whose fate is already written. Ritchie Tenenbaum, the now suicidal former tennis pro and elder sibling, suffers all the misfortunes and thwarted ambitions of his family in silence. An air of circumspect dignity surrounds him, but the unserious, adolescent mood that the film creates through a combination of editing, music and narration obscures the very painful and personal issue he has been shouldering all these years: of being in love with his adopted sister, Margot. A wry humour is coaxed from the gentle, yet continual juxtaposition of inner, adult turmoil and the childlike world that Ritchie, and all the Tenenbaum children, elect to inhabit. Incongruity through affective absurdity underlies the majority of the comic effects produced here. However, as Feibleman points out, there is no situation that does not have its tragic as well as comic aspects.<sup>71</sup> Any story has the propensity to develop into melodrama, tragedy or comedy. What overtakes the tragic dimension of Ritchie's desire for Margot is the consistent deflection and repression achieved by noticeable ironies and contradictions in his persona. Ritchie hides his shame behind an outwardly nostalgic style of dress and behavior. He refuses to discuss the on-court nervous breakdown that forced his retirement from professional sport, but wears his

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<sup>69</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Der Humour', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed and trans James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. XXI, p. 161.

<sup>70</sup> Freud, 'Der Humour', pp. 161-2.

<sup>71</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 248.

tennis gear like a badge of dishonour. He arrives home with his pet eagle, Mordecai, wherein he promptly sets up a tent in Margot's bedroom, hanging her childhood paintings on a wall and cultivating a long beard. His quirks constitute a visual misnomer and invoke humour, a sentiment that works to supplant other elements of the *mise-en-scène* concerning the articulation of complex and serious emotion.

Ritchie converts his suicidal tendencies into a state of ritualized adolescence, that is, he develops a neurosis in the Freudian sense. His persona constitutes a regression that allows the re-staging of an infantile and obsessive neurosis, which had in its original instance presumably "succeeded" in mitigating his anxieties. Horton argues that the comic enterprise – in this instance, the contrast between Ritchie's absurdly stylised appearance and his quiet demeanour – is a fundamentally pleasurable performance to witness.<sup>72</sup> The pleasure to be found in the comic is one simple reason comedy has escaped close scrutiny, he proposes, and this is particularly true when a closer examination may well reveal a much darker subtext.<sup>73</sup> Ritchie's nuanced behaviour grants his character a unique absolution for his afflictions, the kind that is not afforded by the gimmick integral to *Stranger Than Fiction* (despite its more obvious resolution). There is no resolution in Anderson's film. The tragic-comic world that Ritchie inhabits, and to which he resigns himself in the end, allows for its own measure of insight, a reflective pause before the work of existing resumes. Like characters in the fictional book from which the narration takes its cues, the story's epilogue extends its absurdly finite yet enjoyable sentiment that there may be nothing terribly serious about any of the terribly serious things that have transpired.

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1991, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, p. 2.



**Ritchie and Margot Tenenbaum in Wes Anderson's, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001).**

Insights provided by Lacanian psychoanalysis illuminate this phenomenon in comic narratives by addressing the absence or illusion of choice that characterises the manner in which comic figures encounter misfortune. Slavoj Žižek, in particular, hypothesises that the space of the comic is precisely this space of inadvertent response, a negotiation between the vulgar intrusion of misfortune, and the upkeep of appearances to the contrary.<sup>74</sup> The objective is not to subject the intruding element to a therapeutic outcome, nor to denigrate the ordinariness of everyday existence. According to Žižek, the self-verification through self-sacrifice and transcendent acceptance promised and delivered by a therapeutic outcome is deeply misleading.<sup>75</sup> And while comedy unveils the angst produced by this symbolic mandate, it necessarily preserves its inexorable origins. This structural “short circuit” can be viewed as alienating, condemning us to perpetual anxiety, he argues, but also as something inherently comical.<sup>76</sup> The interpretation of the comic treatment of death and dying in this thesis, and the point of departure from any mere

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<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 43.

<sup>75</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 191.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 105.

comparison with tragedy, is therefore predicated upon a somewhat tricky series of questions. What do we take seriously in the comic? And if we take some aspect of the comic seriously, do we run the risk of subordinating it to the paradigm of tragic drama, thereby simplifying the structure of incomprehensibility vital to its operation? This question turns upon another complexity: how to conceive of an ethics of comedy, one that adequately takes account of the distinctive way these narratives isolate a protagonist and consequently invoke emotional responses.

Through their inadvertent collision with mayhem and death, comic protagonists on screen bring to light a sense of incommensurability between the causes and effects of comedy. This incommensurability stems from the potential seriousness of the situation and its conversion into apparently facile material. Žižek describes this comic strategy in reference to Chaplin's tramp in *City Lights* (1931) and the accident of mistaken identity that inaugurates the narrative.<sup>77</sup> Comedic performance in this way is inextricably linked to fantasy and the symbolic directive that dictates the network of inter-subjective relations within which we are placed. Chaplin's comic protagonist mistakenly finds himself occupying a position in the (fictional) symbolic network. Like the majority of bizarre contingencies that plague comic characters, this accident simply occurs, and then radically agitates social conventions. The fact that the rich man, which the young blind girl misidentifies in the figure of the tramp, does not exist is beside the point. Rather, Žižek claims, the tramp performs the amusing role of the intercessor between his own idealised figure (the fantasy figure of the rich man in the girl's imagination) and the girl.<sup>78</sup> Psychoanalysis offers a view of comedy as a mode or strategy with pleasurable and playful effects that momentarily suspend the implied boundaries and rules of adulthood,

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<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* pp. 6-7.



re-casting the action within pre-Oedipal scenarios. Comic performances such as Chaplin's are a metonymic sleight of hand: on one level, a glib reaction to dire circumstance, repetitive and disclosed, the domain of the joke; on the other, a displacement of emotion that defers fear in its attempt to isolate the unknown through irony. In the end, Chaplin favours rejection over acceptance, hence the lone image of the Tramp in the final scene.

The question of whether to take a joke seriously can be reformulated as a question of what Simon Critchley, in his discussion of the status of the comic in philosophy and psychoanalysis, determines as the possibility of taking our *response* to the comic seriously. Critchley's tenet is that the impulse to laugh dismantles the assumption that the meaning and value of human life is based upon what we can comprehend from the fact of mortality.<sup>79</sup> Žižek similarly proposes that certain comedies provoke this shift away from materialism without resorting to spiritual transcendence, suggesting something other than a collective, comprehensible finitude as the ultimate horizon of human existence.<sup>80</sup> The absurd contains an expansive potential, however he is keen to note that not all elements of the comic adhere to this procedure. Determining the proper comic context is paramount. In his interrogation of the emergence of Holocaust comedies, Žižek remarks upon the comic's latent "self-cancellation" reflex: that certain point in a film where comedy is a form of sublimation wherein we are served the serious message in the joke itself.<sup>81</sup> Žižek's primary example, however, is a somewhat easy target for this type of criticism: the extreme survivalist logic of the clown in Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997).

Benigni's protagonist is a deliberately worsening caricature. In the case of *Life is*

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<sup>79</sup> Simon Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', *Constellations* 6. 1 (1999): 110.

<sup>80</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust Comedies!' *Lacan.com* (December 15, 1999) <[http://www.lacan.com/Žižek\\_holocaust.htm](http://www.lacan.com/Žižek_holocaust.htm)>

*Beautiful*, the joke of a very real, very imminent death is never truly funny and always, absolutely horrifying.



**Roberto Benigni's clown in *Life is Beautiful* (dir. Roberto Benigni, 1997).**

Of course, the point that Žižek makes is that there is nothing ironic about *Life is Beautiful*. The continual jest and game-playing Benigni's father employs to shield his son from the atrocities of concentration camp life do not function as a stand-in for an irreverent comment or misrepresentation of the world. Such games and performances do not express the inherent absurdity of events and the hopeless, ineffectuality of rallying against the inevitable. The intent is not to trick, or to assert, by way of a spontaneous rupture of inexplicability, the chaos of everyday life. If the comic completes a kind of "self-cancellation" it is because each of its jokes has the effect of heightening the encroaching seriousness of the situation yet also ensuring that the operation offers an enjoyable experience of such a discord. Benigni's clownish performance, however, is explicitly sad,

the film itself, inescapably tragic. As Žižek points out, the fantasmatic protective shield is the benevolent fiction allowing the son to come to terms with harsh reality, but in the end, the father does not shield the son from the camp, he merely provides the symbolic fiction that makes such a reality bearable.<sup>82</sup> This “symbolic fiction” is but one part of the tragic imaginings of the film, and its escalating incompetence – the pitiful effect of each joke – part of the repertoire of traits this tragic protagonist exhibits. The failure of the game is purposefully maintained, prefacing and finishing in a self-sacrificing gesture. It is a dramatic pretense wherein the audience knows that the plot is destined to fulfill itself in the tragic tradition. In other words, the protagonist must die, and in dying, transcend their suffering. It is useful here to outline a primary difference between perversity, an effect mobilised by the symbolic fiction of tragic narratives, and irony, as an articulated function of the comic. Reduced to its basic workings, Žižek argues, perversion can be read in Benigni's “jokes” as a defense against the threat of unintelligible disaster, a defense that purports to thwart the imposition of life's finitude in the guise of a choice: that one is not forced to die.<sup>83</sup> The alternative, however, is not that one may decide to live, but that the individual may heroically submit to death. Conversely, Žižek says, the stuff of comedy is exactly this strange and insistent imperviousness to confrontation, this resourceful, bulletproof character that survives the incursion of catastrophe.<sup>84</sup> The films of interest to this chapter can therefore be deemed comic because they exclusively feature this type of figure: blundering into situations exceeding their control, navigating the contingency of death with cartoonish impunity.

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<sup>82</sup> Žižek, ‘Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust Comedies!’, *Lacan.com* (December 15, 1999) <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižekholocaust.htm>>

<sup>83</sup> Žižek, ‘Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust Comedies!’, *Lacan.com* (December 15, 1999) <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižekholocaust.htm>>

<sup>84</sup> Žižek, ‘Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust Comedies!’, *Lacan.com* (December 15, 1999) <<http://www.lacan.com/Žižekholocaust.htm>>

For misanthropic weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) in Harold Ramis' comedy, *Groundhog Day* (1991), the hitherto innocuous world turns into unimaginable trickery by condemning him to live out the same day (February 2nd), every day, in the small Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney. There is no foreseeable end - outside the larger implications of the film's running time. This is the meta-diegetic joke that sustains the text. Serious philosophical comment is continually upstaged by not only the farce of solving an absurd situation arriving out of virtually nowhere, but the expectation of solution we naturally attach to the film itself. Humour here works concurrently, negotiating both the restraints and possibilities of various subjective positions. Its purpose is neither to authenticate one position (e.g. the triumphant ending), nor to explain the confusion as some sort of narrative quirk or emblem of psychological decay; instead, Phil's narcissistic indifference is more than what Almond conceives of as a means of escape from characterological dilemma.<sup>85</sup> His reading of the film, in particular the first dazed re-enactment of *Groundhog Day* wherein Phil waltzes up to Rita, his winsome producer, and requests a "good hard slap in the face", falls into the trap of assuming that in order for change to begin something must "wake up" in Phil. What this interpretation sidesteps is the fact that something has already changed. In the aftermath of such an unalterable event, when the guarantee of tomorrow is far from verified, one could fairly assume that Phil needs not to wake up. As he muses afterwards: "*Something's going on. I don't know what to do...Can I be serious with you for a minute?*" Rita is doubtful: "*I don't know. Can you?*" His answer is unfailingly sarcastic: "*Yes. I'm being serious. I'm having a problem.*" Another sarcastic pause. "*I may be having a problem.*" Phil's problem is ostensibly the one he has always had: the problem of being Phil in a world that doesn't

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<sup>85</sup> Almond and Almond, *The Therapeutic Narrative*, p. 1388.

understand him, a problem that Groundhog Day heightens. His ridiculous predicament is the predicament of all comic figures that slip on the proverbial banana peel. The accident has already occurred and time has already provided its irrational solution, impervious to its victim. Though the humour communicates the utter transparency of this predicament, it also – in the same gesture – reiterates the unthinking, inescapable isolation it induces. Time marches endlessly on. The perplexity lies in this impetuous, yet suspiciously intentional rupture, in the fact that the little fellow, as Lacan first described, though tripping up and falling in the soup, will nonetheless still survive.<sup>86</sup> For Phil, something has irrevocably changed and yet everything remains the same, especially within his own character. The humour of this situation is precisely this incommensurable state of affairs.



**Groundhog Day begins for Phil Connors (*Groundhog Day*, dir. Harold Ramis, 1991).**

It is fitting, then, that for Phil Connors, Groundhog Day ceases as enigmatically as it begins. At first deeming it an amateurish prank from a second-rate radio station, Connors slowly, bemusedly, discovers it is actually – literally – February the 2nd all over again.

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<sup>86</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, p. 314.

Instead of reacting in anguished panic, he complies with the ridiculous premise, going about the days much like the proverbial Groundhog each winter, “reluctantly yet alertly”. Will there be an early spring or will it be a late winter? Phil dryly pontificates upon this useless conundrum when he asks aloud: “*What if there is no tomorrow? There wasn’t one today!*” And so each morning resumes. Conners oscillates between idly biding time and exerting great energy re-living February 2nd. The actual duration is never revealed and so the central marvel of its mayhem persists. Within the impossible, yet concurrently endless confines of a single day, he masters several instruments and languages, achieving unfeasible acts and ingratiating himself in the lives of the community. The consequence of these actions is the failure of consequence. Time refuses to carry tomorrow backward and triggers a series of passionless suicides. Everyone forgets, except Phil. Life simply – bizarrely – transpires. The absurd limit of existence remains integrated since it is, as Žižek hypothesises, part of the same elusive and universal force that asserts everyday life.<sup>87</sup> This is when the proper comic effect occurs, he argues, at that unexpected moment when we confront the ridicule and nullity of the unveiled mystery, that:

Pathetic sense of encountering, behind the veil, the terrifying Thing, too traumatic for our gaze, the ultimate comical effect occurs when, after removing the mask, we confront exactly the same face as the one on the mask...when, instead of a hidden, terrifying secret, we encounter the same thing behind the veil as in front of it.<sup>88</sup>

This strange encounter with the absurd is not entirely resolved since it does not indicate great change or transformation. Walking hand in hand with love interest, Rita, as the music swells and the credits start, Phil’s response to her suggestion that they settle in Punxsutawney is characteristically down-played: “*We’ll rent to start*”, he quips. Life presumably goes on in much the same way it did previously.

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<sup>87</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 107.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 109.

We laugh *at* Phil, not *with* Phil, and not necessarily because we pity him or because the situation is without implication. Farce converts to irony in *Groundhog Day*. This proper comic effect occurs after laughter. Laughter, as Jacques Derrida writes, highlights the significance of the unknowable.<sup>89</sup> He explains that the response:

Bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never presents itself, because in doing so it would start to work again.<sup>90</sup>

The distinction to be made here, as Critchley points out, is that in the proper comic procedure this laughter is not manic, not the hysterical cackling in the face of the firing squad, but the spontaneous laughter that occurs when expectations aren't met.<sup>91</sup> Though we may desire it, the tragic, unfair finitude of life is not something capable of being reversed or affirmed by laughter. Laughter merely acknowledges its sudden emergence. Phil may act manic, but he is never truly ridiculed or mocked by this behaviour because even in his most dystopian abandon, he is so stubbornly deadpan. He is refused consolation by any rationale of events that are – or in this case, aren't – taking place. Žižek expounds further upon the expansive, immaterialist properties of this comic effect by stating that the truly negative (abstract) force stems from the individual, which is where the comic (after laughter) returns it and where it remains.<sup>97</sup> Each *Groundhog Day*, people act the same, react the same, and perform the same mundane routines unaware of the cosmic reset button that plagues them. Phil repeatedly misrepresents his condition, testing the range of his demeanour, all the while holding some suspicion that maybe – ironically – the crisis is not horrifying and in outgrowing its horrific dimension, has

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<sup>89</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, A. Bass, trans (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 256.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 256.

<sup>91</sup> Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', p. 113.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 107.

become remarkably similar to the nonsensical workings of everyday reality he has always perceived. His contemptuous, world-wearied shtick resurfaces when – tired of striving against the impenetrable will of his exigent crisis – he muses to Rita that he may be a god. “*I’m a god, I’m not the God,*” he is generous enough to clarify, before adding, uncertainly: “*I don’t think...*” Because the predicament he involuntarily finds himself in is unanswerable, invisible to the world around him and himself, Phil is given license to experiment with these renditions of himself. He may die, he may not. It will always, inevitably, be Groundhog Day. And so he orders doughnuts, waffles, downs a pot of coffee then casually lights a cigarette. “*What makes you so special, everybody worries about something,*” Rita accuses. “*That’s exactly what makes me so special,*” Phil replies. “*I don’t even have to floss.*”

Groundhog Day, that anonymous tyrant, begins to resemble the formless creator presence determined to undo Daffy Duck in *Duck Amuck*. The indirectness of the attack, and Connors’ ludicrous efforts to comply with, ignore and address it, also references the nihilism of Samuel Beckett’s theatre of the absurd. The performance objective of Beckett’s theatrical modernism turns upon a central absence in much the same way that Ramis’ film revolves around an arbitrary and transitory phenomenon without countenance, origin or logic. Like Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot* (1953), Connors suffers the ignominious fate of biding time. Alain Robbe-Grillet suggests that the essential uselessness of waiting is felt through the body, partly as a result of its very somatic redolence:

The condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be there. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways of representing reality. The essential thing about a character in a play is that he is on the scene: there.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Samuel Beckett, or “Presence’ in the Theatre’’, *Samuel Beckett: A*



Even in his most somnambulistic moments of depression, Connors is always on the scene, and yet his very repeated presence illustrates an existence overshadowed by the absence of that which questions his very being in time. Jean-Francois Lyotard identifies this as the aim of the "modern" text seeking to represent the presence of the unspeakable by a contrarily enforced, and foregrounded, absence.<sup>99</sup> Phil Connors offers a quintessentially modern representation of the body in literal limbo. In a strategy perhaps more exact than that given to Beckett's characters, Connors' dilemma is that there is no way to conform to the absurd. He exists by virtue of the failure of complying, and the pointless, relentless effort he makes every morning.

Comedy, as Feibleman argues, dramatises two apparently antithetical facets of human subjectivity.<sup>100</sup> Feibleman proposes that in borrowing from these conditions, from our contact with the actual and the unimaginable, the known and unknown, the genre makes more vivid and immediate the fact that contradictions in actuality must prove insupportable by continually insisting upon the limitations of all aspects of experience.<sup>101</sup> Every day is February the 2nd but each day is not strictly identical to the one before. Sameness and differentiation coexist by virtue of some seemingly logical compromise. Some days Phil dies, some days he doesn't. All the while, this willful eternity, this thing-in-itself, remains impenetrable. For this protagonist, perspective is not a matter of choice between survival and death, between self-sacrifice and transcendence, it lies somewhere in between. "*I didn't just survive a wreck*", he states. Subdued, he recounts all the ways in which he has died: "*I have been stabbed, shot, poisoned, frozen, hung, electrocuted, and*

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*Collection of Critical Essays*, Martin Esslin, ed (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 108.

<sup>99</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' *Postmodernism: A Reader*, R. Durand, trans and Patricia Waugh, ed (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 122.

<sup>100</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 421.

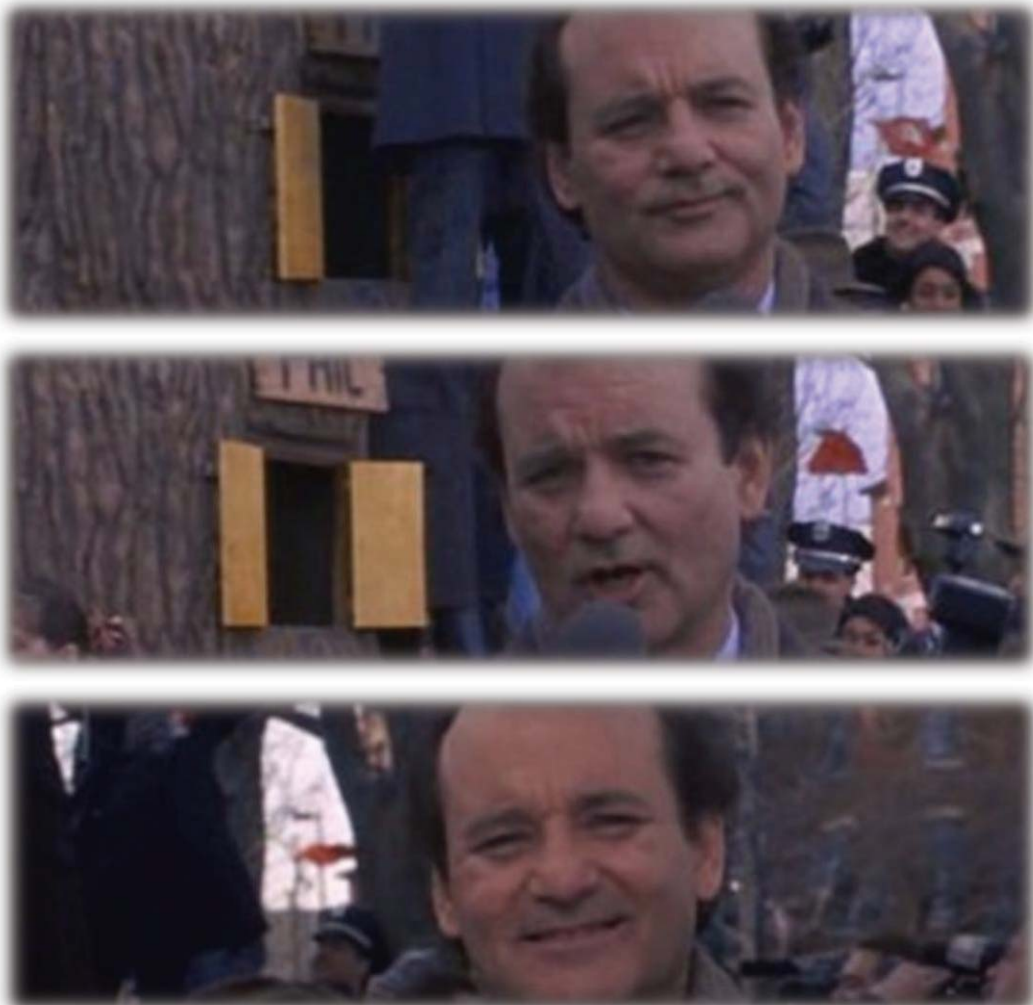
<sup>101</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 421.

*burned...And every morning I wake up without a scratch on me, not a dent in the fender...I am an immortal.*” Rita scoffs at his suggestion. It is meant to be ridiculous, of course, though somehow not an implausible conclusion for Phil to entertain. If the comic has an intrinsic function it is the ability to emphasise the arbitrary foundations of both idealisation and capitulation to what Žižek terms “this confrontation with his lack of being”.<sup>102</sup> The opening and closing scenes of the film attest to this by virtue of their symmetry. We witness Phil performing the TV weather, gesticulating in front of an empty screen, behaving in much the same unaffected way as when re-living Groundhog Day and “performing” various identities within. The bedside clock shuffles from 5:59 to 6:00 and the same song plays in both scenarios. He wakes with the same glib resignation. There is little evidence of an internal metamorphosis, externalised on screen, effecting change. Finding Rita, his producer and love interest finally beside him the morning after Groundhog Day, is as much a mystery as why the day has finally ceased to repeat. In response to one of his nonchalant indulgences in the local cafe, ordering and feasting upon copious amounts of pastries, Rita quotes Sir Walter Scott: “*The wretch, concentered all in self, living, shall forfeit fair renown, and, doubly dying, shall go down to the vile dust, from whence he sprung, unwept, unhonor’d, and unsung.*” “*You think I’m acting this way because I’m egocentric?*” Phil calmly questions. “*I know you’re egocentric,*” she declares. “*It’s your defining characteristic.*” Phil’s question is arguably rhetorical; the poem, not as cruel an indictment as it claims to be in the context of Phil’s impassiveness. Rita reiterates what this protagonist already suspects about the ordinary, ongoing dimensions of both this strange existence and the life that preceded it. Camus writes that the absurd becomes god, in the broadest sense of the word, and the inability to understand

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<sup>102</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 193.

it becomes the existence that illuminates everything.<sup>103</sup>



**The changelessness of the comic protagonist: Connors pre and post Groundhog Day.**

If we do garner a sense of cumulative progression, it is always thwarted by the changelessness of the dying comic protagonist. This changelessness, it is important to note, does not merely mask a “wretched” state. Rita’s innocuous request at the beginning for Phil to “*Try it again without the sarcasm*” is perhaps the film’s running joke. What would Phil be without the very thing that allows him *to be*? If anything underlies Phil’s droll, slapstick efforts to “out-live” the day, it is the ironic echo of his original, un-

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<sup>103</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 31.

bothered persona. What is remarkable about *Groundhog Day* is that humour, as a repetitive joke on the immutable nature of the protagonist, elucidates the poignancy and mystery of Phil's misfortune without ever having to discredit the comic procedure as a psychological symptom. There is little evolution of attitude, instead a recurrence of the same to the point of the ludicrous. And the ludicrous, the incommensurable, contains its own meaningful signature, ensuring its own closure within the bounds of the comic. Connors repeatedly tries to kill himself in his effort to "outsmart" the day, free-falling off buildings and driving a truck off a cliff, but it is precisely because these acts fail that they are able to underscore a different trajectory of emotion, away from pity and fear. Again, it is the automaton-like behaviour of the comic protagonist that evokes irony in Ramis' text. This humorous sentiment is a by-product of Phil's Sisyphean drudgery. Dying and living are interchangeable. Simply surviving is hard work for Phil. His unsuccessful "deaths" thereby enable the superficiality of his existence to be glimpsed, though the fantasy of confrontation and comprehension recede as quickly as they are conjured. Phil wakes again; is repeatedly compelled to cooperate with the senseless demands of this symbolic and literal obligation, where living produces the same ineffective result as dying. Misanthropy is perhaps the only attitude left for Phil to assume, trapped as he is in a situation of impossible unfairness, where there are no rules and seemingly no consequences. As an exaggeration of cynicism or sarcasm, it fulfills the requirements of comic effect as outlined by Feibleman, showing the presence of something where nothing is expected.<sup>104</sup> Whether he takes a toaster to a bath or carves an elaborate ice-sculpture with a chainsaw, the underlying irony is the resounding echo of the disposition he has possessed all along. It is with scorn that Phil wakes each morning. Through the aid of his

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<sup>104</sup> Feibleman, 'The Meaning of Comedy', p. 423.

perpetual disdain, Connors alights on the impervious absurdness of his life – such as it is. The attitude glorifies him.



**Unsuccessful suicides in *Groundhog Day*.**

Is it therefore fair to postulate that the absurd disposition of Connors’ misfortunes are, like the pathetic jokes made by Benigni’s protagonist, the comic’s brand of symbolic fiction? Following this logic, a comic protagonist can hardly be noble since there is little to act heroically about when seemingly nothing is at stake. In the proper comic procedure, because the erroneous misfortune resists integration into a therapeutic narrative, the mystery often oddly persists and coincides with the advent of narrative closure. More often than not, reckless insouciance and hapless sarcasm are misrepresented as a cowardly unwillingness to, in the Heideggerian sense, “be” for death. When not subordinated by comparison to the affirmations enacted by tragic figures, the comic is often dismissed for not nearly being tragic enough. It is this preference for heroic fatalism or authenticity in the majority of psychoanalytical and philosophical readings on comic

narrative that warrants interrogation. In Critchley's estimation, Lacanian psychoanalysis ostensibly nominates the actions of heroism, with its noble capitulation to the encroachment of death, as the means of achieving a purification, or catharsis, of desire in relation to its object.<sup>105</sup> This tragic-heroic thematic is powerfully at work in post-Kantian thinking – and powerfully at work in the types of filmic protagonists generated and revered by the majority of critical philosophical and psychoanalytical discussions. The comic protagonist disdains death and struggles valiantly to avail the burden. The venture assures failure. The failure, however, does not diminish this character, nor does it taint the integrity of their endeavours. Like Sisyphus, the comic creature works arduously at the task of existing under punishing circumstances. The work, or repeated failure to outwit and outrun death, is what defines the dying comic protagonist. The extra-large, exaggerated performance that results embodies the anxiety and vertigo of anticipating death, of anticipating nothingness, a performance that echoes wildly, yet forthrightly, into the silence of the world.

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<sup>105</sup> Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', p. 116.

## CONCLUSION

Death is good – but there is no love.

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1880.

In his essay, ‘Thoughts For the Times on War and Death’, Freud states that “in the realm of fiction we discover the plurality of lives for which we crave. We die in the person of the hero, yet we survive him, and are ready to die again for the next hero.”<sup>106</sup> The plurality of lives that Freud identifies the reader as desiring from the reading experience is simultaneously enhanced and displaced by the cinematic medium. The sensibility of cinema is that of movement, ephemerality, however the communion the viewer seeks from cinematic forms often transfixes attention away from the broader composition of the scene and the momentum of its narrative. Barthes elaborates on this paradox of simultaneous immersion with, and displacement from, the text, arguing that because the position of the reader is outside the work, external to the scene, meanings can be read and retraced as we pass over it, ready to die again for the next protagonist, and in doing so, bringing to bear a singular scrutiny that momentarily articulates the nature of language in all its forms.<sup>107</sup> Film forms are similarly heterogeneous in that its signifiers transmit a subtle, aesthetic intelligence that we encounter on the condition of their inherent transience. Berger ascribes this effect to the phenomenon of expression and reflection that cinema inspires, where what we are being shown has, at one and the same time, something of the focus and intentionality of all art, and the volatility of reality itself.<sup>108</sup> In

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<sup>106</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Thoughts For the Times On War and Death [1915]’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. XIV, p. 291.

<sup>107</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), p. 18.

the context of films of the dying protagonist, this balance of reflection and expression is especially pronounced. The language of its forms transcribes and abstracts a specific subjective reality (that of dying) that is often autonomous of the underlying structure of the text.

Though this thesis passes over and intersects with the visual data of these films in a way that is tangential to film structure and narrative, the endeavor has been to foreground a type of cinematic intelligence that is as much a part of these systems as it is a language in and of itself. In the various ways each director shapes and arranges their forms, a filmic language is conveyed, one that often resembles the pluralities and nuances of the language of literature. Impressions of dying emerge in these films that express a certain poetic rendering of human behavior and emotion in the face of mortality. As this thesis has attempted to show, the dying protagonist is isolated, a condition enforced by the untimely arrival of death-awareness. This isolation references an epistemological absurdity, however, as it has as much to do with surviving alongside death, as succumbing to it. It is the same position. By their very existence on screen, these dying protagonists transcend logic and time by needing to hold death near enough to make meaning of it but far enough away to survive it. The anxiety and attraction of this state of being is relayed in the visual, in the *mise-en-scène*, an object in the frame or a fleeting expression, which has the effect of communicating the uncertainty and ever-present incursion of actual death in the symbolic. For Mulvey, this is the essential character of cinema, where metonymy is irremediably haunted by its original inertia, a tendency made apparent when the film finds its end in a human end, enabling its secret stillness to



emerge in a form specific to the medium.<sup>109</sup> For Berger, it is montage that makes the cinematic spectator a perpetual aesthetic nomad, propelled through space into an unknown elsewhere where every encounter is momentary and where, finally, nothing can be known.<sup>110</sup> All the fragmented images, fantasies, dreams, nightmares and hallucinations that create the impression of the repetition, torpor and absurdity of the dying condition are these emergent forms, drawing the eye to them and in the process, derailing the single-minded momentum of the filmic narrative. The fantasy of this death-bounded existence, wherein the resistance or acceptance of mortality equates to greater understanding of, and participation, in life, is neither extinguished nor lessened by the end of the film but endures, validated by the inevitability it faces.

Despite the displacement that typifies the experience of watching films of the dying other, it is our fascination with the appearance of this character that seemingly substantiates the universality of their death-bounded condition. Through the tangible liminality of this protagonist we encounter the possibility of contending, and thereby comprehending, the unshakeable direction of life toward death. The performance of the dying protagonist in the cinema of Amenabar, Ramis, Friedkin and Van Sant invents and extends this fantasy. Proximity and distance interchange in the performance. The course of life toward death is dramatically experienced, and in this way delayed, yet the visual realm to which these figures belong intimates the ultimately mysterious nature of the experience, and the disappearance it hinges upon. The sense of universality is both acute and short-lived. Fictive death is always the disappearance of another, an irrecoverable displacement. We remain outside the text and the film must end. The inviting yet foreclosed nature of the

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<sup>109</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, p. 79.

<sup>110</sup> Berger, *Keeping A Rendezvous*, p. 15.

cinematic signifier is both reassuring and provoking in this context, making the space it carves out for the viewer like that of the scene in literature, external and intrinsic to our sense-making experience. As Barthes reiterates in his discussion of Tacitus, the symmetry of death's description is an elegant and captivating falsity, a delusion in which the presentation of death seems to construe it symbolically as the purest moment of existence.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, the presentation of death on screen necessarily throws us back onto ourselves, into a nature that appears not only extrinsic, as Merleau-Ponty writes, but discernible at the centre of my subjectivity.<sup>112</sup>

The foreclosed yet necessary nature of our encounter with dying others is a subject Henry James explores in his 1880 masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*. At the centre of the novel is Ralph Touchett, an invalid who bears more than a passing resemblance to the dying protagonists outlined in this thesis, sharing their elusive and melancholy disposition, and providing the site on which the text is able to crystallise a vision of mortality and intersubjectivity. Ralph is the consummate outsider. Ailing cousin and confidante to the novel's enterprising, yet thwarted heroine, Isabel Archer, he is a secondary, though by no means marginal, character. The part he plays in the ensuing drama is arguably the most critical one of all, being both arbiter of Isabel's independence and the unwitting engineer of her imprisonment. The untimely proximity to death assures Ralph's status as an outsider whilst at the same time bestowing upon him the privilege of perspective. From here James keeps him, cloaked in the dignified silence of his consumption, hands in pockets, watching helplessly as the wealth he secretly confers on young Isabel through the estate of his recently deceased father ensnares her in the machinations of a devious

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<sup>111</sup> Barthes, 'Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque', p. 166.

<sup>112</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 403.

suitor, Gilbert Osmond, and his embittered mistress, the charming Madame Merle. When Ralph's condition turns inevitably grave, Isabel finds the courage to seek the truth from him, risking the wrath of Osmond and aristocratic society to be at his deathbed.

Isabel's journey is strenuous, but for all her misfortunes the most tragic and significant end belongs to Ralph, who supplies the novel with its graceful and bittersweet denouement. His deathbed is the scene of Isabel's awakening. Here, the heroine finds an egress from the maze of social pretence. In "the figure and pattern of death"<sup>113</sup> that she encounters in Ralph's prone, emaciated form, she is forced to confront the penalty of her ignorance. Looking upon her belatedly revealed benefactor, Isabel:

...was full of the sense that he was beyond the reach of pain; he seemed already so little of this world. But even if she had not had it she would have still spoken, for nothing mattered now but the knowledge that was not pure anguish – the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together... She wished to say everything; she was afraid he might die before she had done so.<sup>114</sup>

James grants Isabel her wish. Thus rendered, it is her presence and perception that lends meaning to Ralph's death, is what – in the end – transcends the potential meaninglessness of it. As such, the scene has little to do with the pain Ralph might be enduring. Details of any physical degradation are minimal: the usual, surreptitious remarks on the pallor and gauntness of the consumptive body are all that remain to remind us of his fate. Dying is an elegant procedure, its main objective to bestow wisdom upon the character afflicted. Since consumption is Ralph's occupation, he enunciates from the position of someone already extracted from life's contingencies. His words to Isabel are thus of the order of a pre-emptive farewell ("I love you but I love without hope."<sup>115</sup>). Elisabeth Roudinesco

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<sup>113</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1997), p. 528.

<sup>114</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, pp. 530-1.

<sup>115</sup> James, *the Portrait of a Lady*, p. 320.

recalls how Jacques Derrida would similarly take leave of his companions with “words torn from silence and nothingness.”<sup>116</sup> Derrida’s words of farewell speak of our ultimate (symbolic) interchangeability wherein “one person will have to disappear before the other.”<sup>117</sup> Ralph’s genteel passing, catalogued and described as such, occasions Isabel’s unflinching sense of becoming, the transcendence of looking at life in simultaneous communion with the other. As she gazes into the face of that dying other, an “immeasurable space” opens up and for an unnaturally protracted moment, all her sorrows possess her with clarity.<sup>118</sup>

In the sad and heightened duration of Ralph’s passing, Isabel is granted the space in which to bid farewell to her friend. The enchantment of this interim is that it lends the heroine a consoling distance with which to consider herself:

It was a solemn occasion, but it was not a disagreeable one; there was a certain geniality in the appearance of things...If it was sad to think of poor Touchett, it was not too sad, since death, for him, had no violence. He had been dying so long; he was so ready; everything had been so expected and prepared. There were tears in Isabel’s eyes, but they were not tears that blinded. She looked through them at the beauty of the day, the splendour of nature, the sweetness of the old English churchyard, the bowed heads of good friends.<sup>119</sup>

The images that are relayed here do not transpose the reality of the dying other onto the reader. They emphasise the displacement endemic to all cultural signifiers. At the heart of James’ literature, and at the basis of cinematic language on death and dying, is that Baroque evocation of absence, the interval of last words that Barthes finds in Tacitus’ *Annals*. Like James, Tacitus styles and subsequently transforms death into a supreme and symmetrical moment of life, an attempt to put an end to the ambiguity of signs that at the

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<sup>116</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Philosophy In Turbulent Times*, William McCuaig, trans (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 146.

<sup>117</sup> Roudinesco, *Philosophy In Turbulent Times*, p. 147.

<sup>118</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 530.

<sup>119</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, pp. 533-4.

same time calls into question the verisimilitude of the words employed, and the experience they relate. “For perhaps that is what the baroque is,” Barthes muses, “the torment of a finality in profusion”.<sup>120</sup> As an event witnessed by another, Ralph’s death becomes emblematic of the life that perceives it, which is undoubtedly Isabel’s. His presence lingers in much the same way it did before: dimly, retreating with hands in pockets to an empty drawing room, hovering perpetually in the dark corridors of Isabel’s conscience. His disappearance is the specter that haunts the text. This sense of belatedness is the particular quality of James’ prose. Ralph’s passing, and the lack of friendship and love that it entails, is what enables Isabel to catalogue the world around her so vividly, and this way of seeing is what lends shape and continuance to those absent relations. Everything is amplified by the absence of Ralph.

Encountering the dying other on screen, we place ourselves in a similarly sympathetic yet distanced position. We stand on the precipice of meaning and non-existence, much like Isabel encounters in the “pure anguish” prompted by Ralph’s deathly visage. The death of the other comes apart in the imagination. It is a perception of absence that, once rendered, is immediately supplanted by the desire to make meaning from it, to suspend and ultimately, as Barthes points out, wrestle with it.<sup>121</sup> In films of the dying protagonist, another image fills the gap that absence creates. This is the movement of cinematic flocculation and the arresting language of cinematic forms. We do not forget who we are but we lose ourselves in the temporary delusion that we can experience the terrifying immanence of our own death in the dying of this cinematic other. In the guise of such characters, the limitless horizon of subjective death is telescoped into an often poignant,

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<sup>120</sup> Barthes, ‘Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque’, p. 166.

<sup>121</sup> Barthes, ‘Tacitus and the Funerary Baroque’, p. 165.

often attractive, nevertheless fantasised relation to non-existence wherein we are invited to relish in, and wrestle with, the penultimate interval it provides before the film ends, before absence, momentarily, takes over. As Camus writes, the fable of the dying others does not exclusively amuse and blind us.<sup>122</sup> We are strangely bound to the terrestrial face, gestures and attendant images evoked by the dying other because they encapsulate the difficult wisdom and ephemeral passions of our inter-subjective relations, the wish that Isabel expresses to say everything to Ralph before time, ultimately, runs out.

In her homage to Derrida in *Philosophy In Turbulent Times*, Roudinesco remarks upon the structural, ontological, universal law that presides over our inter-subjective relations. The price we pay for friendship, she observes, is grief, that one friend will invariably live to see the other die.<sup>123</sup> Roudinesco, a friend of Derrida's for over twenty years, writes from the perspective of loss, from the one who outlives their friend. This loss constitutes more than the end of the latter's life, she remarks, but the intrusion of a pervasive sense of absence into experience, a terror that only nostalgia and melancholy can allay.<sup>124</sup>

Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, a compilation of the philosopher's essays and eulogies on the death of his contemporaries, and the work with which Roudinesco is primarily concerned, articulates precisely the impossible position of the survivor, or witness, unable to adequately express the loss of the other, that singularity of relation between the deceased and the living. Suffused by grief, Derrida begins almost every passage with a confession as to the insufficiency of what he is about to write. He prefaces his dedication to Louis Althusser with the statement: "I knew in advance that I would be unable to speak

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<sup>122</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 114.

<sup>123</sup> Roudinesco, *Philosophy In Turbulent Times*, p. 143.

<sup>124</sup> Roudinesco, *Philosophy in Turbulent Times*, p. 144

today, unable, as they say, to find the words".<sup>125</sup> Something of the immanence of mortality is foretold in this elegiac sentence, and persists, Derrida believes, in recollection. It is by recalling the departed that we inevitably acknowledge that the arena of presence this constitutes for the deceased person is as much absent as it is self-evident.<sup>126</sup> For Derrida, the work of mourning rushes towards an impossible task, and it begins at the name of the other, not necessarily in death, but at birth.<sup>127</sup> Death, this future absence always looming on the horizon of self-consciousness, thus permits and excludes a relation to this absolute other. It is the necessary condition of imagination.

Derrida locates this contradiction in the relationship between two terms that he borrows from Barthes: the *punctum*, that which signifies the wound or prick of the absolutely particular and unique, and the *studium*, that network of collective cultural meanings through which we bring the habitable world into view. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes applies these terms to his largely phenomenological readings of photography. Within, the *punctum* refers to a partial object, a detail in the photograph that coaxes our attention rather inexplicably from the general arrangement of the picture, the *studium*, which addresses us as cultural subjects. Barthes points out that while the two co-exist there is no intentional connection, no dialectical link, since the *punctum* catches our fascination purely by chance.<sup>128</sup> As such, it manages to momentarily transcend the medium of its expression, initiating a metonymic expansion of the photographic referent to insinuate the existence of something that is latent in the work, yet ultimately resistant to analysis. For Barthes, this is always death. Death is latent in the photograph as the *punctum* of pure

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<sup>125</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work Of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, eds (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 114.

<sup>126</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 45.

<sup>127</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 46.

<sup>128</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 45.

representation, and the source of the form's poignant mingling of immediacy and nostalgia. In describing the photograph of a young Lewis Payne waiting in his cell to be hanged for the attempted assassination of the U.S. Secretary of State, he observes that:

The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: this will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake...What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence...I shudder over a catastrophe that has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.<sup>129</sup>

Derrida speaks of the "catastrophe" of the *punctum* as the force the absent-living (the departed) exert upon the broader fields of our exteriorisations.<sup>130</sup> The same recognition that takes place in our day-to-day lives when we become aware that the other to which we relate to is not the one which can be ultimately integrated into our schema, is amplified in films of the dying protagonist. Via cinematic material that catches our fascination by chance, a plurality of ideas and emotions on mortality are transmitted. In this way, filmic language, like all representation of death and dying, inevitably returns us to ourselves as what is latent in the cinematic scene of death, that inexplicable detail that fixes our attention, remains just that: an ephemeral yet arresting intimation of our own future absence in time and space, a moment lost and a moment foreshadowed.

For these philosophers, mourning cannot account for the catastrophic incursion of the *punctum*. This intrusion of absence in the symbolic is as arresting as it is brief. In this way, the paradoxical, affecting insight the *punctum* provokes can never be adequately allayed since any insight into the singularity of the other is brought into relief by virtue of their immanent disappearance in time and space. Its elusiveness is the impetus for

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<sup>129</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

<sup>130</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 47



representation. In Derrida's estimation, this is because the *punctum* is Time, in other words, "the punctual form and force of all metonymy."<sup>131</sup> He argues:

Remaining as attentive as possible to all the differences, one must be able to speak of a punctum in all signs (and repetition and iterability already structures it), in any discourse, whether literary or not. As long as we do not hold to some naive and "realist" referentialism, it is the relation to some unique and irreplaceable referent that interests us and animates our most sound and studied readings.<sup>132</sup>

It follows that the work of this thesis has been to identify as carefully as possible from the data of this kind of cinema the metonymic displacement that this future absence entails. When stills are extracted from the sequential momentum of the film, the decidedly indeterminate presence of the dying protagonist emerges as this displacement, the *punctum*, or partial object, given to a future absence. Extinguished in, yet intensified by time, these cinematic forms proceed from the ruination of an anterior loss: of the image that it displaces in the signifying chain. The discontinuous, imperceptible instances in each film when death is made to feel imminent and immanent are evoked by these transient images, as they work to puncture the metonymic membrane separating representation from affect. In this sense, the dying on screen we wait to witness is always a deferment of absence that seeks to engender and transcend the relation between materiality and meaning. Whether a satisfactory conclusion is reached or not, we reckon with our position as spectators, which as a matter of course aligns with the disconsolate position of survivors and grievers in the foreclosed encounter with the dying other.

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<sup>131</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 60

<sup>132</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 61.



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