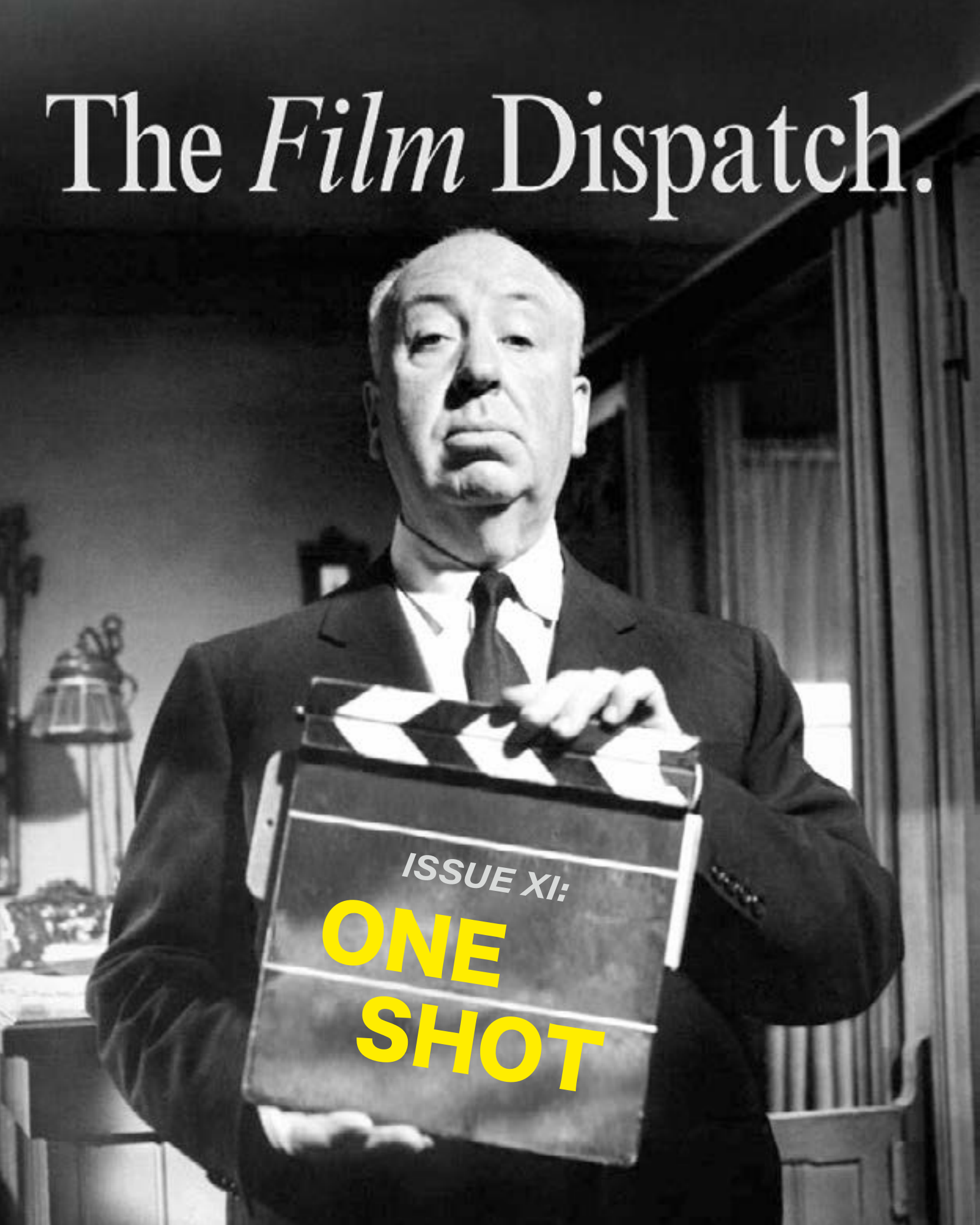
The *Film* Dispatch.



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FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to Issue XI of The Film Dispatch.

Prompted by Luke Robinson and Melanie Robson's recently published *One Shot Hitchcock: A Contemporary Approach to the Screen* (2024), this issue uses the idea of 'one shot' as a springboard to consider everything from some of our favourite frames in cinema to short sequences that have stuck with us.

Robinson and Robson note that what is so striking about Hitchcock's shots are that they are "layered and meaningful in several regards beyond [their] striking aesthetics" (2024, p.1). The articles in this issue do not focus solely on Hitchcock, but rather encapsulate reflections on musicals, horror, international cinema and more. What unites them all is a recognition of Robinson and Robson's articulation of the power of a single shot:

"Encapsulated within this small, cinematic unit is a code that unlocks a series of revelations about, broadly, cinema as an artistic practice and a theoretical study, and specifically the filmmaker's choices" (2024, p.2).

Shots can thus act as distillations of a film's larger thematic concerns, or they can be stand alone moments that possess meaning in isolation. No matter how a shot is defined however, Robinson and Robson seem to suggest, is their ability to prompt revelation, to speak to the spectator.

Thank you to all of our contributors and for all of the team who worked on creating this issue of *The Film Dispatch*. We hope you enjoy reading the articles as much as we have!

Freya Buckley & Almaz Cavanagh

A note on this issue:

We want to flag that some of the articles in this issue engage with themes/include images that may be distressing to some readers and thus advise readers to check the contents warnings available in the contents.

Note that the views expressed by our contributors are their own and do not reflect the views or endorsements of the University.

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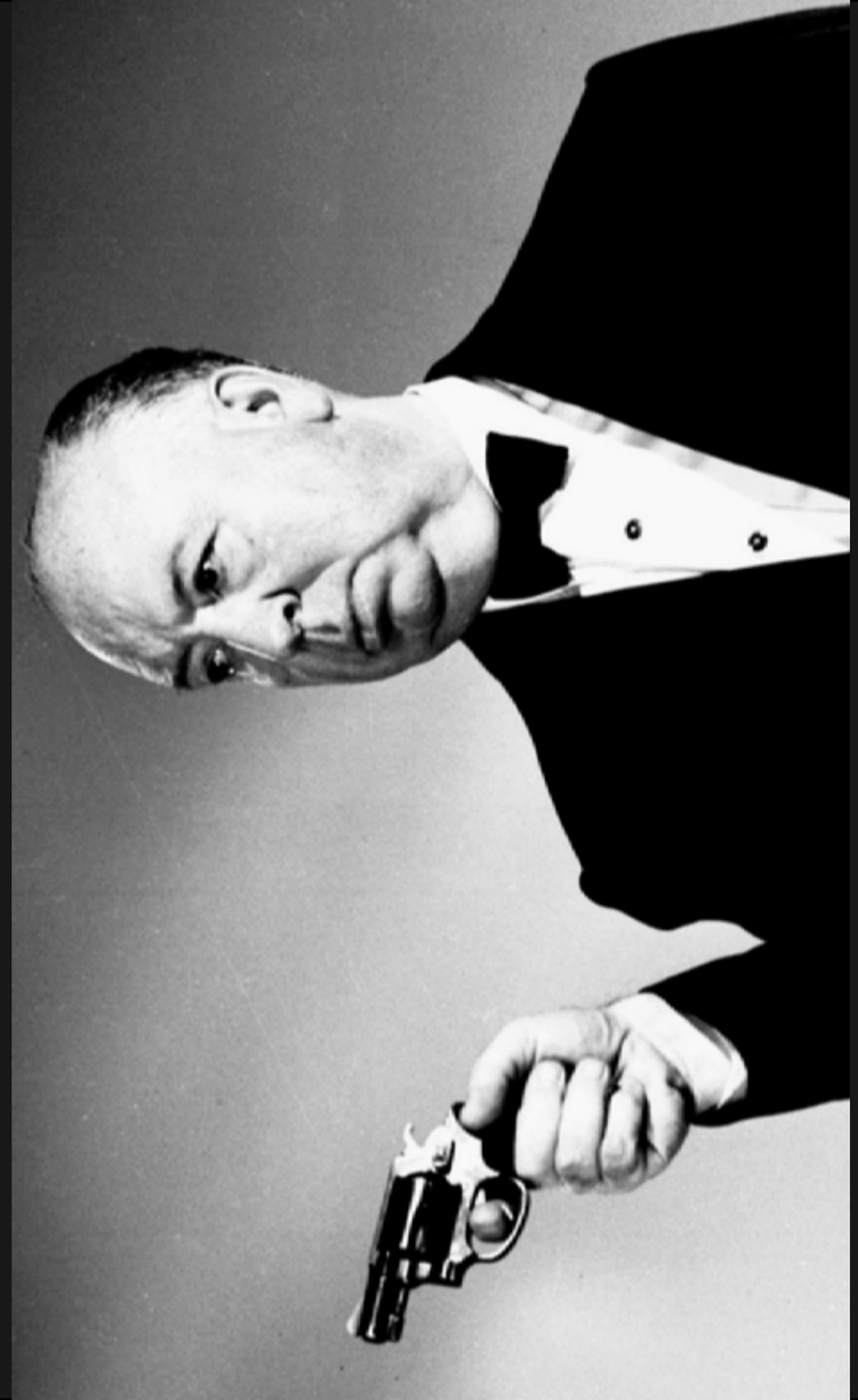

THE POV SHOT

Widely considered as a “master of suspense” (Robert E. Kapsis, 1989: 20), Alfred Hitchcock has employed a rich variety of filmic techniques that have immersed audiences in his narratives. In his *Rear Window* (1954), a leg-injured photographer, Jeff (James Stewart), becomes a voyeur while recuperating in his apartment, ultimately leading him to suspect a murder. Through point-of-view (POV) shots, audiences share Jeff’s perspective as he pieces the mystery together. As established in the opening scene, Hitchcock predominantly cuts between shots from Jeff’s perspective of apartments opposite him and shots of his reactions. About thirty minutes into the film, Hitchcock’s camera unevenly tracks the opposite apartment buildings during the night. The unsteady and imperfect movement mimics human eyes exploring their surroundings. Then, sequential visual and aural cues occur: a car horn blurts out, the camera darts upwards to a darkened balcony and halts abruptly as a woman’s piercing scream is heard, followed by breaking glass. The filmmaker immediately cuts to a curious Jeff, looking up towards the inciting incident. The darkness of the apartment blocks conveys a sense of danger whilst also demonstrating Hitchcock’s suspense technique of intentionally keeping audiences in the dark. By refusing to display the murder, Hitchcock forces audiences to rely on Jeff’s limited perspective. Suspense is therefore created through POV shots that emphasise Jeff’s unawareness of events and restricted access.

La La Land: The potential for stardom in 'Another Day of Sun'

By Sarah Percival

Navigating rush hour in Los Angeles in the baking heat is not a situation many of us would like to find ourselves in. The beeping of the cars, claustrophobic congestion and the overall disgruntled manner of the highway makes us want to reverse far away, but director Damien Chazelle has other ideas. In the opening sequence of *La La Land* (2016) this arid landscape is exactly where we, the viewers, are placed. Our first invitation into the "technicolour world made out of music and machine", that later envelopes the bittersweet narrative of Seb and Mia (actors Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone respectively). Moving them aside, it is this opening fantastical musical sequence I wish to analyse through the use of one shot, the illusion of tracking one camera lens through the scope of a spontaneous mid-day dance escapade.

The premise of the scene is simple. The film opens with the noise of the stalled road before the opening score, 'Another Day of Sun', warms the ears of the viewer as the eyes are suddenly bombarded with the primary-coloured clothing of a synchronised elaborate up-beat dance branching across the highway. The faded and worn colours of LA are masked by the sheer energy and "fun-loving atmosphere" we are presented with (Spillane, 2020, p. 196). Announcing broadly that we have now entered a fusion between reality and musical-typical optimism, we see and hear the cacophony of people stuck in traffic, shrouded by the whirs of car exhausts, being unified by a love of dance and song. This initial overwhelming joy exists before the narrative; a simple excitement of the inhabitants that they have the opportunity to reach their goals in the city of stars.

The viewer follows this position directly. The fixed lens does not give scope to a wider picture other than what we see directly in front of us – the leaping over cars in swishing skirts. We track the dance from one perspective, with people entering and leaving the frame as if we are central to the sequence and not a third party on-looker. There is no chance for you not to have a sense of their enjoyment. After all, this might be your shot at fame too. Delusion doesn't have a name when that is your daily commute.

This is simply what Chazelle wants us to perceive as the ordinary. From the nature of it being the opening score to a musical to the blunt reality that this is the world of dreams created for us, we do not question the plausibility of the scene. If the landscape had truly been sterile, devoid of energy, then perhaps we might wonder why this spontaneous expelling of energy erupted, but it is Los Angeles, the 'City of Angeles'. It utilises our implicit knowledge of the creative atmosphere of the location, our prior perception constructing the realism alongside the car horns, to make us believe this situation is plausible. We do not get a chance to consider the place beyond this because of how quickly we are to relate to the framing, relate to the scenario, and although based on the audience's stereotypes, we still believe this world functions in this natural manner.

Another Day of Sun is a masterpiece in welcoming the viewer to the fantasy land of LA, optimistic and glowing. Initiating the viewer's experience with the sheer joy of the musical, it is no wonder that the luminous visuals and engulfing nature of the camera won this film the Academy Award for Best Cinematography in 2017. Regardless of the subsequent narrative, this primary shot encapsulates all that La La Land wants us to believe about the excitement of life.

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Motherhood, Family, and the Symbolism of the Sagrada Familia in *All About My Mother*

By Georgia Rentoul

Pedro Almodóvar's melodrama *All About My Mother* (1999) is one of the auteur's most celebrated films, winning awards in both his native country Spain and internationally, including best foreign language film at the Oscars (IMDb, n.d.). The film follows Manuela (Cecilia Roth), a nurse who returns to Barcelona after the sudden death of her teenage son Esteban (Eloy Azorin), to not only find his father, but to become an unconventional mother to her new and old friends like Agrado (Antonia San Juan), Huma (Marisa Paredes) and Rosa (Penélope Cruz). The theme of family plays a vital role in the film, as Manuela seeks to discover what family means to her. This theme is shown to the viewer in "the most memorable and symmetric shots of the movie: the reflection of the Sagrada Familia on the window of the taxi that rides Manuela" (Rubén Romero Santos & Ana Mejón, 2020, p. 53). This article will explore how this iconic shot is framed, the meaning of Barcelona as the film's setting, how it symbolises not only the theme of family, but also motherhood. This analysis will reveal how important this shot is in foreshadowing and reinforcing the central themes of family and unconventional motherhood.

The shot takes place during Manuela's arrival to Barcelona. After her train, she gets into a taxi which is seen driving through the city streets. There are both drone shots showing the vast metropolis and tracking shots, following the taxi on its journey. There is a static shot from left to right, showing the taxi's perspective as it drives by the front of the building (Fig. 1). It then cuts to the taxi window which displays a slightly distorted reflection of the Sagrada Familia, alluding to Manuela's fragmented emotional state. The window rolls down and we see her gaze out the taxi (Fig. 2), before it speeds up and drives off. Significantly lingering on Barcelona's iconography, Almodóvar emphasises that the Sagrada Familia is not just another tourist attraction used to set the scene, but that it also holds great meaning to the protagonist.

Figure 1: Low angle shot of the Sagrada Familia.

Figure 2: Medium close-up of Manuela gazing at the building.

Captured in the building's name, La Sagrada Familia, or The Holy Family in English, Manuela's return to Barcelona clearly references family. Whilst the Roman Catholic basilica is famous for its beauty, the fact that it remains unfinished even after 143 years adds to its notoriety. The completion year, with the stairway and main entrance included, is said to be 2034 (Burgen, 2024). Much like the Sagrada Familia, Manuela's family is unfinished and incomplete. Her son has suddenly died at a young age and his father left many years prior and has since transitioned to a woman. In an article discussing maternal frustration in the film, Viki Zavales Eggert states "Almodóvar shows us this landmark to emphasise the importance of family throughout the film and to contrast the traditional family with the unconventional family of choice that Manuela helps forge" (Eggert, 2014, p. 389). The Sagrada Familia is a beautiful feat of architecture that encapsulates a traditional, religious representation of family aided by its status as a cathedral, which greatly juxtaposes the portrayals of family and motherhood shown in the film.

Unconventional motherhood is developed through Manuela's encounters with multiple people. Nina (Candela Peña) is the only character who has some relation to conventional motherhood, given she plays Stella in Tennessee Willaiam's *A Streetcar Named Desire* who is "married and back in her hometown" (Eggert, 2014, p. 389). Where conventional motherhood is solely displayed in a fictional format, this way of motherhood is as a result portrayed as unrealistic and unattainable. Instead, Manuela adopts a less traditional mothering role, reconnecting and looking after Agrado, a transgender prostitute, who the audience meets directly after the iconic shot. Manuela also becomes a main caregiver for Sister Rosa, whose HIV unfortunately leads to her death after giving birth. The conclusion of the film sees Manuela return to Madrid, raising Rosa's son herself. The unconventional status of her role as a mother is clear through this adoption of Rosa's child. The two women only first meet on Manuela's return to Barcelona, but thanks to her clear strong maternal instinct, she not only cares for a nun she does not know too well, but also her son whom she has no blood relation to. In *All About My Mother*, Almodóvar rejects the simple notion that mothering is linked with being a wom-

an and birthing children. Instead, to be a mother is to raise, nurture and love a child, no matter the relation.

Finally, the significance of Barcelona as a setting is imperative in developing the theme of unconventional motherhood, therefore emphasising the merit of the Sagrada Familia shot. Manuela is from Barcelona but moved to Madrid to start her family with Esteban. For Victoria Rivera-Cordero, the film presents "a more globalized Spain" by "changing the stereotypical Spanish mother into a Latin American woman (Cecilia Roth is Argentinian) and by moving the action to Barcelona" (2012, p. 321). The city of Barcelona is said to be "a cosmopolitan and multicultural location" while Madrid is associated with "alleged traditional provincialism" (Romero Santos & Mejón, 2020, p. 53). These comments suggest that Manuela's development of unconventional motherhood would not be possible in her previous home of Madrid, and that Barcelona allows her to fully embrace non-traditional roles and form bonds with more unconventional people. She meets prostitutes, drug addicts and queer people while being a Latina woman in a Catalan city. The presence of the traditional, religious Sagrada Familia in such a multicultural city reflects the idea of taking something deeply ancestral, like motherhood, and placing it in a space of limitless possibilities — one that invites diverse interpretations.

By examining these points, the shot of Manuela driving past the Sagrada Familia is evidently deeply symbolic and introduces the audience to the themes of family and motherhood. This article has explored the shot's framing, as it purposefully lingers on the building and highlights Manuela's intrigue and emotional state at the time. Like the unfinished Sagrada Familia, Manuela's family remains incomplete, and her journey throughout the film reflects her ongoing search for connection. Manuela becomes an unconventional mother to the women she supports and to Rosa's baby after her death. The traditional, religious building in a vibrant, multicultural city symbolises this. With this iconic shot, Almodóvar comments on the fluidity of motherhood, and how this traditional role can be undertaken in unexpected yet meaningful ways.

"The film presents a more globalised Spain"

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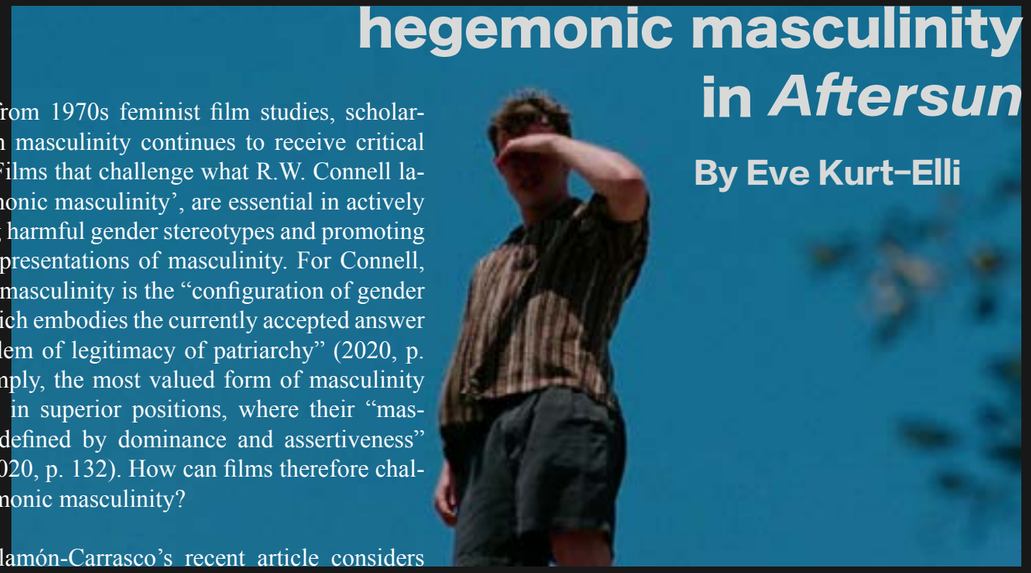
“I can’t see myself at 40, to be honest” : How haptic visuals destabilise hegemonic masculinity in *Aftersun*



By Eve Kurt-Elli

Emerging from 1970s feminist film studies, scholarship of film masculinity continues to receive critical treatment. Films that challenge what R.W. Connell labels ‘hegemonic masculinity’, are essential in actively dismantling harmful gender stereotypes and promoting healthier representations of masculinity. For Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy” (2020, p. 77). Put simply, the most valued form of masculinity places men in superior positions, where their “masculinity is defined by dominance and assertiveness” (Connell, 2020, p. 132). How can films therefore challenge hegemonic masculinity?

Silvia Guillamón-Carrasco’s recent article considers how women’s cinema, in a contemporary Spanish context, produces “new explorations of the construction of one’s gaze that redefine our relationship with the image” (2020, p. 139). In other words, unique filmic approaches have the capability to engage with gender constructions. With regards to female subjects, Guillamón-Carrasco argues that haptic visuality “implies breaking away from the spectatorial subject of classical cinema” and therefore has the power to interrogate “the hegemonic models for representing gender” (2020, p. 139). Haptic visuality provokes a multisensory experience, where extreme proximity to objects and surfaces permits the human eye to discern their materiality. Laura U. Marks’s theory of haptic visuality, which “functions like the sense of touch” (2000, p. 22), places emphasis on lived bodies and their experiences, resulting in a spectatorial engagement with new cinematic methods of representation. Charlotte Wells’ debut feature, *Aftersun* (2022), is exemplary in engaging with haptic visuals. Uniquely, Wells considers how memory functions; a thirty-one year-old Sophie (Frankie Corio) watches MiniDV camera footage of her final holiday to a Turkish resort with her father, Calum (Paul Mescal) through a fragmented amalgamation of home videos, partial memories, and constructed illusions of her father. Whilst the film concentrates on Sophie’s perspective, *Aftersun* is equally a meditation on the immense impact of young fatherhood. Calum’s undiagnosed struggles are subtly fabricated through tender aesthetics.

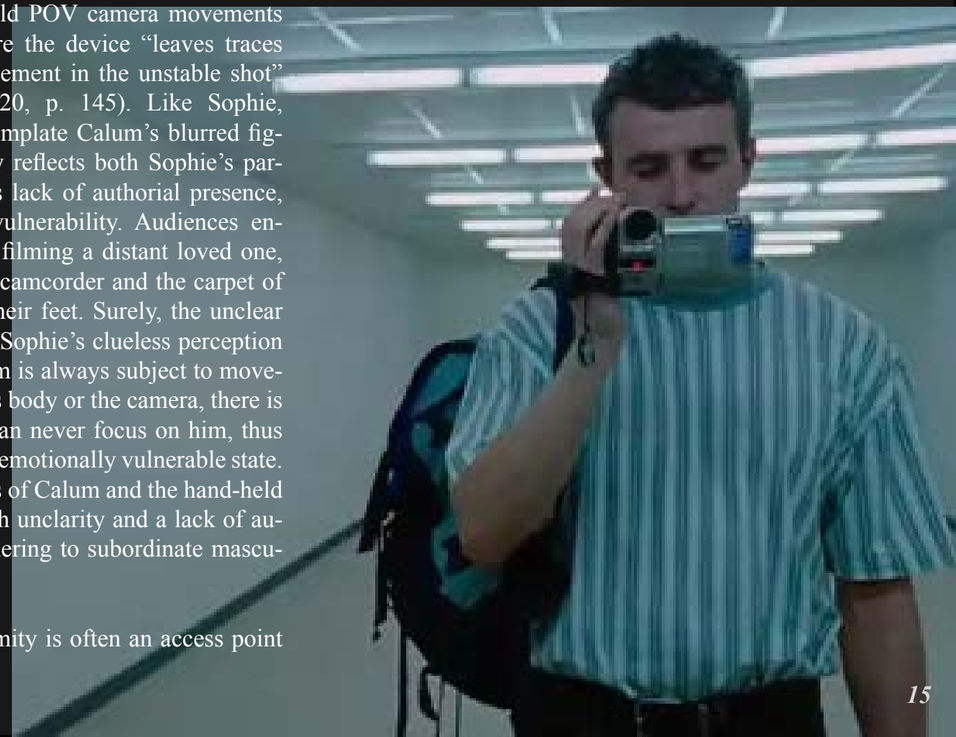
In applying Connell’s relational approach to masculinity, a cinematic text might challenge hegemonic masculinity through a fictional character’s subordinate masculinity. Most exemplified through the homosexual man, Connell associates subordinate masculinity with the “symbolic blurring of femininity” (2020, p. 79). For the scholar, subordinate masculinity is synonymous with facets of femininity. Connell’s comment signifies that gender is a societal, cultural and historical construct, to which Judith Butler concurs. Butler calls into question masculinity and femininity, emphasising that “an identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988, p. 519). Here, the scholar asserts that a male body can perform femininity as gender is an active category created through repeated behaviours. A subordinated masculinity may present itself in emotional vulnerability, challenging emotional suppression linked with hegemonic masculinity. Opening with Sophie’s hand-held Mini DV video footage of her father, Wells illustrates how Calum’s bodily presence, or lack thereof, epitomises a subordinate masculinity. His face, inconspicuously framed, showcases his emotional vulnerability. In other words, the haptic visuals, produced through hand-held footage and unclear close-ups, challenges hegemonic masculinity in Wells’s continuous opening shot of the film.

After the credits are accompanied by the sounds of camcorder mechanics, Wells further reinforces a partial access to memories through camera movement. Audiences are first shown a fuzzy white image in extreme proximity with an off-centered black line that appears alongside a child’s vocal exclamation. In a POV shot, the camera rapidly moves down and around, picking up on subtle indistinct lines of colour, to eventually find a pair of moving legs. As Sophie shakingly moves the camera up to frame her father’s mobile, dancing body, she fails to produce a clear image of him. The close unidentifiable images in the film’s opening, subverts the expectation of strong on-screen male presences.

At the core of haptic visuality, obstructed visuals “invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen [...] before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding” (Marks, 2000, p. 162-163). Whilst Calum’s figure eventually materialises, his “embarrassing” dancing, as Sophie states, results in Sophie’s inability to follow his improvised moves, producing restless camera movements. The hand-held POV camera movements immerse audiences, where the device “leaves traces of [Sophie’s] bodily movement in the unstable shot” (Guillamón-Carrasco, 2020, p. 145). Like Sophie, audiences therefore contemplate Calum’s blurred figure. The shot’s instability reflects both Sophie’s partial memory and Calum’s lack of authorial presence, thus foregrounding his vulnerability. Audiences engage with the process of filming a distant loved one, imagining the feel of the camcorder and the carpet of the hotel room beneath their feet. Surely, the unclear image of Calum displays Sophie’s clueless perception of her father. Given Calum is always subject to movement, whether through his body or the camera, there is a sense that the camera can never focus on him, thus reflecting his isolated and emotionally vulnerable state. Close and fast movements of Calum and the hand-held camera represent him with unclarity and a lack of authorial presence, thus adhering to subordinate masculinity.

Furthermore, close proximity is often an access point to a character’s interiority. In the opening sequence, Wells instead employs close-ups, a key device “express[ing] sensoriality” (Guillamón-Carrasco, 2020, p. 141), to display Calum as a vulnerable figure, inaccessible to both Sophie and audiences. In discussing close-ups in narrative films, Carl Plantinga relates the human face with understanding in fictional spaces and subsequently argues that, within Hollywood films, “the close-up of the human face, then, is a [...] means of expressing a character’s mental states” (2015, p. 296). Consequently, close-ups traditionally make spectacles of the face through tight framing. Much like Calum’s swift movements, a freeze frame draws attention to his rejection of a traditional close-up, resulting in an unreadable face (Fig. 1).

Sophie cheekily turns the camera on herself to joke that her dad is turning “one-hundred and thirty-one in two days”, and innocently asks, “when you were eleven, what did you think you would be doing now?” With difficulty, Sophie turns the camera back to Calum on the room’s balcony with a dutch tilt and Calum slightly tilts his head, with his hands on his hips. Both camera angles and performance contribute to a sense of uneasiness. As Sophie zooms into his face, with the sound echoing the material process of pressing the camera’s buttons to perform actions, Calum is prompted to



actively avoid the camera. Here, Wells employs a freeze frame of Calum moving to off-centered framing, behind a curtain.

For Guillamón-Carrasco, close-ups "bring the characters' subjectivity and corporeity nearer" (2020, p. 145). The freeze frame accentuates Calum's unstable figure. He hides behind a transparent curtain, with his head tilted down, avoiding central framing. He physically and verbally avoids Sophie's simple question. Birthdays and age questions can trigger feelings of self-reflection and loneliness for struggling individuals. Moreover, low-key contrast lighting, occurring as a result of the camcorder's poor quality, shows Calum as a dark silhouette. In referencing videos' tactile nature, Marks argues that "while film approximates the degree of detail of human vision, video provides much less detail" (2000, p. 175-176). Relating to nostalgic home videos of the '90s, the paused camcorder movement creates a blurred image, where the white background blends into the figure's blurred edges. Connecting to the background highlights the various textures of the image. The transparent curtain brings about a soft texture, Calum's blurred silhouette presents an unstable mystery. The two figures are linked through tilted positioning, where the frame's centre reveals adult Sophie's TV's reflective surface. Calum's inability to come into focus in close-ups further stresses his emotional sensitivity. The rejection of a traditional filmic close-up therefore results in an attention to the textual qualities of the image, thus engaging with memories through multi-sensorial practices. For Connell, in identifying hegemonic male bodies, "to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence" (2020, p. 57). Connell therefore concurs that masculinity connotes authority. Throughout the film, Calum avoids a physical presence in that he is "absent even when he's physically there" (McGill, 2023). Wells challenges hegemonic masculinity through unsuccessful close-ups, where Calum's rejection of dominating spaces emphasises his emotional isolation, an identified aspect of subordinate masculinity for Connell.

Ultimately, haptic visuals are significant in destabilising hegemonic gender frameworks, like masculinity. In *Aftersun*, haptic visuality plays a role in framing Calum as an emotionally vulnerable father, linking him with a subordinate masculinity. Consequently, Calum challenges the emotional suppression most identified in hegemonic masculine figures. Where Connell characterises hegemonic masculinity with dominating and tough exteriors, Calum's mental struggles prevent him from embodying such projections.

Figure 1: A freeze frame of Calum.

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Figure 1: Simon's body in the chicken coop.

Redefining the 'ripped' male body

By Freya Buckley

Ari Aster's 2019 folk-horror *Midsommar* follows a group of American university students, as they visit the rural Hårga community in the Hälsingland region of Sweden, invited by their friend Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) to attend his community's 'midsummer' celebrations, which soon turn sinister.

The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, 1939) has some of the most famous shots in cinema; Dorothy's glittering red slippers clicking together, the yellow brick road stretching towards the Emerald city, Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Lion and the Tinman – arms interlocked. However that is not the film I am interested in right now; rather I want to consider a shot from Ari Aster's 2019 folk-horror *Midsommar*. I begin with a nod to the 1939 classic as Aster himself has highlighted it as a reference point for his own film, calling *Midsommar* "the *Wizard of Oz* for perverts" (Handler, 2019). Aster's description encapsulates the film's uneasy contrast between the Swedish setting, the land in perpetual sunlight, the highly stylised production design and the violence and horror of its genre. The spectacle alongside the grotesque; the spectacle of the grotesque. Spectacle is at the core of my chosen shot, specifically the spectacle of masculinity.

While notions of the male body as spectacle have typically focused on the muscular, 'ripped' body of the action hero, the spectacularly grotesque body horror and forced performativity enacted in *Midsommar* reconfigures how we might understand what it means for a 'ripped' body to be spectacular. For Billy Fellows, the film's use of body horror is gratuitous. He finds that rather than providing any kind of "commentary", it is "simply used (…) to show how messed up this Swedish community is" (Fellows, 2024). However, I argue that the film's use of body horror constitutes its own version of narrative "freeze", that Neale locates in the combat scenes from action films. Moreover, this suspension of the narrative in favour of spectacle through the inclusion of body horror is in itself a commentary that the film is making. I focus on one such moment of narrative 'freeze', one shot: Simon's (Archie Madekwe) body in the chicken coop.

First some theoretical background. The 'spectacular' bodies of men on screen have often been located in the action genre. Steve Neale applies Laura Mulvey's work on women as spectacle to the depiction of men on screen. Mulvey argues in her seminal article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), that women

"*Midsommar* reconfigures how we might understand a 'ripped' body to be spectacular"

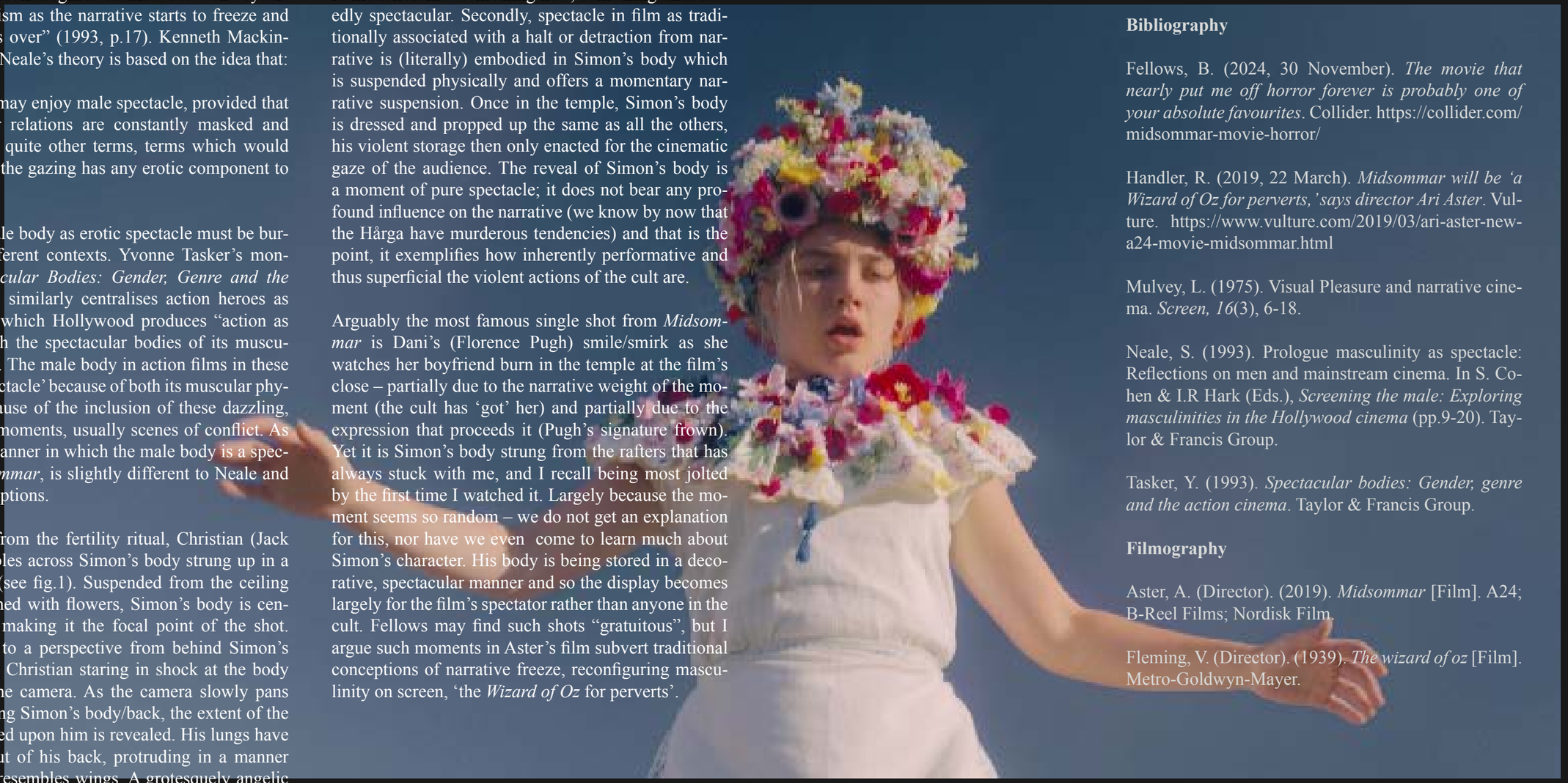
are traditionally cast in an "exhibitionist role", whereby they can be said to "connote to be looked-at-ness"; they are an "indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film" (p.11). Primarily, Neale suggests that action films, particularly scenes of combat, can be seen to present men as spectacle. In these moments, he suggests that "looks begin to oscillate between voyeurism and fetishism as the narrative starts to freeze and spectacle takes over" (1993, p.17). Kenneth Mackinnon notes that Neale's theory is based on the idea that:

The spectator may enjoy male spectacle, provided that 'true' specular relations are constantly masked and rationalised in quite other terms, terms which would (…) deny that the gazing has any erotic component to it (1999, p.14).

That is, the male body as erotic spectacle must be buried within different contexts. Yvonne Tasker's monograph *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action* (1993), similarly centralises action heroes as the means by which Hollywood produces "action as display through the spectacular bodies of its muscular stars" (p.2). The male body in action films in these works is 'a spectacle' because of both its muscular physique and because of the inclusion of these dazzling, non-narrative moments, usually scenes of conflict. As a horror, the manner in which the male body is a spectacle in *Midsommar*, is slightly different to Neale and Tasker's conceptions.

After fleeing from the fertility ritual, Christian (Jack Reynor) stumbles across Simon's body strung up in a chicken coop (see fig.1). Suspended from the ceiling by ropes adorned with flowers, Simon's body is centrally framed, making it the focal point of the shot. The shot cuts to a perspective from behind Simon's body, showing Christian staring in shock at the body and towards the camera. As the camera slowly pans backwards along Simon's body/back, the extent of the violence enacted upon him is revealed. His lungs have been pulled out of his back, protruding in a manner which almost resembles wings. A grotesquely angelic figure, Simon's body is visually spectacular. Christian moves closer to the body, the camera turning to adopt his point of view as he stands under the body peering up at Simon's face. Perhaps even more haunting than his body itself are the flowers affixed to his eye sockets, a whimsical decoration at odds with the gore. These flowers are also the same yellow flowers that formed a walkway into the Hårga commune, Aster's homage to the yellow brick road. The male body is a spectacle here on several levels. Firstly, Simon's body has been aesthetically re-arranged: this is not the 'ripped' torso of the action hero, but a body actually ripped open and re-modelled into something new, something undoubtedly spectacular. Secondly, spectacle in film as traditionally associated with a halt or detraction from narrative is (literally) embodied in Simon's body which is suspended physically and offers a momentary narrative suspension. Once in the temple, Simon's body is dressed and propped up the same as all the others, his violent storage then only enacted for the cinematic gaze of the audience. The reveal of Simon's body is a moment of pure spectacle; it does not bear any profound influence on the narrative (we know by now that the Hårga have murderous tendencies) and that is the point, it exemplifies how inherently performative and thus superficial the violent actions of the cult are.

Arguably the most famous single shot from *Midsommar* is Dani's (Florence Pugh) smile/smirk as she watches her boyfriend burn in the temple at the film's close – partially due to the narrative weight of the moment (the cult has 'got' her) and partially due to the expression that proceeds it (Pugh's signature frown). Yet it is Simon's body strung from the rafters that has always stuck with me, and I recall being most jolted by the first time I watched it. Largely because the moment seems so random – we do not get an explanation for this, nor have we even come to learn much about Simon's character. His body is being stored in a decorative, spectacular manner and so the display becomes largely for the film's spectator rather than anyone in the cult. Fellows may find such shots "gratuitous", but I argue such moments in Aster's film subvert traditional conceptions of narrative freeze, reconfiguring masculinity on screen, 'the *Wizard of Oz* for perverts'.



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Marrying Film Noir and the Gothic in *Crimson Peak*

By Almaz Cavanagh

Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier coined the term ‘film noir’ in 1946 when analysing the American cinema that made its way over to European screens after the war. For Paul Schrader, “Film noir is not a genre” but defined by “the more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (Schrader, 2012[1972], p. 266). This “mood” has always been a contentious thing to demarcate, but for Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, “The vocation of film noir has always been to create a specific sense of malaise” (Borde and Chaumeton, 2002 [1955], p. 13). Broadly, the film noir style offers a feeling of unease and fatalism.

Later, Ellen Moers coined the term “Female Gothic” in her book *Literary Women* (1963), to describe a mode of gothic fiction created by women, for women. Xavier Reyes describes how, “the Gothic can be understood as a specific, yet simultaneously pliable, aesthetic connected to given tropes: darkness, doubling, monstrosity, and madness are only some of the most prevalent” (Reyes, 2022, p. 83). The Gothic has been so well established, but its malleable nature means the style can be applied to modern stories beyond the traditional Gothic canon.

Crimson Peak, a Neo-Gothic directed by Guillermo del Toro, marries and merges the two stylistic forms, with a narrative focused on the dark sides of human nature. The film centres Edith (Mia Wasikowska), who after marrying Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston) following the death of her father, moves to the remote Allerdale Hall and discovers Thomas and his sister Lucille (Jessica Chastain) plan to kill her for her family’s wealth. Jay McRoy describes Noir and the Gothic as “strange cousins” that share a “family resemblance” (McRoy, 2022, p. 38). They detail how, “Since its emergence, film noir has coexisted with its partial progenitor, the Gothic, like a pair of ambiguously incestuous relations in a dark family melodrama” (McRoy, 2022, p. 38). For McRoy, film noir would be inconceivable without the stylistic influence of the Gothic aesthetic, which del Toro uses to present the Sharpe siblings, whose incestuous relationship and murderous intentions threaten the life of Gothic heroine Edith.

Helen Hanson studies gendered relationships within the two stylistic modes of Noir and the Gothic. She writes, “both feature a sexual other as an enigma to be investigated (noir’s duplicitous femme fatale, the gothic’s mysterious husband)” (Hanson, 2007, p. 42). The femme fatale is a male fantasy, an attractive and sexually confident woman who leads men down a dangerous path, and who is destroyed by the conclusion of Noir narratives. In the Gothic, it seems there is the

“She is the butterfly that the two black moths will try to consume”

Figure 1: Thomas and Lucille's silhouette encasing Edith.

"Beautiful things are fragile"

presence of the homme fatal, the fatal man. He is usually older, worldly, sophisticated, with secrets that the Gothic heroine must decipher.

Thomas Sharpe embodies all these qualities, as the mysterious entrepreneur who is English, titled, well-spoken and charming. However, it is Lucille who is revealed to be truly fatal, as she holds power over Thomas and has engineered the circumstances leading to the death of his previous brides. In this Neo-Gothic story, the homme fatal narrative has been subverted. It seems that the femme fatale of Noir returns, but with new layers of darkness added to the archetype. So often, Film Noir uses the narrative structure of the process of investigation by a male private eye, influenced by hard-boiled fiction. In *Crimson Peak*, it is the Gothic heroine who investigates the homme fatal's dark past. Thomas Sharpe's secret, that of his murdered wives, follows the Bluebeard narrative tradition, a Gothic and dark Noir story.

Thomas and Lucille's deadly intentions are foreshadowed in a scene where the pair, along with Edith, visit a park. In a two shot, Lucille holds a butterfly to Edith's cheek and tells her, "Beautiful things are fragile." She describes how black moths "thrive on the dark and cold" and eat butterflies. Lucille is dressed in an intricate black dress which contrasts with Edith's billowy, pale-yellow costume, aligning each with the deadly moth and vulnerable butterfly. An extreme close-up follows of a butterfly being eaten by ants, while the dramatic score simultaneously crescendos to create a chilling atmosphere. In a compelling shot, the silhouette of Lucille and Thomas' profiles frame Edith, who is positioned between the pair's lips (Figure 1). She is the butterfly that the two black moths will try to consume. The expressive shot and use of contrast resembles German Expressionist styling, highly influential to Noir aesthetics. Del Toro's cinematography has a noir sensibility that creates the darkness of a Gothic aesthetic.

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At the Dining Table with Ghosts and Beasts: *On Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*

By Ria Iyer

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, follows a man approaching the end of his life, as he retreats to the countryside with his family—both living and dead.

About 17 minutes into the film, titular character Uncle Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar), his sister-in-law Jen (Jenjira Pongpas), and his nephew Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee) are dining together at a table when Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwong), Boonmee's dead wife, enters the scene. Her appearance, gentle and unassuming, is unlike one I have ever seen before. Huay is a transparency that evolves into a subtle translucency that eventually forms the figure of a slender, middle aged woman—over the span of 10 sublime seconds. The restrained performance style resists spectacle and leans into a more performative minimalism, a tradition Apichatpong Weerasethakul often employs to reject gendered and affective excess. Her figure—translucent, middle-aged, unadorned—stands in stark contrast to the usual shock value associated with female apparitions in Thai horror cinema, designed to evoke fear or pity rather than this quiet familiarity.

My realisation of Huay's presence is simultaneously shared with Tong's—both of us jump a little. Tong's acceptance of the situation, however, is much quicker than mine. Boonmee and Jen barely express any surprise—and certainly no fear. Their response is instead a warm and welcoming invitation into their conversation. The living and the dead share a space together, one that transcends corporeality. Weerasethakul seems to be inviting us into a world where death is not perceived as a destination but as a transitory event.

Huay now sits at the table as if she always belonged there, and every time I rewatch the shot before her appearance, I am mesmerised by how the playful lights and shadows almost seem to summon her into the chair long before she actually appears. It stands as a film that disrupts by its lack of disruption.

As the shot unfolds, and conversation resumes, the camera moves to focus entirely on the wonder and curiosity experienced by Boonmee and Jen—the living. A striking, and nonetheless quiet moment during the conversation is when Huay mentions that she knows Boonmee is dying. He doesn't reply, merely offering her a glass of water to drink. Weerasethakul weaves into his script questions of existence and death that gently unfold. The charm of this shot is that you don't feel the need to seek answers to these questions—it is magical realism done exceptionally well. Often understood as the quiet coexistence of the fantastic and the real without privileging either, this art finds expression in Huay's unassuming, benign, ghostly presence. She does not haunt; instead, she materialises as embodied memory—consistent with Thai spiritual traditions in which the boundaries between the living and the dead are incredibly porous.

A few minutes later, just as you become comfortable with the idea of imperturbable conversations with ghosts at dining tables, Boonmee and Huay's son appears.

Boonsong (Jeerasak Kulhong) is now, as we will learn a bit later, a Monkey Ghost—a consequence of mating with one such creature himself. His presence is met with some surprise, which is digested alarmingly quickly (again) as he is seated at the table with the rest. Todorov's literary theory proposes the idea of the marvelous, which, as opposed to the fantastic, does not involve disbelief—"In the fantastic, hesitation exists; in the marvelous, the supernatural is fully integrated into reality" (Todorov, 1975, p. 41). In contrast to his initially shocking appearance, Boonsong at the dining table is a subdued, tame, human presence. And wonder and acceptance replaces the predicted fear. His animalistic appearance, digested and presented in all of its homosapien familiarity is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of becoming-animal, which "unhumans the human" and "participates in a movement that is neither imitation nor identification, but an alliance, a symbiosis" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 234). Weerasethakul presents him not as an abnormality but as a natural extension of the film's fluid reality and multiplicity, where human, spirit, and animal blend together seamlessly. Stepping into the almost humorous realm of the marvelous, the first question with which Boonsong is greeted by his human family is— *"Why did you grow your hair so long?"*

If Huay's return gestures toward the magical real, then Boonsong's emergence as a Monkey Ghost leans into posthumanism: a disruption of categories such as human and animal, past and present, natural and unnatural. His hybrid form echoes the creatures of Thai folklore—forest spirits, shapeshifters, and liminal beings, participating in an artful dismantling of anthropocentric thought.

The film was released in 2010, and yet with its setting

being a farm and its long takes, it allows glimpses into the lost wonder and fluidity of pre-industrial times. Jameson critiques the nostalgia film as one that creates a "pseudo-past for consumption", a "history with holes" (Jameson, 1986, p. 10). However, despite its framing as an almost-nostalgia film, Weerasethakul's attempt to revisit the violence of the past cannot be ignored. Boonsong's 'becoming-animal' can also be read as a form of exile, not just from his human form but from history itself. His disappearance into the jungle mirrors the fate of Thai communists, whose erasure from official narratives finds a parallel in his marginalised existence. Boonmee's relationship with his son, the now Monkey Ghost or Kong Kai, has elements of estrangement rooted in their politics—Boonmee mentions his impending death as karma for killing too many communists back in his military days and Boonsong is hinted at being a communist. Yet, there is a quiet understanding between the two as they acknowledge that Boonmee is approaching his final days.

The materialization of the ghosts and beasts is produced in such a nonchalant manner through its lighting and extended shots, that the scene takes on the essence of a surreal dream. A dream suspended between that which is fantastical and that which is familiar, creating a sense of the uncanny that isn't spooky but oddly comforting. Warnes credits magical realism with the particular ability to "represent both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth" (Warnes, 2005, p. 3). Uncle Boonmee does not urge you to step back into safety nor does it compel you to confront the unknown—it merely seduces you into curiosity.

And so there I sat, at a dimly lit dining table with Boonmee, Tong and Jen; Huay the ghost; and Boonsong the Kong Koi, letting the pleasure of the mysterious wash over me. Apichatpong Weerasetakul deserves accolades in particular for excelling at the art of being boldly curious and simultaneously sedative. When I say that the film put me to sleep twice, I say this with love and immense gratitude.

"The supernatural is fully integrated into reality"

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Racialised Capitalist Expropriation in One Shot

By Aaron Bowler

Jordan Peele's third feature-length film *Nope* (2022) follows Otis 'OJ' Haywood Jr. (Daniel Kaluuya) and Emerald Haywood (Keke Palmer), two siblings trying to keep their family's Hollywood horse-wrangling business afloat in the aftermath of their father's untimely and mysterious death. Plagued by a UFO which has been consuming their horses, the siblings decide to try and photograph the entity and profit off their discovery.

Nope is a film which compels repeated viewings. The film's structure, and the imagery utilised within, leaves the viewer with many questions that gnaw at the mind. Upon further viewings however, such imagery becomes more recognisably connected to the thematic concerns of the film. Whilst some abstractions appear deliberately incredulous, there are other moments which begin to hold clear narrative and thematic meaning. One shot, occurring at the start of the film, can be said to encapsulate the narrative's thematic concerns (Fig. 1).

Following the film's two separate prologues, the film's title card finally begins. As the cast credits appear on the screen, the frame depicts an ominous cuboid structure with rippling blue translucent material marking its four walls. Wind ripples against the walls, and the muffled sounds of screams can be heard. As the camera tracks forward toward the expanse of darkness at the tunnel's end, a faint image becomes increasingly discernible in the darkness. The image captures Eadward Muybridge's famous 1878 short of a Black jockey riding a horse. The intention of this shot would be confusing to a first-time viewer, outside of the tone of ominous foreboding. However, Muybridge's short holds seismic significance for the history of cinema/media, its usage here foregrounding this history's relevance to

Figure 1: Footage of Animal Locomotion.

the film. Muybridge famously used "multiple cameras to produce a series of still photographs that were then combined" (Keith Booker and Isra Daraiseh, 2023, p. 168), to produce the first recorded moving image.

Peele however chooses to emphasise the social implications underlying the achievement of this feat, highlighting that while Muybridge is heralded for his "historical contribution to the rise of film", the Black Jockey captured in the footage is entirely unrecognised (Booker & Daraiseh, 2023, p. 169). This disparity of recognition is directly referenced in the film by Emerald, when introducing the Haywood's business:

Emerald: *Now some of y'all know Eadward Muybridge […] but does anybody know the name of that Black Jockey that rode the horse…? […] Nope […] there's almost no record of em… That man was a Bahamian Jockey that went by the name of Alistair E. Haywood. My great-great grandfather.*

Muybridge's footage is therefore fictitiously linked to the lead characters of *Nope*. The short acts as a symbol of "extractive capitalism", as in utilising the services of the black jockey and disavowing any respect or recognition to him, the "racialized body [is made] an object of extraction before the lens" (Michael Anthony Turcios, 2024, pp. 32-33). This acts as a microcosm of the role of black people within cinema, considering the reality that "Hollywood history is littered with unacknowledged contributions from people of colour" (Booker & Daraiseh, 2023, p. 178).

With the significance of Muybridge's short established, its situation in this specific shot must be interrogated. It is later in the film, upon witnessing one of Jean Jacket's (as the siblings have named the UFO) murderous consumptions, that viewers learn the camera was tracking through the organism's feeding tube. Whilst this immediately explains the muffled screaming and the sound of wind, it does not provide immediate answers for the situation of Muybridge's short within Jean Jacket. I argue that Peele employs metaphor in this shot to position Jean Jacket as a symbol of extractive capitalism within media, a monster octopus with the initial conditions of cinematic exploitation at its heart (Fig. 2).

Comparing Jean Jacket to an octopus may at first seem bizarre but is easily justifiable upon close analysis. The entity's initial appearance as a traditional UFO is something of a misdirect; it leads the viewer to believe it is being operated by aliens, before uncovering that it is itself a gargantuan living being. Furthermore, at the film's conclusion Jean Jacket shows its true form when provoked, spreading its many tendrils into a squid-like shape. The science fiction genre tropes the film incorporates conceal the gothic undertones of Jean Jacket as an evil deity. Many similarities have been identified between Jean Jacket and the famous krakens of Lovecraft and Tennyson, such as its "monstrous size" its "mysterious unknowability" and even the "sphincter-like opening at its centre" which the camera tracks through in the film's title shot (Bride, 2023, pp. 141-148). Through such comparisons, Jean Jacket can clearly be seen as a "contemporary reimagining of the monster octopus" (Bride, 2023, p. 140). It is important to recognise how this symbolic congruence situates *Nope* within a canon of capitalist critique.

The monster octopus has an interesting status within contemporary media. The depiction of monster octopuses emerged as a form of capitalist critique in the late 19th and early 20th century to represent the "enormous multi-armed companies" that "were perceived to be taking over the world" (Bride, 2023, p. 143). Such illustrations were typically featured in print media, yet visual media has a different relationship with the octopus. Many popular contemporary films feature "cephalopod-like creatures" as a means of spectacle which generally captivate audiences (Brown & Fleming, 2022, p. 6). Octopuses hold a highly prominent position within visual media, leading some to reconsider the metaphoric capacities of the many-limbed creature. Brown and Fleming notably envision the tentacular as "a capital metaphor for cinema" with its "chromatographic displays" and "seductive tentacles" producing a "dimension-less and cinematic space-time in which everywhere and everywhen is connected" (Brown & Fleming, 2022, p. 7-13). Through the reutilisation of this symbol, the medium of cinema can be seen to intersect with the forces of capitalism. The all-encompassing power of the conglomerate is shared by the cinema screen, the construction of the spectacle leaning on the same unethical cruxes (and serving the same ends) as the monstrous forces of capitalism.

Having conveyed the relation between monster octopuses, capitalist critique, and cinema, we return to the title shot of the film. This enigmatic shot affirms Peele's intentions in contributing to the canon of octopedal capitalist critique, adding to the conversation by implicating cinema within this critique and identifying exploitation at the heart of its inception. Jean Jacket's murderous consumption embodies the forces of extractive capitalism as much as it embodies the monstrous kraken, coldly sucking up those living beings that it needs to survive and spitting out what it does not. Peele's symbolic placement of the Black jockey in the heart of the monster confers the "symbolic violence" of his erasure upon all the acts of corporeal violence that Jean Jacket enacts throughout the film (Turcios, 2024, p. 33). By placing Muybridge's short at Jean Jacket's centre, the rest of the film is framed as a means of fighting such capitalist racial exploitation. Within the narrative, the descendants of the unacknowledged Black jockey defeat the living embodiment of the force that undermines his place in history, and cement their place in their own. Peele articulates the film's intent in "taking up that space" and "acknowledging the people who were erased in the journey to get here" (Booker, 2023, p. 178). The film therefore recognises the racial exploitation at the heart of cinema and rallies against it. The weight of this pursuit is skilfully conveyed through just one shot.

Figure 2: Jean Jacket assumes octopus form.

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