

CINEMA AND LONELINESS

IRISH SCREEN STUDIES JOURNAL

Issue 1, May 2026
Barry Monahan (Ed.)



Irish Screen Studies

Irish Screen Studies Journal, Issue 1, May 2026

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TRAVIS BICKLE: Loneliness has followed me my whole life. Everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores. Everywhere. There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man.

Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

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FOREWORD

Máiréad Casey and Barry Nevin, Editors-in-Chief

The present issue marks the first step in the latest initiative by the *Irish Screen Studies* group: a peer-reviewed journal. Although there is no shortage of journals in the field of screen studies, this was created with three core goals in mind. First, to bring together the voices and thinking of early-career and established scholars. Second, to guarantee open-access scholarship to our contributors at a time when this can be a financially prohibitive choice, especially for independent scholars. Third, to ensure that scholarship presented at our annual *ISS* conference reaches a wider audience.

What is now *Irish Screen Studies* was founded in 2002 by Kevin Rockett (*Trinity College Dublin*) and John Hill (*Ulster University*) and began as the “Irish Postgraduate Film Research Seminar”. It was successfully developed as a cross-border initiative to connect postgraduate and early-career researchers in screen studies on the island of Ireland and beyond. For over twenty years, the annual conference has been hosted by a variety of third-level institutes in Ireland – North and South – and has provided a research platform for emerging and established researchers, many of whom have gone on to play key international roles in screen scholarship, industry, and popular culture. The event has also hosted prolific keynote speakers including Richard Dyer, Catherine Grant, Liz Green, Tom Gunning, Laura Mulvey, and Laura Rascaroli.

Momentum behind the annual gathering has grown in recent years, and the *Irish Screen Studies* network has expanded the scope of its activities to include practice-based research and to provide information sessions about research, job opportunities, and the real challenges involved in an increasingly precarious professional context where the arts and humanities lack sufficient funding. We have also organised online coffee mornings to provide scholars with a supportive environment in which to discuss the rewards and challenges that their research, teaching and vocational duties entail.

Like the *ISS* network, the *Irish Screen Studies Journal* embraces an expansive view of the field traditionally referred to as Film Studies, so that

now covers screen culture in the broadest sense: including cinema (the most widely studied category), as well as short film, television, digital media, networks, transmedia, technoculture, video gaming, video art, and any other cultural artefact that takes place on screen. Cinema's boundaries have never stopped shifting in its relatively short history, and our deliberate inclusion of other media within the fold of screen research provides evidence of this. The journal – like our conference – has the aim of accounting for and encapsulating the shifts initiated by the current phase of digitisation, which are subsequently reflected in the specific themes of annual conferences.

As current editors-in-chief, we wish to thank the many contributors to our inaugural issue, whose dossier shares its theme – “Cinema and Loneliness” – with our 2025 conference. We especially wish to express our gratitude to the issue editor, Barry Monahan, who worked tirelessly to determine the kind of publication that could match the ambitions of *Irish Screen Studies*; and the Boole Library in University College Cork, which has generously agreed to host our journal online on an open-access basis. Finally, we want to thank our readers and members for supporting *ISS* activities, and we invite you to contribute to the journal, to our conferences, and to our other events in future.

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt and the iPhone: Modern Technology, Cinema, and Loneliness

Barry Monahan, *University College Cork*

DR THURMAN: Donnie, what did Roberta Sparrow say to you?
 DONNIE: She said that every living creature on earth dies alone.

DR THURMAN: How did that make you feel?
 DONNIE: It reminded me of my dog Callie. She died when I was eight, and... She crawled underneath the... the porch...
 DR THURMAN: ... to die?
 DONNIE: To be alone.

DR THURMAN: Do you feel alone right now?
 DONNIE: I dunno... I mean, I'd like to believe I'm not, but I just... I've just never seen any proof, so I... I just don't debate it anymore, you know? It's like... I could spend my whole life debating it over and over again weighing the pros and cons and in the end I still wouldn't have any proof. So, I just... I just don't debate it anymore. (*He laughs uncomfortably.*) It's absurd.

DR THURMAN: The search for God is absurd?
 DONNIE: It is if everyone dies alone.

DR THURMAN: Does that scare you?
 DONNIE: I don't wanna be alone.

During this poignant scene from Richard Kelly's intricate 2001 cult film *Donnie Darko*, the character experiences an emotional moment of epiphany. Speaking to his psychotherapist he realises that, because of the likelihood that there is no divine authority, he is afraid of dying alone. Kelly's film had its début at the Sundance Film Festival six months after the publication of the third (twentieth anniversary) edition of Philip Kolker's important work *A Cinema of Loneliness*. The thematic connection is interesting but was no more than pure coincidence. However, a quarter century later, with attention on noteworthy anniversaries in the academic field, the serendipity offered enough of an opportunity to consider the theme and title "Cinema and Loneliness" for the *Irish Screen Studies* conference at University College Cork in 2025. Some reincarnations of papers and research presented at that event had creative longevity and

enough fascination for their authors to be reworked and revisited. They have been assembled here – in long and short form – for your consideration.

Donnie Darko was not the first film to ask questions about the loneliness of its protagonist, but it was a rare instance in which the theme was juxtaposed with death and self-sacrifice. Cinema-going audiences would have witnessed the demise of Donnie in the same way that earlier spectators had watched the downfall of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*: as a collective experience of outliving the protagonists. Gathered in a dark film theatre with other strangers, the events might have even provoked questions about their communal loneliness; together but individually responding to the tragic outcomes of both characters, and the impossibility of being outside their own moments of passing.

Technological developments in the decades between the surge of the Video Home System market in the 1980s and the present film and television streaming experience might imply that solitary spectatorship is relatively new and a uniquely domestic phenomenon. However, film has been celebrated historically for its socially unifying capabilities and for its ability to captivate a viewer viscerally and imaginatively in isolated and personalised ways. There are accounts of early audiences' homogenous reactions of wonderment at the first projected Lumière motion pictures (Gunning 1990; Gaudreault 1990), and similar ones have been repeated in later descriptions of collective responses to film content, whether angry remonstrations or triumphant celebrations. We might recall historical tales about vociferous reactions to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (Stokes 2007; Stokes and McEwan 2023), or the unifying of counterculture audiences by the socially and culturally rebellious cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s as examples of the collective fervour purportedly energised by the medium (Biskind 1999; Hoerl 2018). Accounts by film historians and filmmakers have also attested to the potent force of moving images in creating or reinforcing group identities and identifications. In his 2006 Irish Civil War film, *The Wind the Shakes the Barley*, Ken Loach includes a scene in which a 1921 Cork audience cheers and jeers with aroused passion at Pathé newsreel depictions of Michael Collins in London during the signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty at the end of the same year (Chambers 2020).

Films have also frequently offered representations of the cinema as a place for solitude, personal escape, or private reflection. Some depicted experiences or special moments that are universally identifiable: the prurient covert interest of the individual fan (*Fade to Black*, 1980) or instances of nostalgia by cinephiles who fondly recall special cinema-going events from their youth (*Amarcord*, 1973; *Cinema Paradiso*, 1988). Filmmakers often paint pictures with genuine sentimental affection. The protagonists of Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997), Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulin* (2001), and Terence Davies' *The Long Day Closes* (1992) enjoyed solitary visits to the cinema and their scenes were infused with a nostalgic ambience. At times the scenarios are comical like the one of transformative existential self-realisation that concludes Mickey's personal story in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986).

Others have a darker edge. Less affirmative representations of the solitude of cinematic spectatorship are used to depict the psychopathological unravelling of Travis in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, and a softer melancholy pervades the wistful cinema theatre scenes in films like *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich, 1971) and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003).

Consequently, loneliness and solitude on and in front of the screen have had long histories running alongside celebrations and affirmations of how films have brought us together and depicted our collective experiences. In the dim light of the shared cinematic space our deepest, latent emotional and physical dispositions are susceptible to enticement and incitement. It is there that audiences have been as roused collectively by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), as others have been singularly secretly excited by pornographic movies; both of which effect arousals that have more in common than we might care to admit. Hannah Arendt could have been gesturing towards the former when she described "mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor" (2018, 58). There was definite prescience in Arendt's condemning the displacement of intimacy (in the broadest sense of the word) from a healthy reality "which comes from being seen and heard" to one in which

the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses [come to] lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (*ibidem*)

It may well be that the medium – its mode of public address, and the ways in which it tells its stories – occupies an important and somewhat unique social position. It differs from theatrical performances because it is inorganically fixed in time so different viewers encounter the same product asynchronously, transcending temporal logic in imagining communities. In its scripted, finalised form it lacks the openness of sporting events and the vociferous spontaneity of crowd reactions prompted by open-ended possibilities. And it requires a different regulation of personal conduct to live music events, whether the chanting of the rock concert crowd or the silence of the opera congregation. These other forms of social gathering have different codes of behaviour to the manners of cinema-going, which are noteworthy in their variability depending on the occasion, the architecture and reputation of the screening venue, the profile of the spectators, and the genre screened. The acknowledgement of varying codes of etiquette in these assemblies is an important indication that wider social connections are at play. As a medium, cinema has actively defined and redefined how narration takes place within the communities and communal spaces in which its communications occur. At the same time, we should acknowledge the role it has played in reimagining and reconstituting those same communities. Its continual changing reiterations

through historical and technological developments might say a lot about the relationships between individuals and societies: revealing as much about our motivations for telling ourselves stories as it does about the constitution of the audiences to whom those stories are told. It is the contention of this piece that cinema – the actual communal experience of film – has always had a capacity to foster, protect, and observe a healthy relationship between the personal identity and the public self. I propose that we should examine this potential taking our cue from Arendt who has invited us “to trace back modern world alienation” (2018, 6) so that we might “think what we are doing” (5). According to Arendt writing of the human condition in the 1950s, this embarkation point of self-awareness may help us avoid another totalitarianism born from the condition that a technological mode of living can nurture. We must be cautious that we do not allow a situation arise – if it is not already too late – in which it is the “social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm” (43).

Philip Kolker’s *A Cinema of Loneliness* begins by focusing on the isolation of a group of filmmakers within and outside a system of production and distribution that was undergoing radical transformation at the end of the 1960s. The stories of lone *auteurs* assembled by Kolker present a narrative of how a new generation of directors was creating film art from positions of incidental marginality: not as self-made radical, political recalcitrants. Their situation arose because industrial standardisation and the mechanisms of production that had dominated the labour relations of the classical Hollywood studio system had begun to crumble at the time. They often depicted elements of their loneliness on screen. Experiences of solitude thematically permeated many of the films of Kolker’s case studies, and are evident in their representations of existentially, psychologically, or socially alienated characters. Altman, Coppola, Kubrick, Penn, Scorsese, and Spielberg were not just a new generation of film aficionados steeped in the history of European and art house cinema and intimately acquainted with their native American film culture. They were also interested in telling stories about liminal, displaced protagonists and anti-heroes struggling for social acceptance and recognition. What is significant for us today is that Kolker’s identification of distinct aspects of the film industry and its artistic practices in the 1950s and 1960s – technology, television, and changing corporate circumstances – are the very elements central to the question of cinema and loneliness today.

We should not assume that the words “solitude”, “alienation”, “seclusion”, “isolation”, and “individuality” are synonymous with their melancholic (even pathological) counterpart “loneliness”. Whether in a crowd or alone, the latter condition requires either consciously elected, unconsciously ratified, or externally imposed feelings of marginalisation. Therefore, in the context of what writers have had to say historically about the topic, there is a significant connection between different degrees of singularity of personal experience, a rupture and feeling of separation from the crowd, and the experience of loneliness. It is a situation that identifies and diagnoses its own malady: it is not merely an awareness of being alone,

it implicitly acknowledges a problem with the very situation of solitude. The malaise that Donnie describes to his therapist is not that he feels alone: it is that he has an existential fear of that quality. The nuances of many of the perceived or misconceived interconnections between solitude or social separation and the actual conditions of loneliness are usefully unpacked by Lars Svendsen in his monograph *A Philosophy of Loneliness*.

Before humanity takes its ineluctable step into the solitary realm of virtual reality, and to cope with the existential impact of that turn, it is worth pausing to trace what some of the consequences of that step might be. To do so, I believe it is useful to chart our complex and changeable relationship with cinema (and cinema-going) over the last century. If we consider the medium as emblematic of cultural modernity, and look at the relationships between cinema, loneliness, and community, it might be construed as offering the first modern simulacrum of a receding reality that future generations will eventually abandon completely. In the prologue to her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Arendt might have been speaking of virtual reality or an immersive version of Artificial Intelligence when she described what we have to sacrifice if we fail to acknowledge that the “human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment” (2018, 2). She goes on to explain that

life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life, man remains related to all other living organisms. For some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also “artificial,” toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. (*ibidem*)

Arendt’s book should be read in the light of her preceding works from the same decade, and especially *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951. What is noteworthy about the 1958 study is its affirmation of the plurality of humanity, which it calls us to acknowledge, celebrate, and protect in all its richness and variety. But Arendt’s positive call to reflection is not offered without a caution. Her caveat is the Achilles’ heel of the human situation, one leaving us susceptible to possible alienation from the world, the earth, and ourselves. This warning involves the potential risk of our inadvertently nurturing a new totalitarian regime, such as was witnessed in Germany from 1933 to 1945 or in Russia at the same time. *The Human Condition* is noteworthy for the specific contemporary outlook that it offers and invites us to consider. Arendt makes a clear distinction between the “modern age” – from roughly the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth – and the “modern world” since then, that has been informed and driven by science, and alleged scientific progress. For Arendt, the chief characteristic of the latter period is the rise and mobilisation of atomic intelligence. At the heart of the transition from the modern age to the modern world, Arendt locates the rise of alienation. She focuses on how new forms of division have occurred between the private and public realms in ways entirely different from those that she cites from ancient Greece and Rome, where she begins her account. That Arendt’s work considers the

“modern age” as distinct from the “modern world” does not render her two-millennium historical consideration irrelevant. On the contrary, the range of her search for the roots of social alienation is revealing for our twenty-first century experience precisely because cinema, as the modern medium *par excellence*, was born from and is deeply integrated with technology. This resonates with Kolker’s identification of themes of loneliness in the films of his directors when he acknowledges the terrifying possibility that “for all the challenge and adventure, their films speak to a continual impotence in the world, an inability to change and create change” (2000, 10). Furthermore, any attempt at individual action, emerging from one’s social alienation and detachment as depicted in these films, bears witness to Arendt’s implicit connection between communal fragmentation and the roots of totalitarianism. Kolker argues that in many cases, when the isolated individuals finally emerge from their solitary spaces and undertake action “it is invariably performed by lone heroes in an enormously destructive and antisocial manner, further affirming that actual change, collectively undertaken, is impossible” (*ibidem*).

Arendt insists on the centrality of technology in individual humans’ becoming apart: from themselves, from their society, and from the world. Her discoveries helpfully support the present argument: across the course of “modern world” history, cinema has provided a significant force not only preserving an important aspect of the relationship between humanity and its political formation, but also in ensuring the interaction between humanity’s sense of solitude or loneliness and its political, communal identity, and feeling of connection. Because both private solitude and political participation are integral qualities of the human condition, the experience of cinema, and our engagements with its stories, personalities, and ideas, have been essential attributes contributing to our existential well-being.

Arendt notes, in reference to the denial of civic rights to slaves in ancient Greece and Rome, that their domestication – the definition of their role and identity by and through the private sphere – was commensurate with the deprivation of their voice in the political dialogues of the public space. Arendt reminds us of a useful etymological connection: “We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word ‘privacy,’ and this is partly due to the enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism.” (2018, 38) Taking the homes of ancient Greece and Rome as her templates, Arendt shows how the domestic and public spheres provided different domains of hierarchical relationship: the master was politically active in the city and at home was served by the slave, the non-citizen, whose identity was defined based on (de)privation and containment within that space. In the mid-seventeenth century – the beginning of Arendt’s “modern age” – individualism began to be romantically reinscribed as an admirable condition, worthy of pursuit. This coincided with the rise of the notion of “society”. Elsewhere she summarises her take on ancient slaves: “Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of

human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human." (64)

The ancient home (*domum* or *oikos*) was the domain away from the public arena and it preserved privacy from that space. For the modern world and for us it has been increasingly constructed around technologies and appurtenances that link us to external society while reinforcing our independence from it. The home and house were reconstructed along synecdochal lines as microcosms of the social environments from which they contained their inhabitants. Built into the technology of domestic instruments that catered to our move from public spaces into domestic solitude, was an illusory palliation to the discomfort of isolation. Many devices seemed to offer a reconnection to the world beyond our walls. The automobile became a prosthetic of peripatetic isolation that promised a genuine but tentative connection to other people and places. The wireless radio and television presupposed our isolation from the outside world, to which they provided a simulated reconnection. The development of the telephone is most noteworthy in this respect because it became the ultimate household possession for enabling social connection. More than any other modern convenience, it has exemplified our technological progression towards isolation. In the beginning, a single household might have had one line to a receiving party. Within decades, families possessed several handsets, often further sequestering occupants to the inner private spaces, offices, and bedrooms of their home, until wireless developments permitted roaming throughout the house. Nowadays a solitary individual can connect with billions of others and every information stream on the planet, from anywhere.

Arendt identifies a shift away from the ancient negative implication of the non-public life when she traces a re-evaluation of solitude in the eighteenth century. Lars Svendsen has comprehensively charted a range of modern philosophers who advocated the values of a solitary life apart from others, fronting de Montaigne, Emerson, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche as passionate proponents of the benefits (2017, 112–14). The emotive appeal to individualism by Rousseau and the Romanticists worked against what they perceived to be a social levelling, a dehumanising conventionality "against what we would call today the conformism inherent in every society" (2018, 39). To advance her argument Arendt makes a crucial distinction between the ancient notion of "the political" (participation in the realm of the *polis*) which she contrasts with her contemporary reading of "the social" (universal acceptance of norms of regularised behaviour). The former was the space in which genuine individuality was expressed, defined, contested, and thus strengthened. The latter, on the contrary, establishes a muted, impotent equality which "based on the conformism inherent in society and possible only because behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity" (41). Arendt contends that this equality, albeit limited to a certain class of society, was unlike its contemporary social counterpart. In the ancient public arena freedom was obtained through the

right to be different and by holding alternative opinions with freely oppositional voices. Individuality within the public realm – the place where individualism could be expressed – manifested itself in ways entirely dissimilar from the conformism of society. Where the *agora* and *polis* facilitated, fostered, and thrived on the active participation of individuals, the social realm compromised and even suppressed the constructive advancement of individualism.

If our current political situations are not enough to inspire this kind of reflection, it is worth noting the reasons why the ancient Greeks limited the number of citizens with the right to participate in their cities: “Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism, be this the despotism of a person or majority rule” (43). While the condition of closely gathered multitudes may account for “conformism, behaviorism, and automatism in human affairs” (*ibidem*), these qualities emerge with equal ferocity when groups of people are atomised, unified in an illusory way within the simulacrum of a social identity. Of course, Arendt did not condone the segregation of populations based on categories of “enslaved” and “free citizen”. She was interested in emphasising how inclusion in the *polis* encouraged eligible citizens to reinforce their individual identities. Against the rise of the discipline of economics – the reductive depictions and graphic taxonomic mapping of interpersonal trading, commodification, and calculation – and the “behavioral science” of sociology, Arendt argues for less prescriptive accounts of the relationship between individual and collective selfhoods. In the twentieth century, the continued growth of both forms of statistical representations “indicates clearly the final stage of this development, when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and ‘social behaviour’ has become the standard for all regions of life” (45).

Contemporary software programmed to harvest information for anonymous and inadequately regulated corporations uses algorithms designed to mine and manage data for commodification and the creation of further self-modulating interface programmes. It is as if Arendt’s worst fears have been realised. The experience of our interactions with technology no longer remains within the pages of what had previously “been buried in the highly non-respectable literature of science fiction” (2), a genre that Arendt was not actually citing disparagingly. Her following lines confirm the seriousness of her point about our missed opportunities for warnings from that literary source: “unfortunately, nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiment and mass desires.” (*ibidem*) Sophisticated algorithms have superseded regular, population-standardising statistical analyses and sociological reports. They neutralise individualism by their accommodation of, provision for, and adjustment to, difference. In contrast, traditional cinema-going, as a communal practice, gathers individuals and facilitates the real-time interface of private and public spaces. Both create a sense of solitary selfhood (and perhaps at times loneliness), however they do so differently. One unifies with depersonalising standardisation while the other brings groups together and

maintains miscellany, underscoring and not muting the difference between individuals and their communal environment. The radical isolation of the lonely spectator, solitary in her spectatorship, does not causally contribute to the rise of the tyrannical regime, but it is one of the conditions that enable its development. In another cautionary note, one that might bring to mind images of individuals in public on their mobile phones, Arendt says: “men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times” (58). The tyranny of the mob is strengthened by this kind of standardising multiplication. It is the point at which depersonalised individuals become capable of maintaining a singularity of behaviour *en masse* even, and especially, when they are not sharing the same physical space. This is the breeding ground for totalitarian ideology. Tyranny feeds off a singularity when individualised civilian objects fit a mould, follow its messages, and fix their identities when they recognise themselves within a “total” system. Loneliness is not the cause of totalitarian regimes, but the dehumanising, atomising conditions that produce them across populations can provide fertile ground for tyrannical growth and domination. Citing *The Lonely Crowd*, the 1950 study by David Riesman that considers the modern life as one of systemic and pandemic loneliness, Arendt proposes “this deprivation of ‘objective’ relationships to others and for a reality guaranteed through them has become the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and antihuman form” (58–59).



Deprivations of objective relationships?

On our mobile phones we interact with algorithms that manage bespoke interfacing with information streams. Even as they purport to enhance and enable our access to a global community, the same devices deny our transcendence of predetermined and inflexible social norms of behaviour and melting-pot thinking. The kind of cinematic engagement we experience through our private handsets epitomises the disqualification and denigration of political value that the cinema-going event offers. As one of the newest forms of film viewing, the narrowing singularity of its use runs the risk of socialising or normalising the tolerance of an apolitical position. Arendt succinctly describes what could be lost with her affirmation that

people “in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (4). The stories of cinema, communally shared, have always presented a cultural space for discussions that create meaningful reflection on the human condition. It is not the collapse of the public space, as an active site of interlocution and communal contact that we will observe: the ultimate disintegration of that domain will be manifest in the dissolution of even the sanctity and security of the private space. It could well be, Arendt observes, that it is “in the nature of the relationship between the public and private realms that the final stage of the disappearance of the public realm should be accompanied by the threatened liquidation of the private realm as well” (60–61). How far this “liquidation” has already advanced and whether the rise of far-right and populist movements and new totalitarian regimes might be connected to our latest technologies, are questions certainly worthy of attention.

In 2017, a conference titled “Cinema is Dead” was held at University College Cork. The theme provided a motion for the debate and it gave rise to numerous papers exploring variations on the topic, sometimes arguing one side, sometimes another. The majority of the papers left open the possibility that what might be a postmodern postmortem could also offer a potential for modish revival of the modern medium. Rod Stoneman closed the conference with a keynote speech in which he defended the idea that cinema was truly dead. He used two lines of argument predominantly in this. One referenced certain heydays of cinema cyclically appearing across its history since 1895, when activities of pioneering filmmakers innovatively pushed the limits of the technical apparatus and its capacity to tell stories. But the second line related to cinema in a far wider sense: as a communal event, a cultural mechanism, and a social apparatus. With this emphasis, Stoneman predicted a continuation of current spectatorship trends by tracing declining numbers at box offices and the increased popularity in observing, encountering, and enjoying films in solitude. What we might be seeing as we watch films that depict loneliness, alienation, isolation, and experiences of difference, is more than just a mirror-image of ourselves as spectators. If cinema is dying in front of us, we should take care that our role as active, engaged political participants is not dying in front of it. Our collective responsibility and investment in creating a healthy, integrated, and enriched community may be diminishing before the screens that once created collectives. Like Donnie Darko, our final disengagement may occur in solitude. It is worth concluding with a cautionary, prescient note by Arendt from a section in *The Human Condition* in which she pauses to consider humanity’s relationship with questions of a more otherworldly value: “There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality, a loss somewhat overshadowed by the simultaneous loss with the metaphysical concern with eternity.” (2018, 55)

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Hannah and Her Sisters (Woody Allen, 1986)

Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001)

Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

The Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915)

The Butcher Boy (Neil Jordan, 1997)

The Last Picture Show (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971)

The Long Day Closes (Terence Davies, 1992)


The Wind the Shakes the Barley (Ken Loach, 2006)

Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935)

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ARTICLES

Talking with Ghosts: Spectrality in John Huston's *The Dead*

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At a certain moment in John Huston's film *The Dead* (1987), the camera leaves the room where the characters have assembled to listen to a musical performance, ascends the stairs and enters a bedroom. It spends time perusing the items it finds there. It is as though the camera has no interest in staying for the performance, as if – impelled by its own motives – it had other places it would rather be. In his analysis of *The Dead*, Kevin Barry remarks on this moment, arguing that the camera's lingering gaze on photographs and mementos can be read in parallel with the final sequence of the film. This concluding sequence presents a series of still shots of snow-covered crosses, trees, and graves. Barry argues that these two sequences serve to “define two different time-scales of death [in the film]: one, the dead that it brings to life [...] who can enjoy the party, sing and talk; two, the dead whom these living dead remember and regret” (2001, 29). Barry's assessment of the significance of these elements to the *mise en scène* highlights a central focus of Huston's adaptation: that of a sustained interest in the spectral or hauntological qualities of James Joyce's short story from *Dubliners*. The ghostly elements of the film – the haunting refrain of the song “The Lass of Aughrim”, the photographs of dead relatives, the flash-forward to Aunt Julia's death, and the lingering shots of a graveyard in the West of Ireland – are, I argue, presented within a wider aesthetic system of spectrality. Drawing primarily on Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, this paper offers a definition of hauntology as it pertains to spectrality and aesthetics in cinema. It also engages Anne Keithline and Jacek Mydla's theories of the spectral camera, which usefully articulate a kind of ghostly perspective in film that invites the viewer into a sympathetic dialogue with the spectral presence. This concept intersects productively with Derrida's notion of hauntology. However, Keithline and Mydla acknowledge that their analysis does not address sound (2017, 124). To extend their insights beyond the visual, this paper also draws on Michel Chion's writings on the *acousmêtre*, allowing for a consideration of how audio can contribute to cinematic spectrality. By foregrounding these aesthetic elements, this paper explores the ways in which Huston centralises the post-mortem perspective of the character Michael Furey, thereby revealing the latent hauntological core of the text. Hauntology is considered here not only as *The Dead's* overarching semiotic and ideological impulse but also as a foundation for its aesthetic approach. This reading demonstrates Huston's sustained engagement with spectral aesthetics and shows how haunting is mobilised to interrogate class relations and historical injustice. In doing so, the paper contributes to scholarship on spectral and hauntological aesthetics in cinema.

In its engagement with the past as persistent – as an event that continues to haunt the story's present – *The Dead* lends itself readily to a hauntological reading. The term “hauntology” was initially introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), where he reflects on Marxism's relationship to history and legacy. Derrida argues that the present is never free from the past; instead, what we call “the present” is made up of hauntings, pasts imposing upon us. Derrida refutes cultural notions of linear temporality and contends that the present is not a discrete, self-contained moment separate from what has come before, but is instead shaped by traces, absences, and unresolved histories; ghosts, that have the power to structure and influence the world of the living. Hauntology understands life as intimately bound up with and influenced by death. Mark Fisher later developed Derrida's concept extensively, particularly through his concept of “lost futures” (2012, 16), a term that articulates the ways in which post-industrial and neoliberal culture forecloses the possibility of genuinely new, emancipatory futures, leaving the present haunted by the failure of these futures to arrive. While Fisher's concepts of “lost futures” and “cultural impasse” (2012, 16) are compelling – and could productively be applied to *The Dead*, particularly in relation to the film's negotiation of Irish identity – such an analysis lies beyond the scope of the present article. For the purposes of developing a cohesive theoretical framework for analysing spectral aesthetics, this paper will confine itself to hauntology and spectrality as articulated by Derrida, drawing on his original formulation of hauntology, which remains especially useful for analysing how cinematic form destabilises temporal certainty and foregrounds the past within the present. Derrida defines hauntology by insisting that haunting must be understood as fundamental to thought itself. He writes:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology” (1994, 202). What Derrida proposes here is a radical challenge to classical ontology: rather than treating being and time as stable, knowable categories grounded in presence, hauntology insists that they are always already disrupted by what is absent, deferred, or unresolved. In short, haunting becomes a condition of the world. Elsewhere, Derrida elaborates on this destabilisation of presence, arguing that spectrality troubles the very distinction between what is present and what is absent:

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth. There is first of all the doubtful contemporaneity of the present to itself. Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in

undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other. (1994, 48)

Here, Derrida emphasises that haunting collapses the binary opposition between presence and absence. The present is never fully itself, never entirely *with* itself. Instead, it is marked by temporal disjunctions in which past and future mingle and intersect. Spectrality here functions as a disturbance of certainty, calling into question the assumption that the present can be fully known or quantified. Weinstock argues that, in cultural texts,

spectrality is expressed as a paradigmatically deconstructive gesture, the “dark third” or trace of an absence that undermines the fixedness of binary oppositions (such as those between life and death, visible and invisible, real and virtual, authentic and replica, wakefulness and sleep, absence and presence) by subverting the chronological dimension of time and history. (2004, 4)

In this analysis “spectral aesthetics” refers to the formal and stylistic choices that foreground the hauntological, the persistence of the past within the present. They are, specifically, aesthetic approaches that destabilise the notion of the present as a safe, self-contained temporal space. Such aesthetics also draw attention to occluded histories of suffering, to colonial history, to labour, and to the ways in which the past continues to structure the present from within the diegesis. In mobilising haunting as an aesthetic principle, *The Dead* asks viewers to align themselves ethically with ghosts, to speak with them, and to recognise their claims on the living in the context of historic injustice.

The Dead was Huston’s final film, and it was released four months after his death in December 1987. The film was predominantly shot, not in Dublin where the film is set, but on a sound stage in California. This was to facilitate Huston’s presence on set for filming, in spite of his declining health which made travel to Ireland’s capital an impossibility. He was at the time suffering from emphysema. He directed the film from a wheelchair and was reliant on an oxygen tank throughout production. The film is very much a family project. Huston’s son Tony was the screenwriter and his son Danny led a second production unit in Dublin (responsible for capturing the exterior shots of the city). His daughter Anjelica starred in the film as Gretta – the wife of the film’s protagonist Gabriel – for whom the memory of lost love is triggered by the song “The Lass of Aughrim”. The story centres on Gabriel and Gretta Conroy as they attend an annual party at the home of Gabriel’s aunts, on the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th). The film follows the anxious, self-conscious Gabriel as he navigates the event, socialising with friends and relatives. At the end of the party, as he and his wife are preparing to leave, Gabriel observes Gretta standing on the stairs listening to a party guest singing “The Lass of Aughrim”. As they travel back to their hotel Gabriel observes that his wife is lost in thought, deeply affected by something. When they arrive in their room, Gretta tearfully reveals that the

song reminded her of a boy named Michael Furey, who used to sing the same tune, and whom she had loved when she was a young woman in Galway, before she had ever met Gabriel. Gretta confesses that she believes Furey died of love for her. Gabriel is deeply disturbed by this revelation. The film concludes with Gabriel considering the profound implications of this personal autobiography, both for his relationship with his wife, and in respect of himself. Barry argues that Huston in a “reticent act of fidelity [...] allows *The Dead* to remain a story in which the most powerful character, Michael Furey, does not put in an appearance” (2001, 23). While it is true that for the characters within the diegesis Furey never materialises in any way visibly perceivable way, his “presence” is undeniable. Michael Furey is patently present in the film through a kind of cinematic possession. An analysis of the use of shadow in the scene at the Gresham Hotel, the camerawork and point of view employed throughout the film, the film’s experimentation with sound and its absence, and its relationship to time (both human and narrative) reveals that the *mise en scène* of the film is infused and inhabited by Furey from beyond the grave, and the diegetic space.

Much of the scholarship on Huston’s film has tended to consider it as at best a fatally flawed attempt to adapt the “unadaptable” James Joyce. Azra Ghandeharion and Roya Abbaszadeh describe the inability of the film to offer the audience insight into Gabriel’s character (2020, 7). Rawan Althunyan describes the film’s “mute and external camera” (2019, 2) and notes the lack of clarity around the intended protagonist of the film, arguing that viewers could easily believe it to be Gretta or even Freddy Malins, Gabriel’s cousin (2019, 4). This lack of context is also picked up by Althunyan, who argues that “most of [the Conroys’] history is absent in the film” (2019, 5), as there is no omniscient narrator to guide the audience. Several criticisms of the film consider the degree to which audiences will be unable to – and indeed cannot be expected to – feel sympathy for or identify with Gabriel (2001, 73). In addition to this, Anelise Corseuil criticises the lack of “focalisation” in the film, arguing that it serves to create a “rupture between narrative development and description – as if the descriptions were ‘frozen’ in time” (2001, 68). Corseuil argues that this lack of sustained focalisation (that is the camera’s tendency to move through the party without attaching itself to any one character) jeopardises the viewer’s engagement with Gabriel’s epiphany. Corseuil’s comments are of particular relevance to this discussion. While her criticism of the film is intended to highlight the film’s deficiencies in translating Gabriel’s interior life to the audience, the references to focalisation are prescient. In spite of the film’s deviation from Joyce’s text, an interior life is nonetheless being communicated to us in *The Dead*: it is simply not Gabriel’s. Gabriel in Huston’s film is not expected to invoke sympathy. Nor are we asked to enter exclusively into his worldview as we do in Joyce’s story. The lack of focalisation in the film and the subsequent lack of sympathy that the audience is encouraged to feel for Gabriel, stems from the centralised perspective of Michael Furey. Kevin Barry states that “James Joyce’s ‘The

Dead' is, among other things, a ghost story. A corpse rises from the dead and overwhelms Gretta and Gabriel Conroy as they leave the Misses Morkans' party and arrive at the Gresham Hotel" (2001, 23). Although Barry argues that the "film, deliberately, does not show us on screen this ghost at the centre of Joyce's story" (2001, 23), I argue that Michael Furey is present throughout the diegesis. Luke Gibbons also notes the presence of Furey, describing him as "something of an uninvited guest at the party" (2002, 132). He cites Huston's film as an example of cinema "opening up the past, bringing to mind things that are 'almost forgotten' – like the memory of the dead perhaps or, in this instance, of adaptations from novels, traces of the words that are absent on the screen" (128). Gibbons and Barry both gesture to a haunting in Huston's film and locate it in the film's navigation of theme, in its relationship to nostalgia, and in the inherent "haunting" of strings of cultural association. I argue that in Huston's adaptation, aesthetics of spectrality are also employed to allow the audience to commune with the ghost of Michael Furey.

It is worth setting out here Barry and Gibbons' analyses usefully foreground the film's thematic navigation of haunting. Gibbons identifies a socio-economically engaged haunting-by-association. He argues that Lily, the servant girl whom the Morkans employ, is economically, socially, culturally, and visually linked with Gretta throughout the film (2002, 140). This linkage unsettles readings of Gretta as straightforwardly middle class. He also argues that the song "The Lass of Aghrim" holds particular significance in the context of Lily's class and employment, as she, like the woman in the ballad, is at an economic disadvantage. Her survival is contingent on the behaviour and choices of those with greater socio-economic mobility. The associations generated by both the song and Lily's onscreen presence gesture to "histories of the domestic underworld of bourgeois households [where] one of the main casualties of the sexual propriety of the respectable classes upstairs were the servant classes downstairs" (2002, 130). Barry also connects the character of Lily with conversations about class and economics explicitly in his analysis, noting that Huston "dedicates *The Dead* to his last and, in his own words, his most beloved companion, an illegal alien in the United States, Maricela Hernandez, a Mexican who had worked as a maid to Huston's fifth wife, Cici" (2001, 7). Barry conjectures that this connection is echoed further in the "monitory, off-centre presence of [Lily] at intense moments in the film's narrative" (2001, 7). Gibbons also argues that the Irish ballad "evokes the painful inheritance of the vanquished in history, the cultural order which was devastated at the battle of Aghrim" (2002, 141). Gibbons' analysis of the film recalls Derrida's "innumerable singular sites of suffering" (1994, 106), highlighting the degree to which every element of the film's *mise en scène* carries with it a string of socio-cultural, political, and economic considerations which colour and inflect the diegesis. Of Joyce's story Kevin Barry writes:

[it is] about a diverse group of people who are, to different degrees, haunted by a past that is lost. The story, therefore, is about nostalgia. But the narrative and thematic pattern of recollection, celebrated and regretted, should not mislead us into thinking that the story is, of itself, nostalgic. (2001, 26)

Drawing on Christian Metz' assertion that film "gives back to the dead a semblance of life, a fragile semblance, but one immediately strengthened by the wishful thinking of the viewer" (Metz quoted in Barry 2001, 1), he argues that "Huston's film aesthetic largely coheres with Metz's definition of cinema. Huston is preoccupied by the interplay between the flickering ghosts we see on the screen and our nostalgic wish to see those ghosts alive" (Barry 2001, 30). As such, Barry pays particular attention to the prevalence of the photographs in the scene outlined earlier in this piece. He argues for their significance in a film which refutes easy nostalgia of a much-romanticised era. Barry takes Metz' claim further, stating in his conclusion that the "camera shows immediately the surfaces of things [and Huston's film], therefore, has served to rescue the story from readings that are overly symbolic or thematic: readings that have, for example, trivialized the life of the party or abstracted a cultural politics from the story's ending" (2001, 100). In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida identifies the obstacles that prevent meaningful engagement with such spectres, noting a particular academic tendency toward detached observation. He remarks that "as theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient" (1994, 11). As Barry and Gibbons identify, Huston's *The Dead* resists this prosaic mode of looking. Both for Joyce scholars and for viewers encountering the narrative for the first time, the film rejects passive spectatorship through its sustained attention to the political and economic realities shaping its characters' lives. Drawing on Derrida's hauntological framework, the remainder of this paper extends Barry's and Gibbons' analyses of the film's haunting qualities by explaining how this "prosaic mode of looking" is prohibited by the film's spectral aesthetics.

When Gabriel and Gretta return to their hotel room, where Gretta reveals the history of Michael Furey, Huston employs shadow in striking ways which emphatically supports the argument that the ghost of Michael Furey is not simply an ideological or metaphorical concept. At first, during this sequence as Gretta begins her story, her shadow, cast against the wall, is visible in the mirror. When Gabriel goes to stand with her, both of their shadows are cast against the wall. Subsequently, Gretta sits and only Gabriel's shadow remains. Following this Gabriel sits beside Gretta and his shadow remains visible, hovering over the two figures and their bed. When Gretta crosses the room, going to sit in a chair as she recounts the circumstances of Furey's death, her shadow can be seen partially against the wall, although it is for the most part blocked by Gabriel's body. When she finishes her story and throws herself onto the bed in grief, Gabriel's shadow manifests again, standing over her as he approaches, mirroring his attempts to comfort her. After this sequence, Gabriel's monologue begins

and we do not see the shadow again. This particular element of the *mise en scène* is significant in the context of spectral aesthetics. Firstly, it can be argued that the shadow harks back quite literally to the language of Joyce's short story, where he wrote: "Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse. [...] One by one, they were all becoming shades" (2000, 239). Shade and shadow are etymologically connected and Huston's lighting design in this scene gestures to the use of the word in Joyce's text. This manipulation of shadow also relates to an understanding of and relationship to representing ghosts with both the story's setting and the life and works of James Joyce. In *Ulysses* (1920) Joyce writes "Our Saviour. Wake up in the dead of night and see him on the wall, hanging. Pepper's Ghost idea". The "Pepper's Ghost" referred to in this line was a theatre technique with which Joyce and much of contemporary Dublin would have been familiar (Binnie). It is an illusion technique that uses a reflective surface, such as glass or plastic, angled at 45 degrees to project an image of an offstage object or recorded display, making it appear on stage as a translucent, floating ghost. By the time Huston came to film *The Dead* he was deeply familiar with Joyce's work, in particular with *Ulysses*, which he had first read as a teenager, a copy of which had been smuggled into the United States by his mother in the late 1920s. Huston also worked towards the preservation of locations from *Ulysses*. He made a donation "towards the creation of the James Joyce Museum in the 19th-century Martello Tower at Sandycove, Dublin, where the first episode of *Ulysses* is set" (Burke 2025). In the final scene of *The Dead*, we experience a haunting within a haunting. As an adaptation, *The Dead* carries traces of the original text, carries socio-cultural relationships to Joyce's texts and contains the potential to diverge wildly from that text. As Miriam Catina argues:

Spectrality is the soul of adaptation, for the latter derives its being not only from a source text but, just as crucially, from a myriad of influences that can include, and even transcend, the multiplicity of literary and/or visual interpretations that such a source could have already generated.

Complementing the haunting process of adaptation, the lighting design of the film also produces a spectral aesthetic. While Gabriel's shadow in Huston's film is not a perfect recreation of the effect (which tends to produce a light filled shape, rather than one defined by light) the idea of an offstage performer serving as the body double for an on-stage ghost is prescient. As Stanislaus Joyce argued "*The Dead* is also, in its way, a story of ghosts, of the dead who return in envy of the living" (Donoghue 1988, 18–19). The challenge was how to have Michael Furey enter the diegetic space without presenting a concrete manifestation of the character. How might Huston incarnate the envy of the dead, otherwise excluded from the lives of the living? Gabriel's shadow in the final scene is frequently positioned between himself and Gretta, or hovering over them. When Gretta is not beside Gabriel, Gabriel's own shadow is strikingly

distant from him, as though it were not really his own, but instead the ghost of Michael Furey insinuating himself between the couple. Through light and shadow Huston both *suggests* Furey's presence in the style of a Pepper's Ghost trick, while also allowing Gabriel's failures to be underscored by an oversized double. This allusion to the Pepper's Ghost technique speaks to a certain manifestation of Michael Furey in the film, but also guides viewer's understanding of the relationship between Gretta and Gabriel. Viewers become aware of the extreme emphasis placed on Gabriel's shadow. It redoubles his inability to comfort Gretta, as he places a hand on her head, recognises his failure and turn away from her following his personal epiphany. Michael Furey is equally impotent in this scene: the dead can haunt but, as Derrida reminds us, that haunting is contingent on the awareness of those being haunted. We might also consider the brief moment when Gretta and Gabriel's shadows embrace. The fact that they do not come together again in this sequence again emphasises an emotional estrangement, but from a supernatural standpoint it recalls the past and the romance between Gretta and Michael Furey. Attentive viewers will sense a doubled male presence in the room, but only when Gretta Conroy recounts the story of Michael's life.

Spectral aesthetics in *The Dead* can also be uncovered in the film's relationship to narrative time. Joyce described his tale as a ghost story (2002, 69). As such, that it should be set over the Christmas period (specifically the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th) is not surprising. *The Dead* is part of a wider tradition of midwinter ghost stories, beginning with an historic oral tradition and extending into the present day with modern iterations such as the BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas* series (1971–), or the perennially reinvigorated *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Midwinter in the Northern Hemisphere, with its attendant darkness, cold and potential for material scarcity, is a time which naturally conjures anxieties around mortality, both its permanence and – in the case of the ghost story – its potential impermanence. As an annual festival Christmas is also "multiple and recurrent" (Derrida 1994, 92). It is an event during which the same narrative, traditions and events reappear and are renegotiated, although not always in the same way. Through its annual repetition, the seasonal festival occurs as a kind of perennial haunting. Although it is not performed as a duplicated or perfect repetition. Derrida writes on the imperfect nature of repetition, working through the idea of the "eternal return" as first posited by Friedrich Nietzsche. The poststructuralist has written:

The page is dated. To date is to sign. And to 'date from' is also to indicate the place of the signature. This page is in a certain way dated because it says 'today' and today 'my birthday,' the anniversary of my birth. The anniversary is the moment when the year turns back on itself, forms a ring or annulus with itself, annuls itself and begins anew. (1988, 11)

Here Derrida uses the concept of the anniversary to illustrate how time does not simply progress linearly, but folds back upon itself. Furthermore, the return is never identical; each repetition both recalls "what has been"

and simultaneously contributes to the transformation of the “having been”. It bears difference within apparent continuity. Derrida does not conceive of any return as a perfect replica, but rather, an event that carries an essential difference. For example, in *Spectres of Marx* Derrida states that his enduring faith in the potential of Marxism stems not from its ability to endure through time unchanged, but rather from its ability “to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organisation” (1994, 117). In this context, the elements of tradition and ritual – particularly in an occasion as adorned with cultural, religious, and economic significance as Christmas is – cannot be read as qualities of fixed tradition, but as providing a space in which the potential for transformation is inherent. Christmas is a container wherein the appearance of continuity can – and frequently does in literature (we need only look at *A Christmas Carol* as an example) – generate something entirely new. In both Huston and Joyce’s *The Dead*, we understand that the Misses Morkans’ party is an annual event. Likewise, Gabriel’s speech is an annual occurrence. In his peroration, he insists that he “will not linger on the past”. But this statement is disingenuous: it comes after he has already spoken about traditions of hospitality, the many other times they have gathered for this party, and the absent friends who are missed. Although Gabriel insists that it is better not to dwell on them, all the better to “go on bravely with our work among the living”, he constantly looks to the past as a source of staid comfort, the place from which continuity emerges. However, after Gretta’s revelation Gabriel is confronted by a return of a history he had never anticipated or imagined, and he is forced to reconsider his relationship to the past entirely.

It is at this point in Huston’s adaptation that Gabriel’s interior world is communicated to us through a string of images that are simultaneously interconnected and yet disparate from each other. Up to this point, Gabriel has entertained an understanding of the past as stable, unchanging, incapable of disrupting the present, powerless to generating transformative action. His revelation, then, is one that acknowledges history as composed of “innumerable singular sites of suffering” (1994, 106) which continue to reverberate into the present. He emerges from a kind of half-life into a searing awareness of humanity. The eternal return here wakes Gabriel from a stupor, and he is left to mourn his previous understanding of the world and of his own life. Scott notes that rituals of mourning “in all their diversity facilitate our renegotiation of reality” (2009, 79), the mourning that Gabriel undertakes in the Gresham hotel, as his previously held convictions about the world are proven to be false, is no different. Barry notes that “in the final three paragraphs of the story, the reader must read and reread the sentences on the page, adjusting and readjusting the sense, according to the indeterminacy of whatever answer is provisionally given to the question: “Who speaks these words?” (2001, 100) The indeterminacy Joyce communicates through shifting language is communicated by Huston as a renegotiation of spatiotemporal logic and narrative time in the film. While looking out the window of the hotel room, Gabriel slips into a reverie as he muses on the inevitability of death. We are presented with a series of

images; Gabriel and Aunt Julia dancing in a room – possibly in her house on Usher’s Island – then Aunt Julia laid out for burial, with Gabriel, Gretta, Kate and Mary-Jane sitting vigil. The film returns briefly to Gabriel at the window, before commencing another journey, this time across Ireland. We observe snow-covered fields, graves and Celtic crosses, ruins, a round tower, a graveyard, and plants buried beneath snow, before the camera tilts towards the sky from which the snow is falling. Until this sequence, the spatiotemporal logic of the film is fixed within the emerging present. During this sequence however time spins out into the future (we see Aunt Julia’s death and the gravestones and ruins which gesture towards the inevitability of mortality for all things) but also tantalisingly into the past. The ruins and gravestones foreground the dead, who endure in their ability to shape the world of the living. In their return, they – to paraphrase Derrida – annul the world as it is, and force its inhabitants to begin it anew.

This destabilisation of time is not only articulated narratively but it is also rendered formally through Huston’s camerawork. The first image in Gabriel’s epiphany sequence, that of him dancing with Aunt Julia, recalls a perspective which we have seen at various points throughout the film. It is striking that Gabriel imagines this moment from outside the upper floor window of the house. The camera hangs outside the window, before pulling in closer, but it stops short of entering the room. While we may interpret that Gabriel has placed a physical or visual barrier between his present and imagined future self is certainly open to us, the distinct perspective of this shot has already been employed at various points throughout the film. These precedents mean that the technique is not one that can be readily, or automatically, associated with Gabriel. Instead, the sequence is indicative more generally of the film’s “spectral gaze”. Keithline and Mydla describe the spectral gaze as dominating “the on-screen victims of haunting, showing them at their most vulnerable, and [enabling] the viewer to participate in all the voyeurism and sadism associated with cinematic gazing” (2017, 122), in short to identify – through the gaze – with the ghost. Keithline and Mydla specifically consider the degree to which the spectral gaze is enmeshed with place in the 1968 BBC adaptation of M R James’ ghost story *Oh, Whistle and I ll Come to You, My Lad*. They argue that in this context, the gaze is communicated through

point-of-view shots and other camera techniques [that] are used to assign a spectral consciousness, with its own subjective gaze, to the terrain itself. Walls, trees, gravestones, furniture, and so on seem to watch the protagonist, and the viewer experiences much, if not all, of the film through the eyes of this spectral setting. (2017, 122)

The ghostly presence of the BBC version is several degrees removed from the ghost M R James invented for his short story. The ghost of the adaptation is a “postwar, postcolonial [and] postmodern” (2017, 131) entity, and asks very different questions about the nature of personhood and haunting in the reincarnated narrative. The spectral gaze identified by

Keithline and Mydla implicitly connects the viewer to the spectral setting, in a “sympathetic spectreship’ of sorts [...] and problematizes the very concept of the gaze by subverting the privilege traditionally accorded to the gazer even while it emphasizes the voyeurism and sadism inherent in all forms of the gaze” (2017, 124). The viewer is inducted into the experience of both the perpetrator and the victim of the haunting, becoming “both the subject and the object of haunting” (2017, 124). This significantly complicates the power dynamics of the gaze, inviting viewers to identify with the ghost, even as they recoil from it.

the question, ‘what if such a thing should happen to me?’ takes on a different character when the ‘me’ in question is no longer the human ‘patient’ of a ghostly haunting, but the ghostly victim of a human intrusion [...] The basic question that spooks the reader of the original, ‘What if I should be visited by a ghost?’ becomes, in the adaptation, ‘What if I should be a ghost?’ (2017, 130–131)

Keithline and Mydla argue that the adaptation fundamentally shifts the question of haunting from one of being visited by a ghost to the unsettling possibility of occupying the position of the ghost oneself. By aligning the viewer with the spectral rather than the haunted, the film reframes the gaze as something marginalised, displaced, and ethically compromised. We see a similar sympathetic spectreship at work in *The Dead*. As the camera moves through the Morkan’s home, the dynamics of the gaze are not of an empowered voyeur antagonising a prospective victim, but rather a marginalised onlooker, who nonetheless through the process of looking has the power to disrupt the notions of class and society held by the characters onscreen. *The Dead* opens with an exterior shot of the Morkan’s house, from across the street. We might initially imagine this as the perspective of a passerby or of a guest who will presently join the party. However, the subsequent shot reveals Gabriel’s aunts gathered at the top of the staircase, looking down anxiously, awaiting Gabriel’s arrival. This shot is set from below, farther down the staircase, as though the perspective is that of a person looking up at them, although no ostensible presence is acknowledged (either diegetically or extra-diegetically). The gaze and perspective which we will later see used in Gabriel’s reverie is already evident. After this shot, and quite suddenly we find ourselves outside again, watching guests arrive, but notably, from a distance. There is no close-up on any of the guests’ faces. With as much abruptness, our position shifts back to the interior of the aunts’ house, before quickly moving to the exterior of house again as the guests are admitted. The next shot is another interior, which follows Lily as she comes down the stairs, where we see her from an area to the boot room. The camera’s movement back and forth between the interior and exterior of the house is remarkable for several reasons. It functions in provision of a certain mapping out, or a discovery of the geography of the house, albeit one initially confined to its lower levels. While in the context of an adaptation, this functions in service of fidelity – in Joyce’s story we don’t move upstairs until Gabriel himself

arrives and ascends – the overall effect means that the house is visually dissected by this process into discrete sections: the exterior, and the interior with its upstairs (associated with the aunts, parties and leisure) and the downstairs area (associated with Lily and work). The angles of the camera are also noteworthy. When Lily first descends the steps, we cannot fully see the doors of the house because they are cut off by the stairs. With this choice of angles, Huston brings a furtive quality to the shot, as if the camera were actively endeavouring to remain out of sight.

The camera also exhibits partiality in unexpected ways. When Gabriel and Gretta arrive, the camera completely disregards Gabriel. It follows Gretta. As she moves across the hall, it pans with her and then stops, watching her climb the stairs. A cut moves it to the top of the stairs where it waits for her. It is only then that the camera hovers over Gabriel's shoulder, situated with unconventional proximity to him. In the following scene, as Gretta changes her shoes, at first the camera remains at a distance, then finds her feet and zooms in, voyeuristically, before she covers them with her dress. The intimacy of the shot is striking, but there is no one present to whom we can attribute this charged intimacy. As I have indicated above, critics have noted the lack of connection an audience is likely to feel with Gabriel, the possibility that Huston resists his being positioned as the main character of story. He is not focalised in any conventional way for the spectator. The opening scenes especially confirm this position. However, it is worth unpacking and reconsidering the reasons for Huston's stylistic choices in these visual constructions. Arguably, neither version of *The Dead* is actually *about* Gabriel, or rather not merely about Gabriel. By the conclusion of the narrative, the character of Gabriel as he was initially presented no longer exists. The narrative concludes with the death of Gabriel's ego, the collapse of his conviction that he is the central protagonist in Gretta's life. In so doing, both Gabriel and the story admit an awareness of an instability and permeability as it pertains to time, persona and relationships to history. Joyce wrote:

Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling. (2000, 240)

That the camera constantly seeks out Gretta's face, that it lingers on her reaction to the recitation of the poem "Broken Vows", and that it moves through the crowd of dancers towards her, even when Gabriel is not dancing, and details that should indicate to us that it is not Gabriel's perspective that is being privileged, but the perspective of an invisible, but no less potent presence.

This is not to claim that *The Dead* is a film only about Michael Furey; but rather that Michael Furey and his relationship to Gretta and the socio-economic and cultural world of upper-middle-class Catholic Dublin at the turn of the century are the ideological and aesthetic forces that shape the

film. The objects and characters deliberately foregrounded through camerawork signal a conscious disruption of a narrow, élite, socio-economic portrait of the period and underscore the ethical, emotional, and spectral force that guide the narrative. Gibbons has argued that the appearance of Lily in the *mise en scène* during Mr Grace's recitation of the Lady Gregory translation highlights a hidden working-class history. I would add that as well as through her presence, it is the system of looking through which Lily is presented that ultimately engenders the revelation of this history. When Mr Grace performs the piece, the shot is framed so that the door is in view. Those listening to the piece have their attention focused on the speaker, but the camera anticipates Lily's presence. The camera – the spectral camera – actively anticipates labour. It understands that this evening of culture and pleasure cannot be facilitated without Lily's work, with her exclusion from the event. The sequence I outlined at the beginning of this paper, where the camera leaves the party and goes upstairs, warrants consideration in this context. One possible interpretation of this scene is that we have entered into a sort of trance state with Aunt Julia who, as she sings, travels upstairs in her mind's eye and looks fondly at the paraphernalia of what we assume to be the childhood of her niece, Mary-Jan: a dollhouse, trinkets, religious images, a bible, and rosary beads. This reading might be further supported by reference to Aunt Kate's outburst after the performance, when she describes the thankless way in which Julia's labour as a singer in Adam and Eve's choir had been rewarded. The fact invites us to consider more broadly the ways in which the three women have been required to earn money, and the limits of respectability within which this work can take place in order for them to maintain their middle-class standing. It is possible to infer that Aunt Julia's talents, (like Mary Jane's – who works as a piano teacher) have had to be "legitimized" as labour within an economic value system. The focus in this scene on material objects suggests not only the monetary cost of these things but also the economic demands on her in supporting Mary-Jane. Attributing this cinematic *dérive* to Aunt Julia, however, may be challenged when one considers the diegetic sound of the sequence. If "Arrayed for the Bridal" – the song Aunt Julia performs – marks a shift in the acoustic register from diegetic to non-diegetic, the song might be read as a vehicle for Aunt Julia's reverie. The sound however remains firmly diegetic. It is as if an unnamed guest has slipped up the stairs, and away from the party so that we hear the song distantly, muted and muffled. The camera at this moment pushes the boundaries of spatiotemporal and narrative logic: the astute observer may ask why we have left the party? With whom have we left? This subtle movement away from the principal action is important. It might be interpreted as Michael Furey's withdrawal from the social world of the living, his gaze lingering instead on the detritus of girlhood with a tenderness that mirrors the earlier shot of Gretta's face. The scene produces intimacy without a body to anchor it, an act of looking unmoored from any visible or observing subject. In sympathising with this absent onlooker and sharing in the voyeuristic pleasure of the gaze, the viewer is

aligned with a presence defined precisely by virtue of its lack of physical form, in a way that validates the operation of the spectral camera.

The suggestion that *The Dead* employs the spectral gaze should not be interpreted as the literalised presence of Michael Furey at the party, but as an argument for the total aesthetic suffusion into the space of Michael Furey, his life, and the lives of young men like him. As a more grounded political gesture, he might be read metonymically for a generation of young men who were employed in dangerous labour conditions, with limited access to medical care, who had low life expectancy, and suffered difficult lives in a colonised country where their bodies served the purpose of enriching both empire and those who benefitted from their socio-economic subordination. Poetically, Huston tapped into resonances he found in Joyce's narrative. Michael Furey and men like him, both the living and the dead, were always the ghosts at the feast, because it was their invisible and unacknowledged labour that made those festivities possible. Even as he complicated it, Joyce did not reject this ideological perspective in his writing, and his story explicitly and implicitly refers to Ireland's colonial past and its uncertain future. Huston embraces this perspective of Joyce's text and chooses aesthetically to foreground the life and labour of Michael Furey. He mobilises technical and conventional capacities of the cinematic apparatus to represent the party from the perspective of an unseen, unacknowledged presence which, otherwise unable to infiltrate the diegetic spaces of the Morkans' home, ultimately disrupts passive engagement with middle-class interpretations of history. That the film and story end with images representing a dreamlike journey across Ireland is equally relevant. In Huston's film, the images of Aunt Julia's funeral, of graveyards and round towers again break with the established spatiotemporal logic of the film, but by this point we have emphatically entered into Gabriel's consciousness and his perspective. Michael Furey has been exorcised. As noted above, this sequence speaks to a return, the eternal recurrence of the dead and the way that this return reforms the present and the future. Gabriel's world has been irrevocably changed by his acknowledgement of the presence of Furey in it. That change is reflected cinematically as Furey's perspective, the perspective of the dead, and becomes Gabriel's. As Jacques Derrida notes at the conclusion of *Spectres of Marx*:

Could one address oneself in general if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the scholar" of the future, the intellectual" of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (1994, 221)

In the concluding moments of the film we enter the Ireland of Gabriel's imagination where the past, the present, and the future cohabit,

linked across time by the powerful symbol of snow that falls “on both the living and the dead”. At this moment, the spectral gaze is as much Gabriel’s as it was Michael’s: it is no longer possible for Gabriel, or indeed for the spectator to perceive the film world in any other way.

It is worth concluding by returning briefly to Keithline and Mydla’s theories of spectrality, and to move beyond a visual register by considering a variation of Michel Chion’s *acousmêtre*, where the *acousmêtre* is defined not by sound, but by the absence of sound, by its inability to speak. Evidently the same hauntological logic governs absence across both the film’s visual and auditory registers. Chion describes the *acousmêtre* as a phantom character, one both omniscient and omnipotent. He writes:

First, the *acousmêtre* has the power of seeing all; second, the power of omniscience; and third, the *omnipotence* to act on the situation. Let us add that in many cases there is also a gift of *ubiquity* – the *acousmêtre* seems to be able to be anywhere he or she wishes. These powers, however, often have limits we do not know about, and are thereby all the more disconcerting. (1994, 129–30; *emphasis in original*)

Chion’s description of the *acousmêtre* would initially seem to exclude any and all characters in *The Dead*. When Chion proposes that the presence of the *acousmêtre* is “based on their character’s very absence from the core of the image” (1994, 129), we might be reminded of Derrida’s claims in *Spectres of Marx*, in which he also speaks about presence, noting that it is essentially composed of absence. Specifically, when Derrida argues that it is “enjoined (*verfugt*), ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet” (1994, 30), he holds that presence is never self-sufficient, but is constituted through what has passed and what has yet to arrive. Absence is not opposed to presence but is essential to its formation. It is the presence/absence of the *acousmêtre* that defines them, the presence of the voice and the absence of a body. In *The Dead* we encounter a cinematic rendering of the absence of both voice and body. However, importantly for Huston, the bodily absence is not a *complete* absence and the ghosts *do* speak. While the absent body is made present through camerawork, narrative, and lighting, the absent voice is made present through a self-conscious foregrounding of that absence. Barry highlights the emphasis Huston places on Aunt Kate’s reminiscences of “the pure, sweet, mellow, English tenor voice of Parkinson” (2001, 20). He has contextualised this within the film’s structural and stylistic design, arguing that the scene mirrors Mr Grace’s recitation which similarly concludes with irresolute “silence and stillness” (2001, 20). This remains until the threat of narrative stasis is “deflected by Lily” who arrives with tangential interruptions throughout the film to announce, variously, that dinner is served, the pudding is ready, and that there are fresh towels in the bathroom. The sequence around the dinner table plays out and the conversations about the great singers of the past – in particular Aunt Kate’s favourite tenor – all falter around similar disruptions and the desire, ultimately impossible to fulfil, to hear the voices of the dead. These

voices are of course irrevocably lost to the past, and yet for those who have heard them, they remain a part of the present – although degraded and imperfect – as memories that persist. These recollections temporarily guard against their ultimate effacement and obscurity. Simultaneously we and the characters derive a morbid pleasure from their absence, or their being merely fragments of presence – impossible to reproduce – that persist in their haunting. This construction brings to mind Derrida’s reworking of the eternal return, where that which comes back does so in an altered state, marked by loss and difference, and charged with a demand to be acknowledged anew. The scene might be interpreted as a séance: the characters gathered around a table, conjuring the dead, out of a desire to hear them speak. This desire is inevitably frustrated and the failure of these voices to materialise (or re-materialise) in the diegetic space might be read as an example of *inverted acousmètre*: an offscreen voice, intimately connected to the events onscreen, that is itself incapable of speaking, but whose absence is aesthetically and semiotically foregrounded. Chion notes that “silence [in film] is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we’ve heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast” (1994, 57). In *The Dead* where we have heard so many different characters sing throughout the evening, the narrative and sonic space of the film are prepared for the imminent arrival of a voice. Its subsequent absence only serves to interrogate its ontological nature. Those, like Aunt Kate, who can recall the voices of the dead become in these moments “omniscient and omnipotent”. Only they have access to a simulacrum of the past and, in describing their memories, that non-present voice becomes “acousmetric”. Their silence is a form of speech, in that the absence of speech directs so much of the content of the conversations that follow.

Absent voices in *The Dead* also serve to prime the audience for Bartell D’Arcy’s performance of “The Lass of Aughrim”. Significantly, in the context of *acousmètre*, we never see D’Arcy sing. D’Arcy’s performance is repeatedly promised from the beginning of the story and the haunting leitmotif of “The Lass of Aughrim” is integrated into the film’s non-diegetic score, also functioning as a sonic conjuring of Michael Furey. A heightened sense of expectation is created by D’Arcy’s refusal to sing. Gretta’s attempts to encourage him fail, provoking another stasis similar to that observed by Barry. It is also notable that D’Arcy’s performance should happen without our observation. Huston’s decision sets the moment apart from the film’s earlier recitations. Those were determinedly embodied and couched within the personalities of the performers. While the spatiotemporal logic of the film leaves no ambiguity that this is D’Arcy’s performance, (we see him both before and after the song and we know he is the only man upstairs), the voice itself enters the sonic landscape of the film as an independent entity. It floats down the stairs towards Gretta and emotionally overwhelms her. From a hauntological perspective, we might read this moment in the context of the concluding statements of Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* where he suggests that the ultimate aim of the “scholar should be to find a way to talk with the ghost and to return speech to them” (1994, 221). In this

sense, the disembodied voice of D Arcy which carries with it the latent authority, omniscience and omnipotence of the *acousmètre*, becomes a proxy for Michael Furey. It is not only that the song serves as a portal to memory, but also that D Arcy's voice overcomes its earlier stasis. Although this occurs only as disembodied sound, perhaps it is that the desires of those at the dinner table to hear the voices of the dead once more have been fulfilled.

For Huston what follows is an expansion of Gabriel's world beyond the narrow confines of his previously held views into a place of uncertainty. The boundaries between the living and the dead dissolve as they do between the past, the present, and the future. It is precisely the kind of hauntological resolution that Derrida encourages us to occupy in *Spectres of Marx*. For the viewer the aesthetic approach produces an encounter with haunting that is subversive and strikingly tender. Through shadow, sound, camera movement, and temporal disruption, the film aligns spectators with a marginal, disembodied perspective that unsettles passive viewing. Spectrality is the structuring principle and, by extension, the thematic and ideological heart of the film. If Huston's adaptation has been variously read as a poor substitute for Joyce's original text, then this piece has aimed to argue for it as a powerful renegotiation of the story, which draws out the subversive class commentary of the "ghost story" and foregrounds it, rendering through cinema what might be considered to be the most "un-adaptable" elements of Joyce's text: the complex interrelations of colonial and contemporary histories upon which *The Dead* is built. It is significant that Joyce sets his story on Usher's Island, that he invokes King Billy, snow, and "The Lass of Aughrim". With these points of references he directs his readers' attention to the past, towards those who live there, and across permeable temporal borders. Huston attempts a similar effect, but where Joyce makes Gabriel and his stream-of-consciousness our guide, Huston gives this narrative voice to a disembodied consciousness. Through the disruptive spectral gaze, Huston uncovers the "innumerable singular sites of suffering" (1994, 106) of which history is composed. Ultimately, Huston's *The Dead* asks us to consider memory as an act of resistance and to consider the dead as agents of change, if only we will acknowledge their presence.

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Asynchronous Watch Alongs

Simon Hewitt, *Maynooth University*

It is Sunday evening on October 29, 2023. You are adopting the spirit of the Halloween season by watching Harry Bromley Davenport's cult British horror film, *Xtro* (1982). You hear Jason mentioning that he has never seen the film, nor apparently have Brian or Erin. Before the film starts, they briefly express confusion and joke about the pronunciation of the title. You know it is pronounced "ex-tro", but you cannot communicate this to them as they are not in the room with you. You are actually watching two screens: screen one is showing *Xtro* and screen two is showing a medium full shot of Jason, Brian, and Erin sitting in recliner armchairs while they also watch. As the film's title appears on screen one, the image of Jason, Brian, and Erin on screen two cuts to the same title shot. This is to help you synchronise your viewing with theirs. One might be concerned that a fault in synchronisation would be difficult to fix with a live stream. Thankfully, one need not worry as the video of Jason, Brian, and Erin can be paused. They are not in the same room as you, nor are they watching the film "live" with you. This is a form of spatially and temporally mediated cinema in which you are watching a film while watching synchronised prerecorded footage of others watching the same film.

There are many online creators offering similar film consumption experiences, which are often uploaded to video sharing platforms like YouTube. These videos are usually held behind paywalls and made available to their audience via subscription platforms like Patreon. These creators vary in the number of members who pay to access content. At the time of writing, they range from creators like Cody Leach with 342 paying members, to "We Hate Movies" which has 7,300 registered consumers, to the 27,200 membership of "Dead Meat". Jason Brant has roughly 1,100 subscribers to his Patreon platform on tiered options ranging from €3 to €7.50 a month. His annual revenue is anywhere between €39,600 and €99,000, discounting the fees he pays to Patreon. He has been uploading various types of videos to his YouTube channel (@JasonBrant) since 2013, which include audiobook excerpts from his self-published horror novels

(Devoured Audiobook 2014) and funny videos of Erin (Eating Jalapenos 2013).

In September 2015, Brant uploaded the first of his *So Bad It's Good* (SBIG) series, which is currently up to episode 422. Each *So Bad It's Good* installation is an edited compilation of Brant and his friends and family watching and commenting upon a film while sitting on reclining chairs in his home in Abingdon, Maryland. This composing is interspersed with clips that reference the moment from the film on which they are commenting. If one examines the upload dates, we see the episode releases in the first five years were somewhat sporadic, but from roughly the beginning of 2020 they have uploaded a new episode approximately every seven to ten days. My use of the plural here is intentional: Brant watches these films with a rotating number of guests who often include his wife Erin as co-producer of the show, as well as their friends Brian, Dave, Pam, and special guests. The first question one faces when encountering such a seemingly novel form of film exhibition and consumption is, what is it called?

It is initially difficult to put language to the practice of watching prerecorded footage of others watching the same film because ascribing language can imply a certain set of assumptions about that practice. If I use the term “co-present viewing”, readers may assume that physical proximity is a precondition, even if more recent research challenges these classic assumptions about co-presence (see, for example, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). In other words, for some scholars, “virtual” or “mediated” co-presence is a contradiction in terms. This article instead follows Julian Hanich’s position that it is possible for creators like Brant to offer “virtual” or “mediated” co-present viewing experiences (2018, 276); even ones that are mediated both spatially and temporally. It will present several examples of such experiences to support this position, but it also acknowledges that clarity of language is an essential consideration if one wishes to document such an emerging practice. For the avoidance of confusion, I will refer to these as “asynchronous watch alongs”, but I make no claim that this term is any more or less “correct” than the others I will discuss. This is an important distinction because as we will see, language, particularly from a legal perspective, is often used to constrain the social benefits of emerging cultural practices in favour of the commercial interests of entrenched power (Altman 2004; Lessig 2004). One might consider that the obvious strategy to identify such language would be to look for comparable precedents to the practice. The problem with this approach is that the corpus of historiographical material from which to draw is limited by the fact that it was (arguably) impossible prior to the advent of Web 2.0 to exhibit and receive films in this way, apart from rare exceptions of experimental installation art exhibition practices.

Bruce Nauman’s *Video Corridor* (1969–70), Vito Acconci’s *Centers* (1971), Nam June Paik’s *TV Buddha* (1974), and Dan Graham’s *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1975) make some comment on the recursive act of viewing. Candice Breitz’ 2005 *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)* is perhaps the closest in form to asynchronous watch alongs in that it invites

visitors to watch a moving collage of people watching and responding to the music video for Madonna's *Vogue* (1990). In a contemporaneous review of its exhibition at the White Cube, London, fellow visual artist Doro Globus highlights how Breitz' work "focuses on the mutually dependent relationship between fan and star that so often goes unnoticed or undervalued" (2005). Given that Breitz' work launched just a few months after the introduction of YouTube, we can now add a more contemporary reading about our online visual presence and the idea of being constantly observable online. Nonetheless, I can find no evidence that Brant or other creators offering similar content are making any commentary on the recursive relationships between themselves, their viewers, or the films they watch together. Consequently, I want to propose that we require a different means, beyond experimental art exhibition, to put clearer language to this seemingly novel practice.

In his discussion of the inherent problems of historicising an evolving cultural practice like cinema, in *Silent Film Sound* it is possible that Rick Altman has already provided such a means by suggesting that:

Each new representational technology traverses a period when contemporaries reveal a great deal of hesitation as to its identity. Is it just another variety of the same old thing? Or is it something new? (Altman 2004, 16)

For Altman, this identity crisis is emblematic of three sequential but overlapping stages that we can use better to understand the kind of viewing experiences that Brant and others create:

1. A new practice emerges that is subject to an initial moment of multiple identification in which multiple nomenclatures are ascribed to it.
2. As the potentialities of this practice begin to emerge, those industries that might stand to lose, and those industries that might stand to gain, engage in a metaphorical and oftentimes literal jurisdictional conflict to constrain its potentialities according to their best interests.
3. These multiple competing industrial interests combine with its users' gradual social construction to produce a somewhat stable nomenclature, identity, and features, which will likely evolve more over time. (19–23)

The difference between Altman's work and this study of asynchronous watch alongs is that Altman is arriving at his object of study roughly one hundred years after the birth of cinema. Asynchronous watch alongs are arguably only at the early stage of their development. We have yet to see any notable evidence of a second phase whereby jurisdictional conflicts from film distributors seek to curtail this practice according to their copyright interests. Moreover, when we consider that Brant and others are generating considerable profit by producing this content, I would argue we are likely to soon witness attempts to constrain its potentialities.

This is a crucial intervention that points to the goal of this article. In the 2004 work *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*, legal scholar Lawrence Lessig highlighted two of the key means by which media industries with entrenched power constrain the potential of emerging practices that could threaten their profits. They are to either define the new practice as something illegal or define it as something they already own. However, Lessig makes clear that this protectionism is not motivated by a desire to protect commercial creativity:

It is instead a protectionism to protect certain forms of business. Corporations threatened by the potential of the Internet to change the way both commercial and noncommercial culture are made and shared have united to induce lawmakers to use the law to protect them. (9)

It is understandable that industries threatened with new practices would seek to protect their interests, and it is consequently the responsibility of policy makers “to assure that the changes they create, in response to the request of those hurt by changing technology, are changes that preserve the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change” (128).

This responsibility is important because history has shown how the nomenclature ascribed to a practice can have important legal implications. The idea of “time shifting” provides an interesting example. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, by 1960, the verb to “time shift” meant “to move forward or backward with regard to timing”. On an August 26, 1979 episode of *Meet the Press*, journalist Bill Monroe demonstrated its common understanding in the field of American television broadcasting when he explained to viewers that “in an annual time shift geared to the football season” the following week’s show would “come to most of these stations half an hour earlier, that would be 12 noon Eastern, 11 Central Time”. By 1981, broadcast industry analysts (Glazer quoted in “New Scene Stealer”) and consumer electronics columnists (Fantel) had begun using time-shifting to describe the capacity for VCR players to grant users a similar power to “shift” television broadcasts by recording them and viewing them at a more convenient time.

In 1984, Universal City Studios and Walt Disney Productions responded to this emerging technology by suing Sony Corp. of America for enabling the unauthorised reproductions of copyrighted works through the manufacture and sale of VCRs (then called videotape recorders or VTRs). Sony’s lawyers used the term time-shifting, already understood in television broadcasting, to explain how their machines simply enabled people to a view a programme “at a later time, and thereafter eras[e] it”. The court agreed, which in part allowed VCRs to proliferate in the country. In 1998, the Recording Industry Association of America sued Diamond Multimedia Systems for manufacturing the Rio PMP300, a portable MP3 player. The RIAA likewise argued it enabled unauthorised reproductions of copyrighted works, but Diamond’s lawyers successfully adapted the now

legally “safe” nomenclature of time-shifting to explain that the “Rio merely makes copies in order to render portable, or ‘space-shift,’ those files that already reside on a user’s hard drive”. The court agreed, which in part encouraged a significant increase in the sales of MP3 players in America. Evidently, applying legally “safe” nomenclature, like time-shifting, to emerging technologies or practices helped curtail certain risks of legislative scrutiny or litigation. It did not eliminate these risks, however, as was seen when A&M Records sued Napster in 2001. The defendants’ lawyers argued they were protected because their technology also allowed space-shifting. The court did not agree. In their decision, the presiding judges explained that the newly developed nomenclature was inappropriate because the Rio MP3 player “did not also simultaneously involve distribution of the copyrighted material to the general public”. Evidently, applying legally “safe” nomenclature to an emerging technology or practice only works if that nomenclature is determined to be apposite.

The goal of this article is to help determine what nomenclature is apposite and, in doing so, to offer a greater understanding of this emerging cultural practice to film and media theorists and historians, as well as to policymakers. The risk of not doing so is that this determination of what is or is not apposite will be made purely through jurisdictional conflicts with media industries who are motivated to protect their commercial interests. This article aims to mitigate this risk by documenting the ongoing “crisis of identity” (Altman, 19) faced by asynchronous watch alongs. The documentation process thus requires a discussion of the “codes of reality” (*ibidem*) this emerging practice borrows from watch alongs, reaction videos, and film commentaries, while making important theoretical interventions into Julian Hanich’s idea of “affective we-experiences” and Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts. This article ultimately aims to give greater theoretical and historical detail to help preserve the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change presented by this emerging practice. It argues that asynchronous watch alongs are an emerging practice of film consumption that create socially beneficial and affective we-experiences for audiences. However, the growing profitability of the practice leaves its creators at risk of jurisdictional (legal) conflicts with media industries: one of the principal reasons for why they code these experiences through legally “safe” nomenclature like “watch alongs”, “reactions”, and “commentaries”.

To help achieve this aim, I will rely on Jason Brant’s instance as a central case study, while offering examples from other creators. The selection of Brant reflects the various criteria by which an ideal case study for this practice should arguably be chosen. He has been producing content since before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic, which was fundamental to its emergence. Brant was also chosen because he has amassed a large repository of content from which to base our analysis, and he often uses language directly relevant to our discussions of nomenclature. Lastly, his selection highlights a potential limitation of this research by foregrounding my personal experience of the field. Brant’s

content was my first introduction to asynchronous watch alongs. However, I argue this limitation invites opportunities for further research to negate any subjective biases that may have resulted. There are various terms that are currently ascribed to this emerging practice. Let us begin, therefore, with the term that seems to be most prevalent in contemporary discourse: the “watch along”.

Crisis of Identity: Watch Alongs

Like many others, Brant often invites viewers to “watch along” (SBIG 380, 2025) with him and his framed spectators, even though from spatial and temporal perspectives, we are not literally watching “along” with them. We are similarly watching from a different place and time than Cody Leach, despite his frequent “watch along” invitations (CROCODILE - Patreon Watch-Along 2013). I suggest that the application of the term “watch along” to this emerging practice is unsurprising given that “watch alongs” are already an established form of film consumption that have comparable elements to the viewing experiences offered by Brant. It is unsurprising because “new technologies are always born nameless” (Altman, 19) and just as what we today call “cinema” coalesced out of a variety of different elements before we arrived at a broad cultural consensus of the meaning of the term, this practice of watching synchronised prerecorded footage of others watching the same film coalesced from a variety of different practices. This new exercise therefore borrows “codes of reality from existing technologies” as users and practitioners try to understand the new practice based on the various practices they already understand (*ibidem*).

“Watch Alongs” have been a prevalent form of cinematic exhibition since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Moore 2022). They involve spatially dislocated, but (crucially) not temporally dislocated use by viewers of online platforms to watch films simultaneously “along” with others online. A “live stream” is another term often attributed to this practice. There are many software applications that support such experiences. For example, Teleparty, which was formerly called Netflix Party, is a software company founded in 2016 that allows one to synchronise video playback freely adding text chat to online streaming services like Netflix, YouTube, Hulu, Disney Plus, HBO Max, and Amazon Prime. Paying premium users of Teleparty can additionally communicate via audio and video. Regardless of whether you are a free or premium user, if you share a subscription to any of these platforms with any of your friends, Teleparty allows you (in their words) to “watch together”. The “others” with whom one watches could be friends or unknown members of a shared community. In fact, Teleparty supports up to 1,000 simultaneous viewers, and has therefore been used by both individuals and communities to create a variety of co-watching experiences.

For example, the LGBTQ society of the University of Limerick organised a “Queer Hangout” in 2021 in which they watched *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016) through Teleparty while there was “a zoom call happening as

well so that we can chat away while we're watching the movie" (From Out in UL). Maynooth University's student Film Society programmed several screenings throughout 2021 via Teleparty and Discord. To mark the launch of the sports documentary *Rising Phoenix* (2020), Paralympics Ireland hosted a "Netflix Watch Party" (Kinnevey 2020). Likewise, Tolland Public Library in the United States invited members of their community to celebrate together with a "Black History Month Watch Party" (2021). As one may have noticed by the dates of these screenings, Teleparty seems to have become especially popular during the Covid-19 Pandemic, which is an inference supported by the work of Andy Moore on "Digitally Present 'Watchalongs'" (2022).

I argue that Covid-19 watch alongs present an interesting example of the potential of new forms of Internet-enabled film exhibition and consumption that is useful for achieving a greater understanding of asynchronous watch alongs. This is because many scholars traditionally argue that physical proximity is a precondition of co-present viewing (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). Indeed, the central thesis of Julian Hanich's *The Audience Effect* is that "once we watch a movie with others, we become part of a collective constellation that has some kind of effect on our film experience, be it positive or negative (2018, 3). He argues that co-present viewing can create an "affective we-experience" in which audience members share some degree of shared emotion about a film they mutually care about, thereby creating alignment between their subjective emotional experiences (168–181). This is not quite the same as Sianne Ngai's idea of taking pleasure from "Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures" (2012, 28), which are circumstances in which someone shares a video of their affectual response to an object, to which others have their own affectual responses.

Francis Bourgeois excitedly filming a passing steam train (2024) would be an example of Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures, as would reality television series like *Gogglebox* (Stephen Lambert, 2013–present). However, they are incomparable to asynchronous watch alongs because in Ngai's terms, Bourgeois' joy becomes the aesthetic object that attracts people to his videos, not the trains he is viewing. Or, in the case of *Gogglebox*, the reaction of the people on-screen to the television show they are watching becomes the aesthetic object, not the television show itself, which we cannot see. I argue that asynchronous watch along viewers take as much pleasure from the spatially and temporally mediated co-"presence" of Brant as they take from simultaneously viewing the film. These viewers are not "short-circuiting the original object of aesthetic appreciation and leaving it behind" (*ibidem*) because the original film remains fundamentally important to the overall social experience. How then might we explain this kind of cinematic pleasure theoretically and historically?

Expanding upon the work of Horton and Wohl, Chris Rojek argues for a kind of "para-social familiarity" that exists between Brant and his Patreon subscribers originates from the growth of media production and

consumption in the second half of the twentieth century. This implies that we can now enjoy “second order relationships with people with whom we never communicate” (2016, 15). He uses news readers, TV show characters, musicians, sports and film stars as examples, but to this list we can add online content creators like Brant. Rojek highlights that these para-social relationships raise important theoretical questions about the nature of “co-presence”. He argues that in the West, and perhaps globally, our existence is often “mediated through technologically informed relations of co-presence” (135). This would seem to apply to the para-social familiarity between Brant and his Patreon subscribers, but mediated co-presence is equally applicable to our social relationships, because the affordances of social media enable us to develop and maintain social relationships through our screens “in spite of the absence of physical co-presence” (15).

Hanich instead uses the term “medial co-presence” to describe this “form of human co-location in which both individuals remain present at their respective sites and at the same time come into each other’s electronic proximity” (280). He does not discuss watch alongs specifically, but he does make it clear that he considers them to be a social form of film consumption (276). He instead uses Virtual Reality (VR) as an example of how one might achieve such medial co-presence. While I believe we should welcome greater theoretical focus on these emerging practices, I argue that Hanich nevertheless does imply an explicit and subjective hierarchy that values physical over medial co-presence when he asks:

Does anyone seriously want to deny that there are striking differences between watching a film in other persons’ physical or in their medial co-presence? To mention only one important difference: Physical co-presence grants more opportunities to show attentiveness and commitment, and at the same time allows you to detect when others are much less committed. (280)

My response would be no. I do not deny that there is a difference between physical and medial co-presence, but I argue our aim should not be to highlight the greater opportunities that physical has over medial. If weighing the benefits of one over the other was our aim, then one could counter that the “looser social regulations” he ascribes to medial co-presence are arguably easier to control in a medial rather than physical co-present environments. For instance, you can mute unruly audience members while watching a film “together” in VR apps like Bigscreen Beta: you cannot do this at the Liffey Valley VUE.

Indeed, the capacity to control the social nature of one’s viewing experience is one of the primary features of watch parties. Ham *et al.* argue that platforms like Netflix would better serve their users by fostering and maintaining their social networks, rather than just serving as a distribution and exhibition platform (2024, 457). Interestingly, many major platforms have been experimenting with offering these kinds of services since the pandemic. Hulu’s Watch Party, for example, is a feature that allows up to eight Hulu subscribers to watch thousands of on-demand films and TV

shows from Hulu's streaming library. Notably, some platforms offered these services but subsequently withdrew them. Plex ceased support for their "Watch Together" feature in February 2025 without citing a reason. Rakuten Viki, which specialises in South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese film and television, introduced their "Watch Party" feature in 2020 to help their community stay connected during the Covid-19 pandemic (Viki Support Help Center 2024). Audience uptake was initially slow, so in 2021 they commissioned research that suggested one of the barriers to popularising their feature was that most Rakuten Viki users were based in the US, Europe, Middle East, and Africa where South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese film and television were less popular (Yee 2021). Usage of the Watch Party feature increased after they enabled publicly accessible rather than just private screenings, so that more geographically dispersed users could find likeminded co-viewers. This is notable as it may explain audiences' motivations for consuming asynchronous watch alongs. As soon as they were able to watch with an audience that mutually cared about the material, they were able to enjoy affective we-experiences more readily.

The company owners have since claimed that "viewer habits have shifted", which is why in 2024 they chose to discontinue the service and "focus on developing new features and enhancements that better meet the evolving needs of our viewers" (Viki Discussions 2024). This decreased demand may be true, although they have not released any data, and judging by their Community Discussions there are a lot of fans bemoaning the loss (Rescue the Watch Party Feature 2024). One might also consider that the higher server and QA costs of synchronising multiple streams for a global multilingual platform like Rakuten Viki may have influenced their decision, as well as perhaps avoiding any complications brought about by sharing across territory-restricted boundaries and licenses.

These problems may not be such a hindrance to larger media corporations, however, who have exercised greater power in any jurisdictional conflicts that might arise. Apple's SharePlay feature, for example, allows users to stream TV shows, films, and music in sync with friends and family while on a FaceTime call, and YouTube Premium members can instead use Google Meet to watch YouTube videos with others. Discord likewise offers their Go Live and Screen Share option, which allows users to screen share any application window, or their entire screen in a server or voice call with up to fifty people. The growing prevalence of these software services arguably helps code the reality of "a watch party" (live stream) for both users (audiences) and practitioners. Interestingly, these live stream watch parties are themselves coded according to the reality of in-person co-viewing experiences that were suddenly made unavailable during the pandemic (Moore 2022). It is perhaps no surprise that asynchronous watch along audiences are borrowing the codes of reality from existing watch parties (live streams) to understand and articulate this emerging practice.

There is also a vibrant supporting industry that incentivises practitioners specifically to borrow codes of reality from watch parties by providing them with products and services to facilitate the new practice. These are often business-to-business software as service (B2BSaaS) companies like Nerd or Die, OverlayOn, OWN3D, Stream Builder, and Overlays Uno. These producers specialise in providing customisable, real-time graphic overlays that connect to a content creator's Elgato Stream Deck (a specialised audio mixer, studio controller, production console for online content creators). Overlays Uno promote their service to watch along content creators specifically by suggesting that:

People love watchalongs because they're an authentic, interactive, and even validating experience. They can connect to someone who is as excited about something as they are, often sharing their opinions... You don't have to stick to what's hot, new and trending. Some of the most popular watchalong podcasts focus on cult classics, critically acclaimed shows, or nostalgic hits like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Whatever you choose, you'll scratch the particular itch people get when they want to talk about their latest obsession, but nobody in their life is watching that film or show anymore. Give them that outlet by sharing your breakdown of what's happening in real time. (Overlays Uno. 2025)

This emphasis on the greater communicative potential of online film exhibition and consumption mirror the broader desire for social media companies to foster "productive" word-of-mouth interactions (Hewitt 2023, 37–95). ("Productive" in this sense refers to the production of social, cultural, symbolic, and importantly for companies like Overlays Uno, economic capital.) This emphasis on productivity further explains why practitioners like Brant are borrowing codes of reality from watch parties to apply to this emerging practice.

If we look at this emphasis on productivity from a critical perspective, we can see how platforms like YouTube and Discord support these practices of both watching others, and be watched ourselves, because "commercializing and standardizing affect" (Rojek 2016, 136) is a lucrative business model. José van Dijck makes a similar historical point in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* when she argues the underlying assumptions made by early Internet pioneers: the Web's goal was to make the World more social, and it now supports "the ideology of making online sociality salable" (2013, 14). In simple terms, the codes of reality that Brant and others are borrowing from watch parties provide a useful model by which they can monetise this new content. Thankfully, we should note that it also provides a model by which audiences can use the content that Brant and others produce as cultural resources potentially helping them produce social, cultural, symbolic, and even economic capital for themselves. This likely indicates the motivations of audiences engaging in this practice, although more research is required in this area.

In terms of the social advantages of these developments, existing research shows there are demonstrable benefits offered to audiences by digital communication technologies that can create a form of mediated co-presence in which they can use platforms like WhatsApp and FaceTime to communicate with each other while they watch the same content (Kim *et al.* 2021). This research involved surveying 367 undergraduate students across Pennsylvania, New York, Missouri, California, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Ohio, and it found that such experiences were enjoyable for their participants “because of the feeling of social presence of virtual coviewers” (7). An important survey of two thousand American adults who had used an SVOD service between December 2020 and January 2021 was commissioned by The Diffusion Group (TDG). It showed that as a result of the social isolation and lack of available in-person co-watching experiences caused by the pandemic, six in ten SVOD users in the country had heard of co-watching, and three in ten reported having used the feature (Kozak 2021). Among these co-watchers, more than half had used Teleparty (*ibidem*). More recent research further highlights the social benefits of these practices for spatially dislocated viewers. A November 2021 study, for example, surveyed 320 South Korean adults and found that co-watching with friends and family significantly reduces Covid-19-related depressive symptoms (Ham *et al.* 2024).

This is not to say that all users seek out communal cinematic experiences for social benefit. The impact of solitary at-home film consumption on communal spectatorship at the cinema has been subject to much criticism, with many commentators deriding so-called “binge watching”. However, Zlatina Nikolova argues that for people seeking “elective states of loneliness”, their relatively easy access to handheld devices and abundant media content

offers a new form of self-care that is better suited to a way of life, profoundly transformed by ubiquitous computing, which alters our understanding of moving image’s presence in the physical world, binding it to the digital device. (Nikolova 2023, 76)

By extension, I propose that asynchronous watch alongs enable people who do seek communal cinematic experiences for social benefit, but have “either chosen a more socially-distanced life or have had no other option but to embrace such forms of elective solitude” (*ibidem*, 75), to use the affordances of digital platforms to create a spatially and temporally mediated form of film consumption that provides a comparable affective experience to physical co-present viewing. Consequently, I suggest that while Hanich focuses on in-person co-present viewing experiences rather than “medial co-presence”, its demonstrable benefits show that by borrowing the codes of reality from watch alongs, audiences and practitioners of asynchronous watch alongs can potentially foster similarly socially beneficial affective we-experiences. Although, again, more research on audience motivations is required here.

Kim *et al.* close their study with a similar call for further research by pointing out that more work needs to be done on how viewing habits changed after Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were eased. This article partially responds to that call by suggesting that some audiences have become more accustomed to spatially and temporally mediated co-viewing experiences. Moreover, thanks to the growing archive of such material on the likes of Patreon – Brant’s SBG series for instance is currently at episode 422 – audiences have a considerable repository of co-viewing experiences from which to draw. In summary, I argue the codes of reality that audiences and practitioners derive from watch alongs (live streams) have been subsequently recognised in this emerging practice because of several factors. These include: the growth of watch alongs during the pandemic, the supporting industry of products and services designed to facilitate them, the social benefits for audiences seeking affective we-experiences, and the economic benefits potentially offered to practitioners of a lucrative online industry. These inferences go some way to show that asynchronous watch alongs are to some extent an adaptation of watch alongs. Nevertheless, they also include features that are entirely novel. We shall see this process of adaptation and innovation in the following discussion of the other two terms currently ascribed to this practice: “reactions” and “commentaries”.

Crisis of Identity: Reactions and Commentaries

This article aims to give greater theoretical and historical understanding to scholars and policymakers by documenting the language ascribed to this new practice. Doing so is important because this language may one day feature in jurisdictional conflicts that are intended to curtail the incentives and opportunities for innovation and change provided by the new practice, in favour of the commercial interests of an entrenched power. With this definitional objective in mind, the final two terms to discuss are “reactions” and “commentaries”. There are several creators who apply these terms. Run to the Movies, for example, describes the viewing experiences they offer as “Full Length Movie Reactions” that are also “in watch-along format” (2023). They use the words “Full Length” to differentiate their paywalled Patreon videos from their freely available “movie reaction and commentary” videos on YouTube, which are edited compilations formally similar to Brant’s SBIG series. Rob Squad Movie Reactions likewise offer “Full Length Watch Alongs” on Patreon to differentiate from their “YouTube Edits” (2025). Mellow McK-Jordan’s channel also mixes the concept of a watch along with a reaction video in his introductory blurb on Patreon:

You Want Someone To Watch Movies With? TV Shows? Anime Even? Join Me And The Community Of MellVerse, Get The Opportunity To Personally Interact With Me And Decide What We Get To Watch. Here You Get To See My Full Uncut Reactions To All Things Entertainment! (MellVerse 2025)

The earliest example I can find of what might now be called a “reaction video” was uploaded on December 6, 2005 (JinRoh), but the mode did not enter public discourse until roughly 2011 (Rowe 2018, 198).

In his article on “Reaction value: affective reflex in the digital public sphere” (2024) sociologist and political economist William Davies gives greater insight into how the term reaction has developed since then, by providing a typology by which we might classify them. He posits three types. “Feedback” is an instantaneous form of reaction enabled by digital platform affordances (300–302). Davies argues that affordances such as the “like” and “dislike” buttons, emojis, and reaction GIFs function as affective expressions that are communicated without the human face. While these elements are a key means by which YouTube content creators like Brant measure engagement, they are not necessarily relevant to our understanding of the asynchronous watch along experience. Unlike danmu experiences provided by websites like AcFun and Bilibili, likes, emojis, and reaction GIFs are not visible on the screen during asynchronous watch alongs. Moreover, the human faces of those reacting are very much visible and important.

Davies’s second type, “Reaction As Content”, is a form of reaction that foregrounds the importance of the human face (303–304).

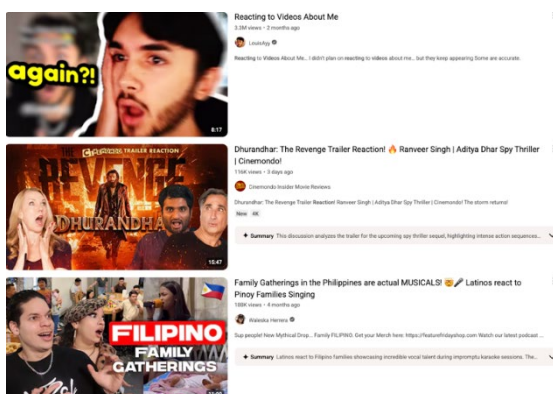


Figure 1. An Assortment of Reaction Video Thumbnails from YouTube.

As we can see in *Figure 1*, hyperbolic expressions of shock, horror, disgust, excitement, and amusement commonly feature in YouTube content creators’ thumbnails. Williams traces this type of reaction to TV shows like “Candid Camera” from the 1940s, which allowed us to see how ordinary people react in extraordinary circumstances. In his typology, Davies suggests a key formal feature of reaction videos is viewers’ filming themselves reacting to media content which they are supposedly watching for the first time (303). While this is relevant to many of the examples that he chooses, it is not so relevant to asynchronous watch alongs as many of the films that Brant’s channel features are films that he or his guests have already seen. Arguably, this kind of repeat viewing and familiarity is less emblematic of “reaction as content” and more akin to the kind of repeated consumption necessary to build subcultural capital within cult film communities (Jancovich 2002).

Formal differences aside, reaction videos are now “an essential part of the YouTube creator economy” (Ghosh and Tripathi 2025, 230). Like

watch alongs, they have been shown to offer tremendous social benefit to their audiences, especially when those audiences were subject to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions (Ghosh and Tripathi). They also potentially offer tremendous economic benefit to their practitioners and have thus been subject to much jurisdictional conflict. For example, in 2016, The Fine Brothers, who had developed highly profitable online channels like Kids React, Teens React, Elders React, and YouTubers React, tried unsuccessfully to trademark the concept of a “reaction video”, and in doing so, issued many content ID claims that resulted in other users having their reaction videos taken down by YouTube (Fine Brothers Ent.).

Although Run to the Movies, Rob Squad Movie Reactions, and MellVerse do not put great emphasis on the idea of reacting to a film for the first time, in presenting the asynchronous watch along experiences they offer through the codes of reality established by reaction videos, they are grounding their user-experience in a mode of consumption with which many audience members are likely already familiar. For practitioners wishing to monetise their reaction videos through advertising revenue rather than Patreon subscriptions, this familiarity is potentially beneficial when pitching one’s content to advertisers. Lastly, by coding the experience of this emerging practice through reaction videos, it might be possible to avoid the jurisdictional conflicts to which reaction videos have already been subjected (Hosseinzadeh v. Klein 2017). The possibility of coding the experience through a well-established practice is also evident in the third and final phrase by which this emerging practice is often referred: “the film commentary track”.

As well as calling them “reactions”, Run to the Movies often refer to their content as “commentaries” (PREDATOR 2 2024), as does Cody Leach who asks his Patreon followers to “vote below on what movie you want me to do a commentary on” (2017). According to Barbara Klinger, the concept of a “film commentary track” emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s when American distributors needed to justify to consumers the higher cost of LaserDiscs by creating added “value” through “special editions”. These included attractive features like digitally remastered versions of the film, trailers, outtakes, “making of” documentaries, and commentary tracks (Klinger, 60). As DVDs became the dominant home video format in the 1990s, extra features like commentaries became a “major drawing card for consumers” (*ibidem*, 70). By the time online content creators began making film commentary tracks of their own – a practice common for roughly the last two decades – the codes of reality of that emerging practice had been long established for both audiences and practitioners. Interestingly, the practice of content creators providing commentaries has now fed back into the industry. For example, Jarret Gahan from the Good Movie Monday podcast recorded a commentary track for the Vestron Video Collector’s Series re-release of *Dream a Little Dream* (Marc Rocco, 1989), and Nathaniel Thompson of Mondo Video and Ryan Turek of Shock Till You Drop likewise recorded a commentary track for Vestron’s re-release of *Chopping Mall* (Jim Wynorski, 1986). By borrowing their codes of reality

from commentary tracks, Run to the Movies and Cody Leach are once again grounding their user-experience in a mode of consumption with which audiences are already familiar. Moreover, by labouring to produce extra features for films in the form of commentaries, they create new texts that benefit the distributors of the “original” texts by incentivising people to purchase adapted versions of those films. This intervention highlights the final theoretical means by which we might better understand this emerging practice: the paratext.

In Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately* (2010), he calls for an “off-screen studies” to reevaluate the meaning that film blogs, posters, reviews, social media discussions, toys, trailers, video games or, in our case, watch alongs, reaction videos, and commentaries, can have on one’s overall textual experience. As one common example, Gray identifies film trailers as “tangible” paratexts. With the common feature that that are readily circulated, seen, and shared other examples are posters, reviews, and social media discussions. Genre on the other hand, is an “intangible” paratext. *Chopping Mall* is a horror comedy film about malfunctioning security robots that hunt and kill young people in a mall. Its genre works paratextually by framing the viewer’s expectations. One is likely to see comedic portrayals of violence in *Chopping Mall*, but one is unlikely to see a nuanced exploration of the potential for technology to destroy its creators.

The content that Brant and others create is interesting because it operates paratextually in three overlapping ways. The feature-length videos of Brant watching a film are, in and of themselves, tangible paratexts. We can download them, we can share them, we might even choose to watch them on their own. However, when screened simultaneously with the “original” film, they facilitate a change the audience’s textual experience. This operation creates a third and entirely new kind of intangible paratext in which Brant’s audience can share some degree of shared emotion about a film like *Chopping Mall* that they mutually care about, and in the process foster an alignment between their subjective emotional experiences. This new kind of intangible paratext is the affective we-experience audiences receive from asynchronous watch alongs.

One might question if one can share an emotional response to an event with someone who is not experiencing the event simultaneously. However, according to Hanich, one of the “most important enabling conditions for shared emotions” is “diachronical relations” (174). In other words, emotional responses can overcome temporal separation. Fear, for example, is not a response that is rooted in the present. In her study of “Affective Economies”, Sarah Ahmed argues that fear “responds to that which is approaching rather than already here” (2004, 125). It is also possible to have a shared emotional response to a major news event, positive or negative, long after others have learned of it, and responded to it online (Garcia and Rimé 2019). It is useful to follow Gray’s call not to dismiss these paratexts as purely add-ons to an “original” text like *Chopping Mall*. We should instead consider the totality of the textual

meanings and subsequent emotional responses they produce. The first of those is the capacity for them to function as affective we-experiences that have been shown to have potential social benefit to their audiences. The second is their capacity to function as promotional resources for the content creators offering the experiences, as well as to publicise the films with which they are synchronised.

Films like *Xtro* have long exhausted any promotional funds that their distributor New Line Cinema applied to them. This is made clear by Gray's observation that while audience members can privilege certain modes of exhibition and consumption that will impact their reception, as well as perhaps impacting the reception of those within a shared community, "we must avoid the trap of seeing these as necessarily of equal presence and power as those created by film and television producers and their marketing teams" (162–163). Gray uses the examples of media-related wikis like the Fandom.com page for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) to show how fan communities can receive media in ways unintended by their copyright holders. In this case, he would argue New Line Cinema retains more presence and power to affect reception by their continuing investment in the franchise through releases like their 4K Blu-Ray. This is noteworthy because many films that Brant features for his watch alongs have no marketing teams currently assigned to them. This would have been the case upon their original releases, and if they were later distributed by Boutique labels like Vinegar Syndrome, however these have ceased operation. In the instance of Vinegar Syndrome, for instance, they would have promoted their releases of *Hellmaster* in 2019 and *New York Ninja* in 2022, but Brant's watch alongs in 2024 and 2023 were circulated without the "presence and power" of Vinegar Syndrome's marketing team. The affective we-experiences that Brant created for *Hellmaster* (Douglas Schulze, 1992) and *New York Ninja* (John Liu, 2021) privilege a certain mode of exhibition and consumption that impacts their contemporary reception. These reincarnations are potentially more impactful for one of his Patreon subscribers than the film's original promotional paratexts. This highlights the third and final textual meaning produced by this emerging practice. It relates to the greater degree of agency afforded to audiences by how certain films are exhibited and consumed. Rather than relying on distributors to promote these films theatrically or on home video, the audience offer continual recommendations to Brant, Leach, and their peers through their respective communities, whether conveyed through Discord, YouTube, or to Patreon directly. In doing so, they mirror the capacity for emerging distribution mechanisms like Crowdsourced Cinema to enable audience members to participate in a counterhegemonic process of film distribution (Hewitt, 184–185).

Conclusion

This article has argued that asynchronous watch alongs are an emerging practice of film consumption that can create socially beneficial affective

we-experiences for film audiences. However, due to social media platforms' capacity to commercialise and standardise affect, they can also create lucrative financial opportunities for platforms like YouTube and Patreon, as well as content creators like Brant. Faced with such growing profitability, asynchronous watch alongs are potentially at risk from media industries that have historically reacted to any emerging practices threatening their profits by engaging in jurisdictional conflict to constrain their potential and, consequently, the social benefits of that practice. Effectively, content creators are coding the experiences they provide through legally "safe" nomenclature like watch alongs, reactions, and commentaries.

The goal of this article was to give greater theoretical and historical understanding to policymakers and film and media scholars regarding these coding practices, ensuring that the social benefits resulting from the exhibition and consumption of asynchronous watch alongs are not ultimately subjugated to commercial interests of entrenched media industries. In doing so, I have suggested that asynchronous watch alongs represent an as-yet unidentified form of intangible paratext in which the audiences of content creators like Brant synchronise their film consumption with Brant's, thereby creating a form of medial co-presence in which there is an alignment between their respective subjective emotional experiences. This article highlights the many potential social benefits of this practice, but it also highlights the potential benefits for film distributors. In monetising the affective we-experiences they create, online content creators like Brant promote home video and VOD releases of films that have likely long exhausted any promotional funds their distributors applied to them. Indeed, rather than constrain this practice, this may suggest why distributors might choose to support it.

In making tentative inroads into this as-yet undocumented cultural practice, this article has offered calls for further research on audience motivations. One might approach this from several perspectives. One might offer deeper exploration of how para-social relationships function within asynchronous watch alongs. One might also look at the practice in terms of gender or race, or perhaps consider how asynchronous watch alongs function within non-Anglophone online platforms.

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A New Look at the Film Company of Ireland

Veronica Johnson

The Film Company of Ireland (est. 1916) has been unfairly overlooked in histories of Irish cinema. Dwarfed by the success of the Kalem company (and associates) in Ireland between 1910 and 1914, interest in it is also stymied by the fact that most of the films it produced are lost. However, this first indigenous Irish fiction film company is deserving of greater scholarly attention. This paper will look at the eventful first year of the company, from its beginning in March 1916 to the period just before the production of its first feature film the following year. It was one of the most productive for the company because at least nine short films were made in various locations in Dublin, Wicklow, and Kerry. As most of the focus on this company to date has been on the two extant feature length films, this body of short films has been neglected. For example, standard volumes of Irish cinema history such as Ruth Barton's *Irish National Cinema* and *Cinema and Ireland* by Kevin Rocket *et al.* give strong analysis of the two feature films only. Using archival sources, I will examine what kind of films the company was making in its first year of operating. What is clear from these sources is that the company was determined to make Irish films, in Ireland, with Irish actors. More than that, they wanted to show Ireland as it truly was, to depict rural and urban Ireland in the 1910s, and to move away from the stereotypical and frequently negative image of Irishness depicted in American and English films (*Evening Herald*, 1918). However, it is worth noting that the company was also influenced by global trends in the film industry, such as the employment of stage actors in screen roles and the contemporary fondness for adaptations. It was both an Irish company and an international company. This article will focus on the Irish aspect of the company.

In March 1916, the Film Company of Ireland set up offices at 16 Henry Street. The aim of the company was to “establish, organise and work in Ireland the manufacture and construction of cinema films of every

description and to engage in the making of scenic and dramatic moving pictures, and in the sale and exchange of cinema pictures, and to engage in the employment of skilled and unskilled labour, and of all such artistes, authors, and performers as the development of the business may require” (“An Irish Film Company”). A month later the same offices were destroyed in the Easter Rising and the company moved to 34 Dame Street (“Display Ad 31”). Dame Street was not an unnatural habitat for the company as, at the time, many other film businesses also had offices there. These included the Gaumont film company where its Dublin premises were located for the screening and distribution of its films, and the Fox Film Company had offices at Dame House in on the same street (“Fox Publicity”). The Express Film Agency was also in Dame Street at the Commercial Buildings (“La Gioconda”). This was an excellent location for a neophyte film company, strategically surrounding itself with other strong players in the industry, and beside the Dame Street Picture House: the cinema where most of its films were first shown (“The Irish Limelight”).

The names on the company register are James Mark Sullivan and Henry Fitzgibbon, but this does not reflect the full cohort of those who ran the company. Fitzgibbon went to America in November 1916 and seems to have relinquished his interest in filmmaking at that point. (“Film Company of Ireland”). In reality the company was run by the husband-and-wife team James and Ellen Sullivan. It was they who hired actors, directors, and crew members, approved scripts, and produced the films. They also had the artistic vision for the company, focusing on screenplays of Irish interest. They were determined to show the modern Irish person on screen and to move away from previous stereotypical depictions.

James was an Irish American who emigrated from Kerry as a child with his parents. Educated at Yale, he was a lawyer by training, and he married Ellen (Nell) O’Mara from Limerick in 1910. Nell was well educated, well read, well travelled, wealthy, and cosmopolitan. She returned with James to America on their marriage and they lived in New York until 1913 when he was appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Dominican Republic. When he left that post in 1915, the Sullivans returned to Ireland, setting up home in Dublin where they established the Film Company of Ireland the following year. Nothing in their backgrounds indicates any previous connection to the film industry, which makes the achievements of the first year even more impressive. To begin with they hired actors, most of whom came from the Abbey Theatre, including Joseph Michael Kerrigan, the well-known character actor and Abbey tutor. Kerrigan was the first film director of the company, taking charge of its initial films. Alongside Kerrigan were other actors from the National Theatre, including Fred O’Donovan, the leading man at the Abbey who would also go on to direct films for the company.

The ambition and enthusiasm of the company’s members, and their ability to promote their films, have given rise to discrepancies between accounts on the number of films they advertised as being made and about to be made. Extant records for the number of films that were ultimately

shown in cinemas are also tentative. This article focuses on the films that were given a cinematic release between March 1916 and March 1917 as it is the only way we can say for sure that these films were made. The nine films screened in cinemas are: *O'Neil of the Glen*, *The Miser's Gift*, *Food of Love*, *An Unfair Love Affair*, *The Girl of Glenbeigh*, *The Eleventh Hour*, *Romance of Puck Fair*, *Widow Malone*, and *A Woman's Wit*. It is most likely that all of them were directed by Joseph Michael Kerrigan; all are confirmed as such and detailed in the filmography below. At various stages in August 1916 the company also announced that they had other films in production or about to go into production. Those named were: *The Upstart*, *Blarney*, *The Irish Girl*, *Shanachies Tales* (a series), *Bye Ways of Fate*, *Treasure Trove*, *Willie Reilly*, *The Girl from the Golden Vale* ("Films that draw"), *Irish Jarvey's Tales*, *Blarney Romance*, *The Irish Girl* (a romance), and *Treasure Trove* ("New Irish Films"). With a total of eleven additional films and a series, their ambition was evident as they embarked on their first year of operation.

The destruction of their first offices in Henry Street during the Easter Rising was a significant setback. Reports in the first issue of *The Irish Limelight* in January 1917 state that the "Company's first efforts were lost in the Dublin fire" ("What the Irish Film Co."), suggesting that at least one film was made and had been on the premises at that time. Notwithstanding the rocky start the company quickly recovered and, by June 1916, they had made their first film: *O'Neil of the Glen*, directed by Kerrigan and starring Bryan Magowan, Nora Clancy, Fred O'Donovan, J. M. Carré, Justice Smith, and Kerrigan himself. These actors, with Kathleen Murphy and Valentine Roberts, would become the core cast for the films made over the next two years and most were Abbey Theatre actors. The film was screened for the press, and there was enthusiastic support for the new initiative ("Irish Film Production"). There was a sense that Ireland's having its own film industry was long overdue.

O'Neil of the Glen concerns the intertwining fates of two families: the O'Neils (landowners) and the Tremaines (solicitors). Tremaine (J. M. Carré) kills O'Neil (who according to best recorded evidence was most likely played by Justice Smith) after the discovery of the fact that he has defrauded the landowner. Without knowing who the murderer is, O'Neil's son Don (Bryan Magowan) vows vengeance on the killer. Greaves (Fred O'Donovan) discovers Tremaine's secret and uses it to become engaged to Tremaine's daughter Nola (Nora Clancy) against her wishes, as she has fallen in love with Don O'Neil after he saved her life. Desperately Greaves attempts to kill Don O'Neil and reveals his knowledge of what happened to her father to Nola. When she discloses this to Don the couple is ultimately united. Although the film was warmly received at this press launch it did not get a public release until the August when it had its public premiere at the Bohemian Picture Theatre, on August 7, 1916.

The film was based on a successful novel by M. T. Pender. This fact and because it was the first film produced by an indigenous film company likely ensured its positive reception in Ireland. The story is filled with twists and turns and melodramatic events typical of the contemporary novel, and

it is reasonable to believe that the narrative was fast-paced and engaging. The actors, although working on their first feature film, were nonetheless experienced stage actors and likely gave very good performances. It is most probable that the settings were well filmed and the action skilfully staged because those aesthetic features were to become a notable feature of subsequent films by the Film Company of Ireland (“With the Film Co. of Ireland”).

The choice of story for their first film is an interesting one and marks the company’s intent to be associated with Irish topics and Irish stories, and particularly stories by Irish writers. M. T. Pender’s novel *O’Neil of the Glen* was a dramatic and action-filled love story. Duplicitous solicitors, vengeful sons, evil blackmailers, and women whose lives were dominated by the male characters representing all three set types were standard tropes of many national melodramatic narratives at the time. The Film Company of Ireland might have chosen to tell such a dramatic tale without reference to the novel or to an Irish writer or screenwriter. However, by choosing this specific story the company made a clear statement of their intent to base their films on already known Irish stories. In addition to taking the story from Pender’s novel, the company judiciously hired screenwriter W. J. Lysaght to work on the adaptation. The company was also actively advertising for screenwriters at the period, emphasising that the focus should be on Irish stories. An advertisement that was frequently published definitely signalled the urgency and conviction of their ambitions: “Wanted. Scenarios, preferably Irish atmosphere. Prompt payment for accepted work.” (Miscellaneous). The placing of these notices unambiguously indicates both the company’s professional approach to filmmaking and its commitment to making films about Irish life.

As the first indigenous fiction film company in Ireland, it was warmly welcomed by the Irish press. There was a desire on the part of the print media to have a film company that would represent Ireland accurately. This was best described in the first issue of *The Irish Limelight* in January 1917 where they indicate the benefits of such an enterprise:

By means of the film, the mountains, the valleys, the rivers, the sea coast, the cities, the country and the people can be shown in their usual avocations, living their lives, enjoying their pastimes, combating their troubles and meeting destiny in each particular country’s own way. It was indeed, time for a respectable, responsible picture industry to make a start in Ireland. (“What the Irish Film Co.”)

That start at a “respectable, responsible picture industry” had been made by the Film Company of Ireland in 1916. There is also an indication here, and in other accounts, that it was time that Ireland had its own film industry and there were aspirational expressions that the Film Company of Ireland would be the institution to provide that industry. Furthermore, there was approval that the company uses Irish actors, directors and stories, and a corresponding hope and belief that the creative combination would finally lead to a more accurate representation of Irishness on the screen. For

example, the *Kerry News* journal called their films “truly representative of this country and its people” (*Kerry News*) a sentiment that was echoed in newspapers around the country. In response to *O’Neil of the Glen* the *Irish Examiner* celebrated the nation’s finally having a film company “whose one object is to show Irish life in its true perspective, without grotesque exaggeration, or what is just as bad, giving an unreal picture of it, even when the intention is friendly to the country and the people. The Film Company of Ireland are to be congratulated on their enterprise in photographing Irish works acted by Irish men and women amidst Irish surroundings” (“O’Neil of the Glen”). The strong response to the depiction of Irishness on screen by Irish actors in local stories in national settings was further endorsed by the ways in which these films would counteract the various negative stereotypical representations of the country in other contemporary film and print media. Writing on this matter *The Irish Limelight* stated that:

The Company has its mission; its work is not only to entertain with Irish humour, legend and story - the purpose of the Company is to make Ireland known to the rest of the world as she has never been known before; to let outside people realise that we have in Ireland other things than the dudeen, buffoon, knee breeches and brass buckles. (“What the Irish Film Co. is doing”)

The film also got a very good review in *The Bioscope*, the British trade journal for cinema owners and managers. The review was particularly impressed by the acting, and spoke of its naturalistic style, something that the Abbey actors had been praised for in their stage performances. Its review stated that “each distinctive part is played with singularly realistic naturalness”, singling out Nora Clancy, J. M. Kerrigan, Fred O’Donovan and J. M. Carré. The review also noted that “The scenes were most excellently chosen and quite perfectly filmed” (“The Bioscope”). As a documented review, this reflection is particularly useful for historians today. Because of the absence of the film the commentary might be seen as less biased than the reviews from the Irish press, the British press, and especially the British trade press who had no vested interest in the success of an Irish film company and therefore were less likely to be biased in offering a positive review to its début.

The company initially made their films in Dublin or in the Wicklow mountains. *O’Neil of the Glen* was quickly followed by *The Miser’s Gift* which also had a private release at the Dame Street Picture House on the August 17. This two-reel film was most probably directed by J. M. Kerrigan, who also starred as the eponymous miser, Old Dolan, who “thinks of nothing but his crock of gold” (*The Irish Times*). His daughter Eileen (probably played by Nora Clancy) is wooed by a “handsome young boatman” (Fred O’Donovan) (*The Liberator*). From extant descriptions of the film in the press, it appears that the story involves the young couple having to overcome the father’s opposition to the romance, and that the materialistic father has to learn how to love his gold less. Other members of the cast were Brian Magowan, Kathleen Murphy, Valentine Roberts and

J. M. Carré. For their second film this was most ambitious: not only was it a two-reeler, but it also daringly ventured towards a supernatural turn that might have compromised the integrity of its naturalism by featuring leprechauns. *The Irish Times* reviewed and praised the film, adding:

It is agreeable to have pictures such as this, preserving a genuinely Irish atmosphere and that inherent charm which is to be found in Irish life. The sight, for instance, of lepracauns [*sic*] and other little people who live in legend, disporting themselves in a fairy fort is a feature which is surely pleasing to Irish eyes. (*The Irish Times*)

From existing copies of the original cast list it is likely that these characters were played by Magowan, Murphy, Roberts, and Carré. This was a very ambitious and unusual approach for a film company who were determined to represent Irish life as it truly was on screen. The inclusion of leprechauns in their second film would seem at first glance to embrace the type of Irish stereotypes depicted by their American and British counterparts, and it shines an interesting light on the type of films that the company considered open to the possibility of offering a specific kind of “Irish” disposition. To understand this apparent disconnection between the desire for an authentic representation of Irish life on screen and the inclusion of leprechauns and “other little people” in their second film, it is important to draw attention to the judicious use of the word “legend” in the review. The film was praised for depicting the mythical and legendary “beings” of Irish folklore. The Celtic revival reignited a significant interest in traditional Irish legends and many new stories had been published that included the more supernatural entities of the national mythology. A typical example of this was *The Kiltartan Wonder Book* (1910) published by Lady Augusta Gregory of the Abbey Theatre. In their second film the company was delivering what it believed to be an identifiable Irish story by including creatures of Irish legend in a way that might align the identity of the tale with the Celtic revival, thus indicating their aspiration to produce culturally credible works. By featuring leprechauns in their second film it is likely that the Film Company of Ireland was not only connecting itself strongly to its Irish cultural and folk heritage, but that it was also reclaiming the depiction of these mythical beings from the stereotypical depictions and negative associations that were a part of British and American films, sketches, plays, illustrations, and cartoons. A comment by Godfrey Kilroy writing as “Paddy” in the Ireland column in *The Bioscope* can perhaps shed some light on this. He states that “Their second picture, ‘The Miser’s Gift’ is greatly in advance of the first as regards the quality, and if this company stick to their guns they should still be well in the front rank of British producers” (“All Irish Films”). This is high praise from an influential trade journal, and the fact that it doesn’t mention legendary beings is significant: it appreciates the film as professionally made and indicative of possible longevity and the future success of the company.

An Unfair Love Affair was the fourth film the company released, and it too featured a being from another realm. In this film, the main character,

Nora (most likely played by Nora Clancy), seeks advice from the “Boola” or “little image” when courted by two men as to which she should accept as a suitor (“Davison’s announcement”). A renewed use of imaginary beings in the second of its first four films invites the consideration that the company had been using trick photography to render these images of fairy folk on screen. It would be consistent with the ambitions of the company that they would experiment in this way. Given that they began with such enthusiasm for filmmaking, that they recruited the best actors in the country, that they recovered so quickly from the destructive fire in their original premises in Henry Street, it is not impossible that they were also experimenting with form and technology in their first films. That this mechanical testing was standard practice among pioneers of the medium, which the cinematic apparatus readily facilitated, gives strength to the hypothesis.

The other films made in this productive first year can be divided into the Dublin/Wicklow films and the Kerry films, according to filming location. The initial spurt of filmmaking which seems to have been undertaken between March and August 1916 resulted in at least four productions: *O’Neil of the Glen*, *The Miser’s Gift*, *Food of Love*, and *A Woman’s Wit* all of which were made in locations in Dublin and Wicklow. At least four others have been confirmed as shot in Kerry in a very productive month between August and September 1916: *The Girl of Glenbeigh*, *The Eleventh Hour*, *Romance of Puck Fair*, and *Widow Malone*. For the only other film made in this period, *An Unfair Love Affair*, it is difficult to determine the venue of its shoot, either from reports at the time or from comparing its release with the period in which the company were in Kerry. Nevertheless, what is clear from this list of locations and films is how busy and productive the company was: not only in its first year, but in its first six months. All of the nine films we know were released by the company were made in the period up to the beginning of September 1916. This output is admirable and extraordinary from a new company with no prior experience of the craft or mechanics of the industry.

The move of filming locations from Dublin and Wicklow to Kerry was most likely brought about by the Irish weather. While there are reports that the company was building a studio in Dublin at the end of August 1916 (“City and District”), it appears that most of their films were made on location without a studio, or at least with very little interior filming. The company had also quickly established a reputation for being very good at photographing scenery. Bearing this in mind, in the light of not having a studio, it made sense for them to prolong outdoor work when possible in Ireland, avoiding detrimental contingencies that would compromise production schedules. Thus, a move to Kerry locations would have widened the visual landscape and avoided inclement weather in the east of the country. The company settled in Muckross and filmed in and around Killarney. From the information we have we know that they filmed in Glenbeigh (*The Girl of Glenbeigh*) and around Caragh Lake between Killorglin and Glenbeigh (*The Eleventh Hour*). It is possible that they shot *Puck Fair Romance* in Killorglin. The cast and crew who made their way to

Kerry included both the Sullivans, Fitzgibbon and his wife, Kerrigan, O'Donovan, Magowan, Clancy, Carré, Justice, Murphy, and Peggy Darval who acted in some of the films. Mrs. M. Bennett, wife of the cinematographer for the company, was also among the party (*Evening Herald*). It appears that they spent almost a month in the south making between four and five films, some of them three reels in length. A report from the *Kerry News* at the beginning of September praises the company for organising a night of entertainment to raise funds for the local church. From this article we get a glimpse into how the company travelled and worked together. In these early days the whole group, including spouses and the general manager formed a tight unit, travelling together and staying in the same hotel together for many weeks ("Film Company of Ireland: Church Debt Wiped Out").

September was a busy month for the film company. Not only were they making a number of films on location in Kerry, but they were also expanding their capability in other ways, constantly on the lookout for new material, expending premises, and changing staff. In the same month they invested in the post-production side of their business by installing a film developing room in their offices at Dame Street ("All-Irish Films"). The facility would give them greater control over completed films, and in-house development and processing would remove reliance on other companies for post-production work. The strategic development also indicates that they had experts already among the company members who were capable of developing film and very likely overseeing all in-house editing. This is further evidence of the extent of the company's resources already at their disposal during the first year of production. In the same journal page where news of the developing room was announced, an advertisement was posted for a "Great Dispersal Sale" for the Jameson company, who were auctioning off their films and equipment; of which film stock development equipment was included ("Great Dispersal"). It may well have been the case that the Film Company of Ireland had an advanced opportunity to procure some of the assets of the Jameson company before auction. The developing room was built and equipped by Mr. W. James, chief operator at the Bohemian Picture Palace, continuing the professional relationship initiated with that cinema when their first film *O'Neil of the Glen* had its premiere there. In the same month they posted a renewed call for original scenarios. In this instance the request was altered slightly, but significantly, to state that any acquired "scenario should preferably have Irish atmosphere, but this is not absolutely essential" ("All-Irish Films"). The notice appeared in *The Bioscope* trade journal which, although distributed in Ireland, had a mainly English readership. This appeal to English writers may indicate not only a broadening of the type of films the film company were aiming to make in the future, but it could also indicate an awareness that, as the English film industry was more established and experienced than its Irish equivalent, there would be a greater number of professional scenario writers there.

As all of the films produced in the first year of the company are presumed lost, we must rely on descriptions in newspapers, magazines, and the trade press to determine their type and genre. There are synopses for only four of these films: *O'Neil of the Glen*, *The Miser's Gift*, *An Unfair Love Affair*, and *The Widow Malone*. Apart from these synopses, some of the films have the basic genre descriptions typical of the era listed in their advertisements. From this it would appear that the company favoured romances – of which it made two: *O'Neil of the Glen* and *The Miser's Gift* – and romantic comedies – three of which were added to their catalogue: *Food of Love*, *An Unfair Love Affair*, and *The Widow Malone*. They also produced two straight-up dramas – *The Girl of Glenbeigh* and *Romance of Puck Fair* – which were thus categorised in newspapers and trade journals. There is only incomplete information about the remaining two films, *The Eleventh Hour* and *A Woman's Wit*, so it is not possible to classify these generically at present. As indicated already, it is possible that *The Miser's Gift* and *An Unfair Love Affair* could fall into the category of “trick films”. The extant synopses are for the romances and the romantic comedies, so discretionary comparison with these provides some idea of the kind of romantic films that the company produced. In the direct romances, the romantic couple forms a force for good, leading to an affirmative outcome. The protagonists stand in marked contrast to the other characters in the film. It seems from the synopsis of both films that the young couple in each represents the future, change and generational succession, and can only survive and thrive when the older generation has either died (as in *O'Neil of the Glen*) or has adjusted its self-centred behaviour in a manner that creates a positive environment for the young couple (as in *The Miser's Gift*). The romantic comedies are, by nature, much lighter. In these, the focus is focused on the romantic aspirations of the characters, and both follow generically similar storylines. Each female lead (called Nora) has to decide between multiple suitors, and the comedy arises from the methods these suitors use to compete with each other for her attention. In *An Unfair Love Affair*, the suitors set up a situation that puts Nora in peril, requiring that the most heroic of them rescue her. In *The Widow Malone* the contest between the three suitors is only resolved when two of them retreat, inaccurately believing that Nora's fortune is lost, and deeming her unworthy. From the synopses it appears that both films also use a *deus ex machina* resolution, which allows the female leads to decide their own romantic future. In *An Unfair Love Affair*, Nora's consultation with “Boola”, her “little image”, and her subsequent refusal to choose between any of her suitors establishes the dramatic pretext for arranging the competition. In the second narrative, although we have less information about Nora, the widow Malone, we can adduce that the supposed loss of her fortune results in her being united with the best suitor.

Not only was the company busy managing the release schedule for the films in Ireland; it had also engaged the Davison's Film Sales Agency in England to arrange distribution of its films there. This agreement was established early on in the production planning. By November 1916 *The*

Bioscope announced that Davison's had been appointed "sole agents" for the distribution of the Film Company of Ireland's films in the UK. They initially offered *O'Neil of the Glen* and *The Miser's Gift* to the trade at the start of November ("The All-Irish Films"). Not much later that month *Widow Malone*, *The Food of Love*, *An Unfair Love Affair*, *O'Neil of the Glen*, and *The Miser's Gift* were already available for distribution. They screened the last of these at a trade show in their offices on November 22, 1916. At the start of 1917 further trade shows for *O'Neil of the Glen* and *The Miser's Gift* were arranged at the Scala Theatre in Liverpool and at the Walker's Theatre in Manchester. The management and business acumen of the company's directors were effective enough to ensure the early short films received ample distribution in the UK in the first year of the company's operations.

There was a break in film production from November 1916, and possibly even from October, as shorter days with less available light restricted outdoor filming in Ireland during the winter months. In this period there were two events of note which had a lasting effect on the fortunes of the film company. Co-owner of the company Henry Fitzgibbon and the group's primary film director, J. M. Kerrigan, went to America where they were to spend time consulting with people in the industry who had considerably more experience than they. The purpose of the visits was to implement strategies and efficiencies of practice that would improve business. Fitzgibbon was in America by November 1916 from where, it was reported, he was "keeping his eye open for all that is best in the studio line" ("Film Company of Ireland"). He was due to return in the new year, and the intention was that the expertise he had gained would be used to acquire an independent studio for the Film Company of Ireland. Reports indicate that a site had already been chosen at Ringsend in Dublin for the location of the studio and the company was "certainly sparing no expense to get things right" ("Film Company of Ireland"). In fact, there was a report in the *Freemans Journal* at the end of August explaining that the company had applied "for a lease of a plot of ground at the Pigeon House road for the purpose of erecting a studio thereon" ("City and District"). The decision to make their own studio in Dublin was a bold move showing that the company had long-term plans for the production of films in Ireland. Developing and equipping their own studio would allow them to film all year round, thus increasing production and focusing on maximising efficiency without the disruption of pausing from October to February when the conditions posed evident disadvantages. Any new facility for interior shooting would also afford them the opportunity of varying the types of films they made and increasing the range of scenes within individual films, in turn offering a greater prospect of story options. This preparation to open a studio is also indicative of the fact that the company had significant financial resources to fund the endeavour, and that it had aspirations to maintain steady production, if not increase output. A film studio in Dublin was a bold and unprecedented proposal. At the time there was no studio in the city and there is no evidence that one had ever existed there. Such a production facility would not only improve the quantity and range of films made by the

Film Company of Ireland, but it could also be rented to other companies and potentially initiate a productive, attractive centre for the development of a genuine Irish film industry. It is unclear if any studio was ever built but given the change in the financial fortunes of the company in 1917, it is most unlikely that the plans came to fruition. Kerrigan's trip to America was reported at the end of December and, while in one article the purpose of his visit was explained as studying "production first hand" ("Topical Work"), *The Bioscope* expected that as a result of the trip "a great improvement will be noticed in the company's productions when they start 'filming again' (*ibidem*). Kerrigan did return to Ireland in 1917, but the record is unclear as to whether he worked with the Film Company of Ireland from that point onwards.

The company was established to make films of "Irish atmosphere" and specifically to include both fiction and non-fiction productions in its repertoire. Most of the output of the company ultimately comprised fiction films, and it was for this work that it gained its reputation. However, it also made or was commissioned to make non-fiction films, beginning in 1916. The first report of such intentions came in December of that year, when *The Bioscope* stated that it had recently filmed an important GAA match ("Topical Work") as part of its turn to "topical" filmmaking. Once again, there is evidence of the company's enterprising spirit and a determination to succeed. Equal determination is evident in its resilience to extend operations as much as possible during periods of poor weather and limited winter daytime light. It is clear that the management wanted to keep making films in this period, and it would seem that such "topical films" were a good choice for maintaining filming. Live events were already set up so there was less groundwork for the company as was typically required for fiction film shooting. In cases where documentary productions were planned, a cinematographer was dispatched to the event. *The Bioscope* states that the Film Company of Ireland had "secured the sole rights to film the Gaelic football match" ("Topical Work"), indicating that the Film Company of Ireland, and not Pathé or the Topical Budget, would be in a unique position to film, edit, and distribute the item. The *Irish Independent* recorded that the GAA football final took place between Wexford and Mayo on December 17, 1916, and that Wexford emerged victorious.

The first year of operation was very successful for the Film Company of Ireland. They had some natural advantages: they were well organised and well financed with good actors and crew, and they received a warm welcome from the Irish press, cinema owners, and the public. One of the strengths of the company was its talent for, and drive towards, publicity. From the beginning they sent out creatively worded and appealing press releases and held publicity events and private screenings for the journals ("New Irish Industry"). The ability to promote their films from the outset of operations established a vertical system of operation that gave them a prominent place in Irish film culture and ensured a favourable reception for their announcements. By the end of 1916, the company had released nine films, gained a distributor for its films in England, and had begun plans for

the development of a studio for the production of its first feature-length film. It was an extremely productive and ambitious start for this new company. The signs were good that they could build on the promising enterprise and continue to make successful films over the next few years.

NOTES

Much detailed archival work on the Film Company of Ireland has been undertaken by Liam O’Leary and Denis Condon. I am grateful for the research they have done on this topic and for making this available through the Liam O’Leary Archive at the National Library, and for Denis Condon’s earlyirishcinema.com blog.

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An Unfair Love Affair (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

A Woman’s Wit (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

Food of Love (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

O’Neil of the Glen (J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

Romance of Puck Fair (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

The Eleventh Hour (J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

The Girl of Glenbeigh (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

The Miser’s Gift (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

Widow Malone (*J. M. Kerrigan, 1916)

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DOSSIER

Even Ghosts Desire Touch: The Lonely Image of *L'eclisse* (1962)

Oscar Bloomfield, *Deakin University*

Michelangelo Antonioni and The Lonely Image

Within the concluding montage of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), the filmmaker offers a profound expression of loneliness *vis-à-vis* the figure of the (*in*)*visible* spectre. Throughout the film's final seven-and-a-half minutes, Antonioni imbues seemingly vacant spaces with vitality, as the very ontology of absence appears negated. The absent is far from *empty*, as a montage of ostensibly fragmented images dissolve the distinction between the *seen* and the *unseen*. Reaching not only an apex in relation to the narrative because Vittoria (Monica Vitti) and Piero (Alain Delon) fail to meet at their spot at 8:00pm (with their romantic pursuits therefore ultimately appearing fruitless), the concluding montage of *L'eclisse* undoubtedly embodies one of Antonioni's central preoccupations with exploring the liminal space wherein the parameters between *visibility* and *invisibility* become increasingly thin.

Throughout the film's closing montage, the camera persistently lingers upon the material surfaces of the landscape, as Antonioni's gaze returns to spaces that hold explicit reference to prior memories within the narrative. The camera's intense attention towards materiality remains central to the film's evocation of loneliness: the *invisible* subjectivities of Vittoria and Piero manifest themselves through both the camera's gaze, and also the features of the physical landscape. In a masterful exploration of cinematic (*in*)*visibility*, Antonioni's montage becomes haunted by the *immaterial* presence of the lonely lovers. The camera's actions are purposeful, rather than merely accidental, where the fragmented images, despite their apparent bareness, are instilled with the phantoms of Vittoria and Piero. Seeking connection – and touch – by recourse to the materiality of the landscape, their ghosts manifest themselves through the sentimentality that has been subsequently eschewed by their unfilled future. Drawing attention to the pair's *absent presence*, Gilberto Perez notes that the viewer “share[s] with the camera a recollection of the lovers through a beholding of things associated with them, things that for the camera, for us, carry their memory and at the same time point up their absence” (1991, 261). However, in order to enrich Perez' observation, I argue here that Antonioni's camera functions beyond what he describes as a “distinctive individual eye, an autonomous eye percipient mind” that “makes itself felt with peculiar eloquence” (*ibidem*, 260). Rather, the gaze, through its attention to the landscape, simultaneously envelopes their lingering pasts and deferred futures. For Antonioni, it is evident: the camera's gaze is never simply a means of offering the viewer an objective

insight into the realities of his characters, but conversely, it becomes a profoundly abstract vehicle for exploring the *hidden* tensions that reside at the core of the image's ontological structure.

The Usual Spot...

The camera's attentive focus to the unfinished building situated at the corner of the lover's usual spot – their failed meeting location – is most evocative of their *absent presence*. While the camera is persistently drawn back to the sentimental location, the viewer is thus confronted with an aesthetic space that transcends the visual, as Antonioni's lonely images cannot be characterised by merely what the filmic *technē* is able to capture (see *Figure 1*). Antonioni's content, and his difficult-to-define sense of 'emptiness', is cultivated out of a dynamic lyricism between the *visible* and the *invisible*, alongside the *familiar* and the *unfamiliar*. Here, the auteur's social realities, as thematised consistently throughout his *oeuvre*, are not simply lonely by virtue of their visual content, but instead, by the abstraction and estrangement augmenting from beneath the image's exterior. While it is perhaps correct that "one of the most powerful ways in which Antonioni underscores the dehumanising effect of modern society is by allowing landscape to shape human relationship" as Clara Orban (2001, 12) observes, my understanding suggests that it is not merely the *visual* framing of social milieux that produce pervasive sensations of loneliness but a destabilised distinction between the *visible* and the *invisible*, and the *empty* and the *abundant*.



Figure 1: Vittoria and Piero's 'usual spot' in L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

Material objects, such as the reoccurring attention towards the drum of water or the wooden fence, absorb a visceral intensity, transfiguring into the very threshold where a multitude of tensions, such as the *past* and the *present*, and the *familiar* and *unfamiliar*, are placed into immediate dialogue (see *Figures 2* and *3*).¹ Piero and Vittoria's subjectivities, despite having ostensibly vanished from the landscape, persistently render themselves present *vis-à-vis* sentimental objects and surfaces, thematising, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, how "[e]veryone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants" (2023, 98). However, in building upon this notion, it is useful to reiterate that it is not simply non-human objects that offer connection to the absent characters, but the focus of the camera itself.

Antonioni thematises the flux between *material* and *immaterial* realms, embodying a fluidity shared between two ostensibly juxtaposed phenomena. As the lover's *absent presence* is manifest throughout the concluding montage, the auteur's moving image affectively speculates upon not only cinema's limits, but also on how even beyond the materiality of flesh, one's spectre remains vitally alive.



Figures 2 and 3: The wooden fence and drum of water in L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

During the film's final moments, the camera slowly pans to the right: its gaze moves away from *their* corner, momentarily exhibiting the uninhabited street, glistening with streetlamps. Cutting to a single eclipsed streetlight, the camera maintains its fixed gaze. An unclassifiable intensity floods the frame, as the blinding light shatters representation (see *Figure 4*). Abstraction undermines the tangible, as the viewer is confronted with an aesthetic affect that has apparently emancipated itself entirely from narrative spectacle. This sentiment of emotional and intellectual stammering is suggested by Antonioni, who explained that “[e]ven during an eclipse, our feelings appear to stop” (2007, 196). The score reaches a blinding apex, as Giovanni Fusco's menacing score pulsates throughout the frame.

Only ghosts loiter amongst the landscape. They too, desire touch.

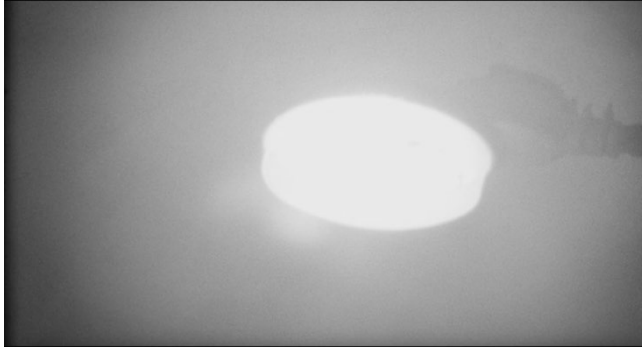


Figure 4: The eclipsed streetlight in L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

NOTES

1. The wooden fence and the drum of water are both particularly notable. Earlier in the film, the pair shared their initial 'embrace' at the fence, whereas Vittoria tossed a piece of wood into the drum of water.

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L'eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

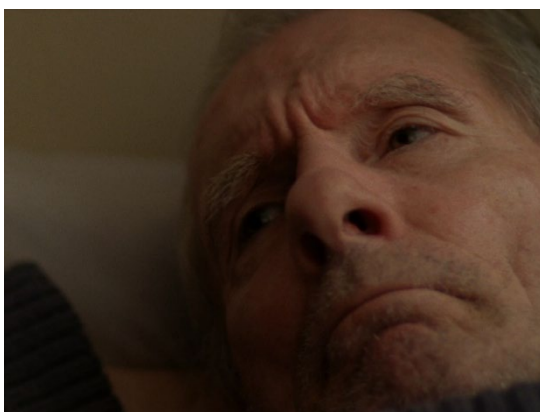
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A Captive Picture: Richard Billingham *Ray* (2016)

Kieran Cashell, *LSAD TUS: Midwest*



What happens does not matter; the moment is all.

Jean Vaublin¹

Unaccustomed Viewpoint

Richard Billingham started photographing his father Ray in the early 1990s. Ray was living alone in a high-rise council estate in the West Midlands town of Cradley Heath since his wife Elizabeth (the artist's mother) moved out. When Richard was a student at Bournville School of Art in Birmingham, in 1990, he was ostensibly living with Ray. But for the nineteen-year-old, cohabitation with his father was an arrangement of convenience. Interaction between them was impersonal, curt, and cursory. Working the night shift at the local Kwik Save discount store and, with college an hour's commute by train, Richard was out most of the time.

Yet he was gradually becoming aware of his father's presence: "there'd be periods when I'd be with him in the flat and I would see him" (Billingham in Evans 2016, 2). Unemployed for over a decade with no probability of reemployment, Ray Billingham (1931–2007) had become a hopeless (and increasingly solitary) alcoholic. "He always drank," the artist acknowledges, "But before then, only in the pub. Like everyone else" (Billingham 2013; Adams 2016). Now, with his wife gone, Ray withdrew permanently to his bedroom, where the serious drinking – that is to say, the persistent, solipsistic, and compulsive drinking – started.

Apart from an upstairs neighbour who provided him with strong homebrew and cashed his welfare cheque (using the money to "pay the bills") and his estranged wife (whose weekly visits were motivated by swindling him out of the remainder of his dole) he withdrew completely from the world. Watching his life slide out of view, Ray prepared for death.

He stayed in his room all of the time except when he wanted to go to the toilet; he never came out otherwise. He would drink to get to sleep and then wake up, have a drink. And drink until he got to sleep again. (Billingham in Evans 2016)

At some point his son started to take a pictorial interest in this situation. The strange experience of dwelling with his agoraphobic father led to a gradual change of perception for the art student.

Ray's spartan living space, Billingham explains, began to "take on an outward expression of his inner life. And I had a strong urge to make paintings about the situation." His first sketches of his father were made in preparation for a planned series of figure-in-room studies, an iconological connexion catalysed by his growing interest in controversial Camden Town post-impressionist Walter Sickert. "I first started painting my father ... drinking, looking in the mirror, looking out of the window. Alone in his room" (in Evans 2016, 2).

His room was meagrely furnished with few traces of [my Mam] Liz but to me at the time, the sparse objects still remaining seemed to take on a symbolic significance – the glow of the electric fire, an old key, his beer-stained glass, two litre homebrew bottles, a nub end, the oval dressing-table mirror, or a teenage photo of Liz on the windowsill. (Billingham 2013)

Dissatisfied with his initial studies – and attributing them to the unexpected perplexities of painting from life – he turned, but more as process, a means rather than an end, to the camera.

I thought [it] would help in making a painting that was more detailed / finished and not just a sketch from life. Ray would pose for say 15 minutes and would want to move after that. With the photos I thought I could copy a bit from one and a bit from another and compose the entire painting from different part. (Billingham 2018)

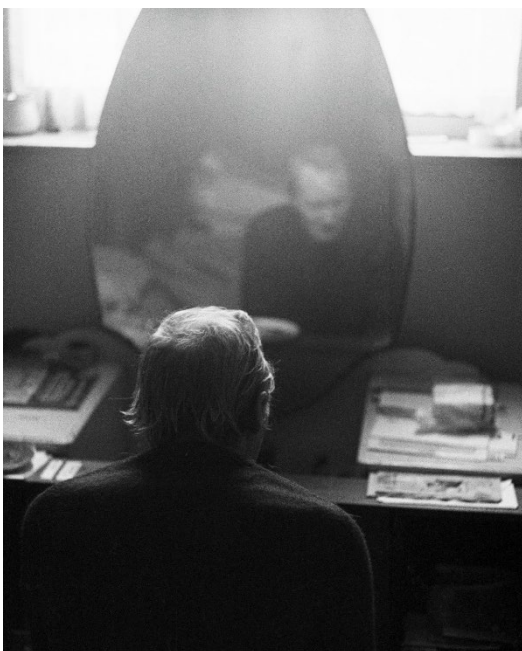


Figure 1. Untitled (Richard Billingham, 1990)

Intended as a convenient exploratory way of gathering visual research, in time, the photographs would assume an aesthetic integrity of their own,

gradually eclipsing the original motivation. So, in 1990, with his camera, a Russian-made Zenit 35mm manual-focus SLR acquired on credit (by persuading the shop assistant he was a librarian) Billingham entered his father's bedroom and looked through the lens at the figure within (see *Figure 1*).

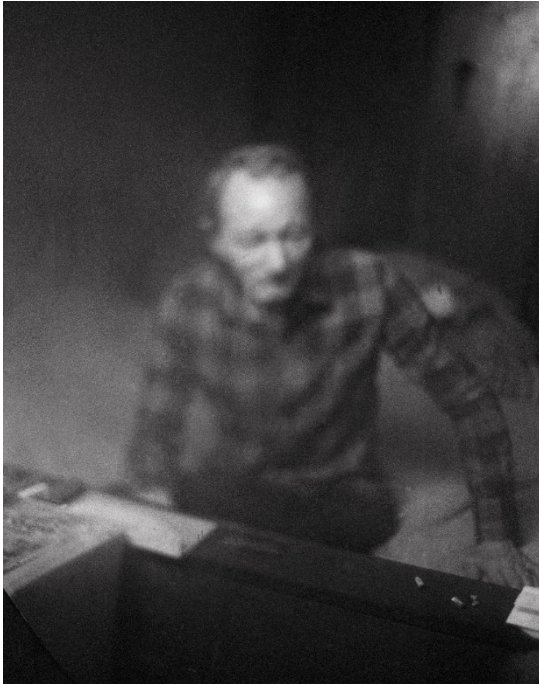
Figure in a Room

When Billingham returned in the evenings his father was already paralytic. "Every time I came back from college, he was lying in bed, drunk ... I saw a lot of that. And it stuck in my mind" (in Lingwood 1998, 58). Sometimes, when he came home, his father was in a heap on the floor, where he had collapsed, hours before. On the train, Richard would often wonder if his father was already dead. He would imagine opening the door to a cold corpse (Billingham 2013; Chesshyre 2001). He often entered Ray's room just to make certain he was still breathing, his body still warm. In the mornings, before he departed, he'd leave slices of bread on his dresser.

But to act, to intervene, he adds, "would be a fulltime job. Wouldn't it? I'd be his carer" (in Chesshyre 2001).

The 1990–1991 photographs document this situation. Some were published in the groundbreaking photobook *Ray's a Laugh* in 1996 and yet remain formally distinct from the majority of images in that publication. Many, like the three paradigmatic images comprising the *Triptych of Ray* (1990) are black and white, and, if not, almost monochrome in their grim, drear, colouring. Grainy, indistinct, sometimes completely unfocused, these photo sketches capture a haunted, wraithlike entity, diminishing to shadow before our eyes. Of *Untitled* (1990) (see *Figure 2*) a picture of his father's reflection in the dressing-table mirror, the artist comments:

It's like he's fading away because of the drink or something and it makes you realise that everything is very fragile ... I didn't know the picture would look like that. It wasn't my intention to have it blurred, but for some reason it was out of focus; I think it's better because it makes it look like he's withering away more graphically. (Lingwood 1998)



*Figure 2. Ray's A Laugh #53
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*

Today, Billingham is sceptical of these images, however, criticising them as “unresolved”. They “don’t tell Ray’s story” (see *Figure 3*).

The idea for the film began simply as a “way to give form to ideas and narratives hinted at in the photographs” (Billingham 2015). With this, the theme of *Ray* is identified and its motivation clarified: to reconstitute his father’s acedia and in the process provide some coherence and narrative closure.

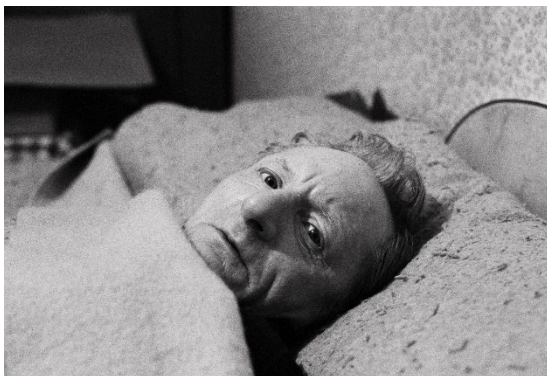


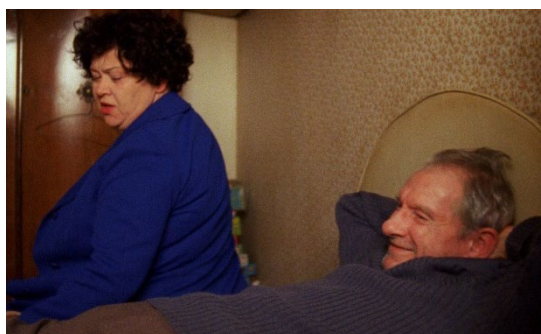
Figure 3. Untitled (Richard Billingham, 1990)

Ray (2016)

With the short film *Ray*, Billingham revisits the autobiographic theme that secured his place in late twentieth-century art. Yet the circumstantial *verité* synonymous with his intuitive and lumpen documentary style is here radically reorientated. Yet, what audiences familiar with Billingham’s severe realism found most challenging, arguably, was the casting of actors to play his family.

In *Ray* Patrick Romer plays the eponymous character (aged 59). While the role of Billingham’s mother (age 40) is interpreted in a surprisingly

convincing performance by Deirdre Kelly (“White Dee” from Channel 4’s controversial documentary series *Benefits Street* as well as reality TV show *Celebrity Big Brother*) (see *Figures 4 and 5*).



Figures 4 and 5. Liz Visits. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

Obviously, the actors were auditioned in the first instance for their striking resemblance to Billingham’s parents. This is especially true of Romer and Kelly whose physical complementarity with Ray and Liz contributes a stunning level of verisimilitude to Billingham’s film. Indeed, watching *Ray* through the afterimages of Billingham’s mid-1990s era photos is a slightly unsettling, even weird experience. Due to the extensive photographic (and videographic) documentation of Billingham’s mother, in particular, gives Kelly’s performance of Liz an uncanny (and I mean properly *unheimlich*) effect. Yet it is not primarily her Doppelgänger physique and physiognomy that’s key here, but rather how White Dee reanimates Liz somatically – through *gesture* and through *vocalisation*. From Winson Green in West Birmingham – the location of James Turner (“Benefits”) Street – Dee ventriloquises the mother through her own Black Country accent. Every chopped-off staccato sentence sounds like an aggressively rhetorical question.



Figure 6. Liz Visits (2). Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 7. Liz Visits. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

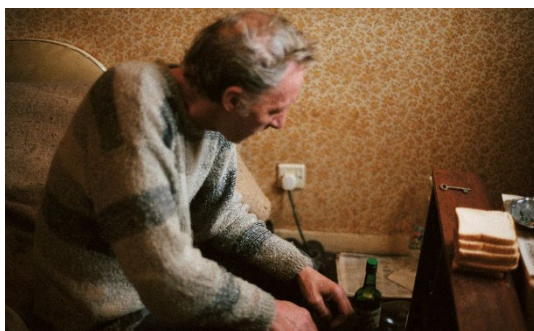


Figure 8. Artist Richard Billingham and Deirdre Kelly (White Dee) on location. Cradley Heath (2015). Cradley Heath (2015)

Filming took place on location in the enclosed bedroom space of the seventh-floor flat of Addenbrooke Court, the exact council estate in Cradley Heath where the family lived until Billingham's younger brother Jason was taken into care in 1988 (at age 11) and his mother subsequently vacated in 1990 (taking all her stuff with her). The hermetic, flyblown environment in which the artist's father hibernated during his worsening alcoholic isolation is recreated with forensic exactitude. "We used the photographs to reconstruct the wallpaper and the furniture" the artist reveals. "I wanted to go back to that, where every detail in the room is telling a story" (in Adams 2016). Three images (see *Figures 9, 10, and 11*) published in Billingham's 1996 photobook *Ray's a Laugh* provide specific points of departure for the film's opening scenes (see *Figures 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16*).



*Figure 9. Ray's A Laugh #33
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*



*Figure 10. Ray's A Laugh #16
(Richard Billingham, 1996).*



*Figure 11. Ray's A Laugh #17
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*



Figure 12. Ray in Bed. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016).



Figure 13. *Ray in Mirror. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 14. *Ray Drinks. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 15. *Ray Drinks (2). Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 16. *Ray Drinks (3). Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)

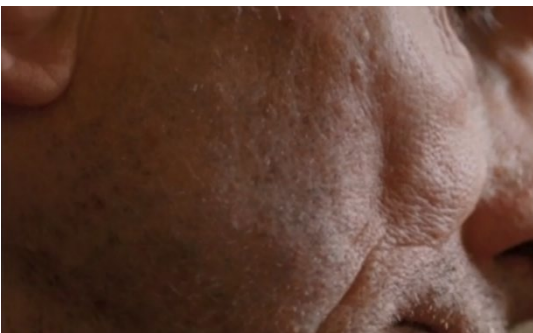


Figure 17. *Close Up. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)

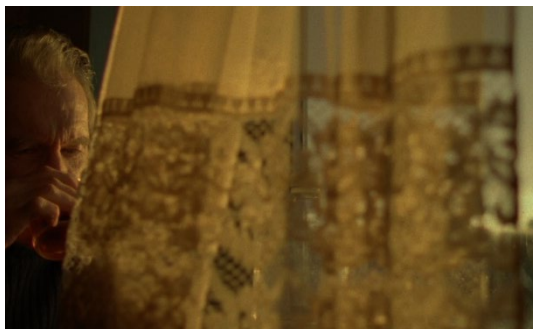


Figure 18. *Ray Drinks at Window.*
Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

Time passes. Ray is back in his customary position, sitting on the edge of the bed facing the mirror. He flicks the dregs from his glass into the corner and pours himself a drink, taking care to fill the glass to the very brim. He drinks, audibly swallows ... and drinks again. And again. His drinking is autonomic, repetitive, compulsive. Once the drained glass is back with a soft knock on the dresser, it's immediately refilled. This demoralizingly repetitive (but weirdly hypnotic) activity is hyphenated by a series of extreme cutaway close-ups where the generally unobtrusive camera suddenly twitches into rude life and begins its own independent analysis of the figure in the space. Detaching itself from the primary process of reportage, the camera shifts, almost audibly, to the haptic level. And it moves in close ... very close. Scrutinising the grainy creases and porous folds of Ray's bristly skin. So close, in fact, that it seems to touch the trembly, juddering wattle of the neck, close enough, indeed, to anatomise the minute cellular events that comprise a throat convulsing in a swallow.

Referred to as generative archival data for the figure-in-room sequences' *mise en scène* (as well as wardrobe decisions) analysis of this photographic material reveals that the nicotine-toned room – with its “diapered” wallpaper and semicircular leatherette headboard, military-grey mothballed blankets and pillows, newspaper-strewed floor, battered wardrobe, oval mirror, wood-framed electric fire, scallop ashtray with its tinder of smouldering cig butts – is an exact simulacrum of the space of his father's living internment. Every detail of the scene derives from this archive material. “In the reconstructed room,” the artist comments, “I was able to replicate with the 16mm [movie] camera these original positions or camera angles, from where I stood or crouched down. Like another hidden person watching him” (Billingham 2017).

Billingham's film is structured, perhaps uniquely in the history of the medium, by a process of “mnemonic intratextuality” (a multilayering, that is, of reflexive, if implicit, references to his own photographic archive).

A sense of the limits of the world in which the film takes place is established from the outset. As a consequence of his solitary drinking routine, Ray totally lost track of time: waking at three in the afternoon or three in the morning, taking up exactly where he left off, the cycle would begin again. The limits of his room became the limits of his world. In one scene, he spots Liz passing by outside, and shouts down to her from the

open window: “Oi! Up ere! What day is it?” “Tuesday! I’ll be up Thursday morning Ray!” (see *Figures 19 and 20*)



Figure 19. “Oi! Up Ere.” Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 20. “I’ll be up Thursday Morning, Ray!” Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

However unintentional (and notwithstanding Billingham’s disclaimers regarding the film’s political context) casting White Dee as Liz represents an implicit engagement with reality television culture, and specifically, the politics of the representation of social class (in popular media culture / culture industry).² *Ray & Liz* “ticks”, as Steve Rose observes, a lot of those “poverty porn boxes: drinking, smoking, obesity, neglect, tattoos, council estate squalor” (Rose 2019). In a review of *Ray* Tim Adams anticipates this connection by imagining future sociology dissertations on the subject of the “depiction of poverty in British culture and the ethics of intrusion”, delineating a trajectory from *Ray’s a Laugh* to *Benefits Street*. He concedes by acknowledging the complexities of the artist’s contribution to the reality-cult phenomenon, suggesting that although difficult to distinguish “some of the extremes of reality TV without first having had the more complex intimacies of Billingham’s art”. His most recent non-fiction cinema projects arguably accomplish a subtly intrusive form of post-reality photographic realism that reactivates his earlier family studies and somehow epitomises Samatha Lay’s forecast of a form of neorealism that makes social realism as “we have come to know it with all its predictable conventions look stilted and ‘unrealistic’” (Lay 2002). *Ray* might be a non-fictional film. But it is not documentary.

Yet the artist is aware of the problem; I believe it’s possible to glimpse the artist’s insecurity in the awkwardness of some of the scenes of *Ray* – especially the scenes involving Liz. Consider the compulsive focus on the actor’s mouth and lips as she smokes, for example, or the shots of her feet from under the bed, or, indeed, in the defensive reflection shots of Liz in the dresser mirror when she visits her estranged husband.

A Devotional Image

The hermetic interior recreated (twenty-seven years later) for *Ray* doubles, for the director, as an externalisation of his father’s existential predicament. “I think of the room,” Billingham says, “as a visual manifestation of Ray’s inner life. A bit like the cell of a prisoner or even the pen of a zoo animal” (Billingham 2017) (see *Figure 21*).

Sequences in *Ray* were defined by what the artist refers to as the “spatial dynamics” of the figure’s ascetic setting: “I had the idea,” he says, “that each shot would respond to the room’s special dynamics and out of that the film would emerge” (Billingham 2017). The 3:4 aspect ratio reemphasises the sense of agoraphobic retreat and enclosure. Indicating its affinity with the dimensions of a vintage glass TV screen, the director claims that he opted for Academy Ratio because it enables an optical concentration on “heads”, framed “objects in space”, “hands” (Dublin International Film Festival 2019).

Often referring in this context to Robert Bresson’s film *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s’est échappé ou vent souffle où il veut*, 1956) which he stumbled across on TV as an adolescent, similar to the prison cell scenario, where the restricted interior determines available shots and camera-angles, the artist admits that the “intense rhythm”, and, especially, the optical parsimony of Bresson’s technique influenced the framing of the figure-in-room sequences of *Ray*.



Figure 21.
Triptych of
Ray (Richard
Billingham,
1991)

But, above all, as with the very early *Triptych of Ray* (1991), Beckett remains enormously relevant for Billingham’s début feature. Especially apropos here is the playwright’s stripped-back *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1959) with its “patho-comic” figure-in-room variant, the “wearish old man” in his darkened “den”, drinking whisky and listening to annual diary recordings on reel-to-reel cassettes. “I was probably just in my own way,” Billingham responds (after a lengthy pause) when this connection is proposed, “trying to objectify or make sense of a surreal situation” (Billingham 2013). Perhaps a less obvious precedent for *Ray* is Beckett’s short for television, *Eh Joe* (1967). The fixation on the expressionless face of Joe, sitting on the bed as he listens, paralysed, to his aural hallucinations, closely parallels Billingham’s lens practice (see *Fishtank* 1998). When Joe finally takes his place on the edge of the bed, satisfied that his checks are complete, the

“inquisitorial” camera takes the opportunity to shift into intentional mode, commencing a seemingly sentient examination of the figure on the bed, faceting his face into closer and closer fragments, as the intrusive voice grills, deeper and deeper.

I would, however, insist that Ray’s withdrawal and voluntary hermitage was motivated to shut out the external world more securely (*c.f.*, the key on the dresser). And that Billingham’s figure-in-room enclosure is carefully articulated to evoke agoraphobia and not claustrophobia as some critics have suggested. Less fly-on-wall, than fly-in-bottle, the character’s interiorized predicament holds us captive because we sense the expanding desert of the external world menacing the tiny region of reality Ray has shelled out for himself. What Ray fears, in other words, is (the) outside. Outside the cell is a huge and hostile expanding, soulless sphere, that bears down suffocatingly upon him, a bewilderness of chaos and noise (suggested by the ubiquitous “soft cacophony” (Dyer 1999) that murmurs and chitters and patters through the ambient funnels and seams of the film), “which is frightening” (Rose 1993, 18).



Figure 22. *The Key*. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

No key is provided to the character’s inner experience. Unlike *Ray & Liz* where cinematic “aha!” interpolations project a kind of retrospective understanding of his father’s subjective condition, *Ray* doesn’t proffer any explanatory narrative to rationalise his behaviour and thereby satisfy the current predilection for reductive trauma-plot causality (see Figure 22). Cruelly perhaps, we’re given no privileged access to Ray’s interior life. His psychological state will, in this thin slice of reality, remain ultimately elusive. Opaque. And yet in this evasion of documentary transparency in favour of the mysterious we acknowledge an enactment of early Wittgenstein’s *ineffable* (*Unsagbare*). Wittgenstein, at the end of the *Tractatus*, draws on the distinction between “saying” and “showing” and thereby invokes the theme of the mystical. Explicitly identified, for him, with a sense of the world as a limited whole, and the feeling of safety elicited by this awareness, he insists that this sensation, although not uncommon, is impossible (and futile) to describe. Yet, Wittgenstein concludes, the mystical is manifest in the mundane precisely where clear communication, explanation, or documentation collapses and there is only the final acknowledgement of silence.

Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility. (Pinter 2009)

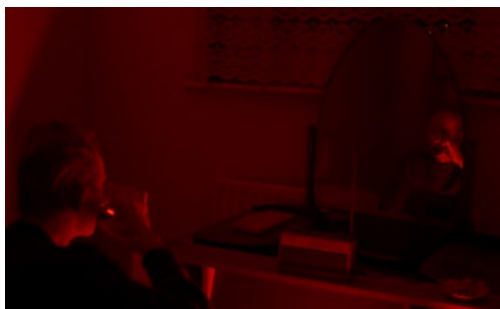


Figure 23. Red Room. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

Time passes. And in Ray's cell, as the glow of the electric fire intensifies into a uterine, efflorescence, the lonely sensation is, I suggest, briefly and vanishingly, accomplished (see *Figures 23 and 24*). And a state impossible to describe or account for, a resigned man's ascetic denial of the world (similar to the withdrawal of Christian mystics as part of a "set" of ritual monastic practices) segues into ecstatic experience: the *Epektasis*, or psychosomatic straining towards divine release (Critchley 2024). In acknowledging – or respecting – the limitations of neutral documentary explanation, the Red Room scene, I believe, inscribes the inscrutable mystery of human solitude into the formal signifying structure of the film. Through the slow concatenation of extreme close ups, episodes of optical near-stillness and reflexive references to his earlier photos, in *Ray*, an unintentional devotional image is gradually revealed that, in acknowledging that his late father's nihilistic behaviour exceeds documentation, carries an inscription of presence which, in the dreadful purity of its *unending instant*,³ approaches the mystical.

We witness a moment of transcendence actually occur in this Pentecostal scene, where the picture of a captive becomes a captive picture, and wherein, to use Simon Critchley's definition of the mystical, the mobius-strip of "woeful dereliction" exfoliates into a roseate ecstatic "transport" (2025, 255). Aided, of course, by the ambient radiophonic sound of Dusty Springfield's voice (to which Ray lip-syncs). Like Bresson's films, according to Zina Giannopoulos (2024), this deliquescent scene is characterised by an aesthetic de-creation associated with the director's "commitment to a deeply spiritual if not religious worldview". As we leave the character to dwell forever in the looped limits of his eternal stasis, the main theme is re-established and a lonely veil of perception is removed, with a palpable presence revealed, briefly, behind it. Transient, still and there.

We are left, at the end, with his profound longing for an intimacy he can never attain. (Cork 2003, 39)



Figure 24. *Red Room. Ray.* (Richard Billingham 2016)

Author's Note: All illustrations (*Triptych of Ray* [1991], *Ray's a Laugh* [1996] and *Ray* [2016]) used with permission of artist (copyright Richard Billingham). For which the author is profoundly grateful.

NOTES

1. John Banville. 1993. *Ghosts*. London: Secker & Warburg.
2. While it remains important to acknowledge its complex relationship with “post-documentary” reality media, it is erroneous to identify Billingham’s video work as an effort to embrace the addiction to endlessly protracted footage of everyday life, or, more sinisterly, commercially-inspired Milgram-type social-experiment documentaries contrived to appear unscripted when in fact the strategic product of high-tech editing and “deposited manipulated narratives” (Engberg 2007).
3. This phrase is from John Banville *Ghosts* (Banville 1993).

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Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016) 16mm. 33m. UK: Producer, Jacqui Davies.

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Cinema and Mental Isolation: Representations of Autism and Mental Health in the Short Film *Corduroy* (Hugh O'Connor, 2009)

David Mackey, *University College Cork*

Cinema has a unique way of interacting with the audience on a multi-sense plain. It is able to develop a shared consciousness between the cinematic world and the spectator, one realised in the camera's becoming a physical presence in the diegetic space in ways that invite interrogations of the spectator's sense of self. The body of the spectator experiences a visceral elevation of emotions and sensations, that invite her to identify with screen representations, or to experience as sense of detachment, isolation, and alienation from them. The subjective (located or point of view) depictions of mental health within the cinematic medium is an extreme form of this evocative engagement. From the perspective of the film spectator, the encounter can fluctuate between a sense of loneliness and a communally shared experience of isolation from the physical environment. The imagined space between camera and body can become distorted as each shares with the other the mental activity of encounter. Some have even suggested that through the cinematic medium a "new human being is formed" (Holl 2017, 161) by virtue of a newly emerging "being present together". Mental health is a theme increasingly addressed in cinematic narratives, and it one of evident critical importance. Its depictions and characterisations on film inevitably aim to offer an experience that is shared by the collective consciousness of the film audience. In a basic way, as film struggles to represent cognitive anomalies, it reaches back to its historical foundations, and some of the first endeavours it sought: it attempts to display for audiences pure ontological experiences, and in reaching towards its phenomenological capacities, we might recall how at best it is a "strange mechanism parodying man's spirit" (Baudry 1975, 348).

In the Irish short film *Corduroy*, specific capacities of the medium are mobilised to present a world shaped by the mind of an autistic woman. Most directly, these allow director Hugh O'Connor to share the character's experiences with his spectators, by using aural and visual techniques that only the cinema can provide. The idea of collective experience in the film is further developed by establishing a "common memory" (Margalit 2009, 51) between the audience and the protagonist, Jesse. Within this shared isolation from the outside world, the audience and Jesse are united and

emerged in the diegetic space of *Corduroy*. The film strives to neutralise its own processes of mediation, and while we see what Jesse sees and encounter her experiences as she lives through them, the film foregrounds the inevitability of its own limitations – of framing, of polyvocal sensuousness, of two dimensionality – rather than concealing them with a more traditional seamlessness. Thus, it leans into the limits of the medium instead of disregarding or denying them and so represents an ontological and cognitive position to us more aligned to that of Jesse's. O'Connor sets up an interesting and innovative relationship between the audience and Jesse that helps to display (at times almost impressionistically) a perspective of mental health. The means by which our understanding of various attributes of the illness are conveyed is not concealed, and the "disruption" generates a feeling of separation, distance, and (ideally, even) loneliness for the viewer. Our encounter with this world becomes a complete encounter with a distinct aesthetic, cinematic domain.

In a basic way, the film's point of view alignments work to ensure the establishment of a coherent subjective engagement and, simultaneously, objective disengagement. As we follow Jesse through her uninterrupted perspective, we are denied access to the points of view of her helper and others surrounding characters. Formally we are given access to Jesse's interpretation of events in scenes when the blurring of characters and the backgrounds during a conversation within the autism centre. This enhances the division between how Jesse interprets the places and people around her and the identities and perspectives of those sharing her space. The audience is forced to confront an alienating and disorientating environment, in which regular cinematic cues, codes, and conventional modes of representation are suspended or disrupted. The "real world intrudes in such a setting" for both Jesse and the audience as it attempts to eliminate their shared understanding of this world from their minds (Dixon 2016,505).

The film takes a further interesting turn when Jesse is submerged in the sea. During this scene, Jesse's world becomes tranquil and severed from normative sensual stimuli. The film responds by suspending its soundtrack and rejecting recognisable framing. This moment of Jesse's existence is at odds with how the ocean may be seen by those outside of her purview: as an active energetic threat to our physical reality. In the world of the film *Corduroy*, which is entirely Jesse's world, it is transcendent. The autistic world of Jesse as she lingers in the seas and her existence within the surface has become a "secondary world" (Clayton 2022, 216).

The spatial design of *Corduroy* confronts and interacts with the viewer by allowing her to experience another level of consciousness and an alternative mental state. This exploration facilitates an alternative understanding of not only the physical impact of mental illness on those who suffer but also on how our world can be seen as at times alienating and distorted from our own perceptions of reality for those who experience autism. From its earliest moments, cinema had developed a relationship with the phenomenological and physical structures of the mind that

mirrored its perception of the world at large as “our imagination is projected on the screen” (Holl, 2016). *Corduroy* reaches back to the fundamental mechanical capacities of the technical apparatus and has used these faculties to represent alternative cognitive dispositions.

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Loving in Solitude and Encountering Pity in the Cinema of Wong Kar Wai

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In Wong Kar Wai’s films, the characters experience a transition from the attempt to regain a lost unity, to the recognition of the role of a psychic division in enabling a potential convergence with the other. Analysing aesthetic and iconographic components of his films, I will interpret certain turning points of the plots by identifying his cinema with the genre of

melodrama (Marcantonio 2015, 6) and by revealing its metacinematic value.

Among the most profound affinities between Wong Kar Wai's cinema and the melodrama genre is the primary importance given to the *hamartia* inherited from tragedy (Pérez Rubio 2004, 15). Desacralised and translated into ordinary problems (127), in melodrama the wound is transformed into the loss of the object of love (84), facilitating the identification (González Requena 1986, 94) necessary to activate the process of catharsis. In the case of the protagonist of *Days of Being Wild* (a.k.a. *Ah Fei Zheng Zhuan*, 1990), who has been abandoned by his mother, it is explicitly a question of that state of fusion linked to primal and irreparable loss (Jullien 2014, 88) – namely the castration typically portrayed in melodrama (Pérez Rubio 2004, 196) – which social order represses (Gledhill 2002, 117). Indeed, given the tonal and aesthetic exaggerations through which this genre operates (Pérez Rubio 2004, 91), it is important to consider the specific means by which the protagonist is permitted to embark on a journey in search of his mother, attempting to regain the lost love. The radical nature of this character is further framed by a mirror that highlights his vanity, ultimately reflecting his psychic split (see *Figure 1*).

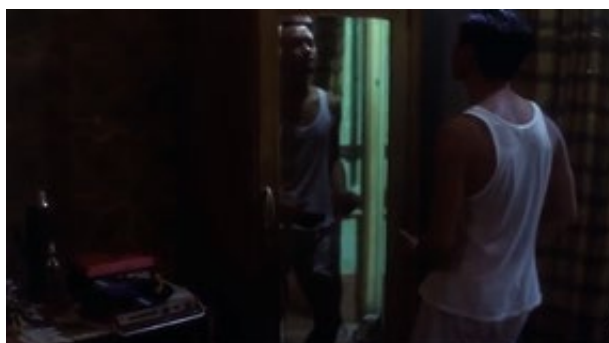


Figure 1: The character of Yuddi and his mirror reflection in Days of Being Wild (a.k.a. Ah Fei Zheng Zhuan, 1990)

This situation inaugurates the “primal scene” of Wong’s cinema, where we find characters wounded by unrequited love affairs (Weinricher, 2001), echoing the original trauma of the separation from the mother (Tarizzo 2003, 21). Unlike *Days’* character, many of these tormented souls seek to restore a mythical unity by creating a new emotional nest. This properly-melodramatic variant arises because of the incorporation of the expiatory journey derived from the Oedipal model (Pérez Rubio 2004, 118), filtered through the sentimental novel and extended to the couple’s dimension (119). For this reason, behind the great utopia of achieving redemption through love, lies a healing of the respective wounds of the two lovers (109). This should ordinarily arise only as a consequence of the other ambitious objective. However, in Wong’s films, the narcissistic core of the quest usually results in a failed interlocking of selfish pretensions, a mismatch often iconographically rendered by frames in which the mirror separates two characters occupying the same room (see *Figure 2*).



Figure 2: Two characters, framed as separated by the mirror, in Happy Together (a.k.a. Cheun Gwong Tsa Sit, 1997)

However, a poignant sequence in *Ashes of Time* (a.k.a. *Dung Che Sai Duk*, 1994) clarifies that what unites the characters is precisely what divides them, creating a situation in which it is impossible for them to meet. Bound together by their shared sense of loss, each of them uses the other's body to restore contact with his or her own fantasy of fusion. In this case, the role played by the iconographic element of the mirror is taken on by the cross-cutting montage, which serves to represent the different timeframes that split and separate the characters (see *Figures 3, 4, and 5*).



Figure 3, 4, and 5: Cross-cutting montage showing the different times between which the characters are split in Ashes of Time (a.k.a. Dung Che Sai Duk, 1994)

The difficulty of living in the present is a common trait of the two characters-narrators, each of whom is projected into another time, in the book

Intersection (a.k.a. *Dui Dao*, Liu Yichang, 1973). Significantly, excerpts from this novel are quoted in *In the Mood for Love* (a.k.a. *Fa Yeung Nin Wa*, 2000).

For Wong's characters, the recognition of temporal depth marks a turning point in their *impasse*. However, perceiving the passage of time also means recognising its deteriorating effect on love, which has transformed it into another feeling (Paz 1984, 215), giving it the traits of compassion (213). In this sense, the capacity to feel pity seems to distinguish characters who have reached a certain degree of sentimental maturity. The choice of the protagonist of *2046* (2004) to fulfill himself vicariously, through the desire of a young woman with whom he identifies, determines a reduction of the possibilities of connection with others to pity; a quality that becomes an ashen remnant of a passion of the past (see *Figures 6 and 7*).

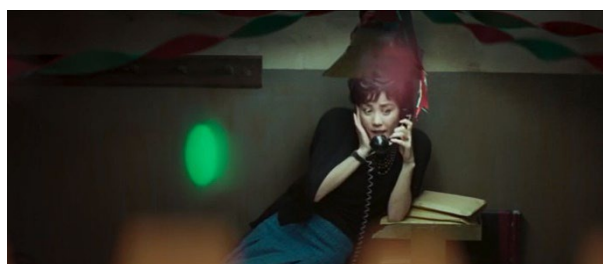


Figure 6 and 7: A transition showing the compassionate gaze of a character, yet marking a temporal distance between the two in 2046 (2004)

In the case of *In the Mood for Love*, this maturity is acquired “in progress”. It is possible to grasp a salient moment in the gradual development through the manifestation of the visual motif of pity, in its variant of mutual pity, which crystallises a transition (see *Figure 7*). By trying to put themselves in their spouses' places, the characters end up distancing themselves from their own selfhood, even as they come to feel and attempt to heal the pain of the other.

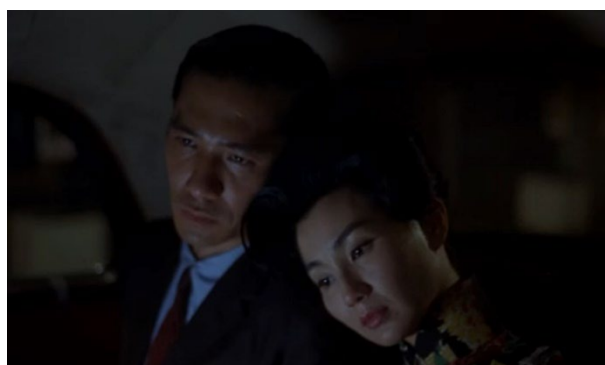


Figure 8: The visual motif of pity in the mutual pity variant in In the Mood for Love (a.k.a. Fa Yeung Nin Wa, 2000)

Although, psychoanalytically, compassion refers to the narcissistic dimension – as secondary identification arising from a feeling of loss that belongs to the subject but is shared with the object (Pérez Rubio 2004, 94)

– the examples mentioned show that this feeling implies a certain detachment from the self. In this case, that approach to the other in projective terms (Jullien 2014, 51) – although the antithesis of self-referentiality – actually paradoxically leads to achieving that longed-for reconciliation with the self.

The *In the Mood for Love* protagonists' attempt to empathise with their respective spouses leads them to emulate the love affair that was going on between the other two, dissociating themselves from their "selves" and consequently, imperceptibly opening each individual up to new experiences of (or possibilities for) love. Thus, if reconciliation with oneself is a necessary condition for ensuring receptivity and openness to otherness (Wai-ming Lee and Lee 2017, 32), awareness of the temporal distance from mythical unity is achieved through dissociation. One can see in these implications an allusion to that empathetic mode of experience, which typifies the spectator's position. In this case, the ongoing process that the characters, as well as the empathetic viewers, go through in these films can lead to the opening onto the possibility of encounter in the name of that communion with the other (156) to which the melodrama's amorous vocation always aspires. Following a smile, a mixture of disillusionment and self-compassion that establishes detachment from the deadly clinging to the past, policemen of the second story in *Chungking Express* (a.k.a *Chung Hing Sam Lam*, 1994) is ready to reinvest his desire, this time truly being "in the mood" for love.



Figure 9: A character's smile which is a mixture of disillusionment and self-compassion in *Chungking Express* (a.k.a *Chung Hing Sam Lam*, 1994)

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Happy Together (a.k.a. *Cheun Gwong Tsa Sit*, Wong Kar Wai, 1997)

In the Mood for Love (a.k.a. *Fa Yeung Nin Wa*, Wong Kar Wai, 2000)

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The Loneliness of the Cinematic Academic: Reflections on Reconnecting and Community

Veronica Johnson

Even before Covid, the academic life had its moments of loneliness. Hours spent researching, writing, and preparing classes alone, watching films alone, going to archives alone can be wonderful; but it can also be isolating and lonely work. Of course, this loneliness was interspersed with time spent with colleagues; working together in the same department, attending meetings in person, co-teaching, meeting up at conferences, collaborating on a project, going for coffee or lunch. So, before Covid, there was some sort of a balance between the work one did alone and the work one did with colleagues, and there was a sense that you could turn to someone in person if there was a problem. Since Covid the connectedness of the academic life has taken a blow. We connect more frequently to each other electronically, through email, online meetings and various social medias. We do more work alone and more work from home, there is less meeting up in person for meetings or coffees. Most of the time, most of us have adjusted to this new way of being an academic, we still enjoy the work, and we still grumble about it as we did before Covid.

However, there is one important way in which the loneliness of the cinematic academic has had a very serious impact on our working lives and that is in relation to the gap between established scholars and early career researchers and how we communicate with each other. This gap has widened for many reasons, mostly because we don't see each other in person to the same degree. We feel that we are busier because we conduct more of our time online, in a global shrinking of academic jobs we worry for our career future and in a time of technological produced writing we are concerned about authenticating our work and that of our students. In this climate, there are good channels for sharing information, we post about job and funding opportunities, new books and CFPs, but the connections to each other that go beyond this have weakened.

All of this came home to me at the final session at the Irish Screen Studies conference in Cork in May of this year. Billed as a Roundtable on Professional Horizons it was facilitated by Temmuz Gürbüz and Barry Monahan and attended by about fifteen academics at various career stages. It quickly became apparent that this was to be no ordinary discussion, with the facilitators managing to create a space where most people felt very comfortable in discussing their own difficulties with the academic system as it now stands. This was not a "grumble and complain and take no action" roundtable. Rather people spoke of their own struggles in a genuine way, their honesty encouraged others to speak, until it became clear that most people in the room had experienced or were experiencing the same issues. This was the "ah-ha" moment, where we all realised that we were not alone in our difficulties, that others had similar experiences and that we could all learn from and help each other. Suddenly, the loneliness of the cinematic academic worker was breached and new

connections and potential new networks were formed. What was and is unique about this grouping is that it is a coming together of established scholars and early career researchers facing the systemic problems in academia together.

In the moments when I haven't been employed as an academic, I have had interesting experiences when I meet old colleagues, or people I did my PhD with, who I haven't seen in a while. When I tell them I'm at the end of a contract, they make what I call "the face". This is an expression unique to these circumstances; it is a mixture of sympathy and guilt. They are sorry that I'm not working in a job that I want to be working in, and they feel guilty that they are working in a job in academia while I am not. It usually makes for an awkward start to a conversation, with both of us saying how difficult it is to get an academic job in the current circumstances and then drifting off to other topics because this one seems to make us both feel uncomfortable, as if somehow we are both responsible in some way for the lack of academic jobs.

And this uncomfortableness stems in part from that loneliness of the cinematic academic worker, we don't talk to each other face to face as much as we did before, and as a result we think that our situations, our problems, and our experiences are unique. So that when we do talk to each other, we feel uncomfortable if one of us is working and the other is not, or if one of us got promoted, or if one of us is struggling with a difficult class, or if one of us has just got a huge grant. We know how to respond to these events online, but we are losing the ability to respond to them in person, our loneliness is hampering our ability to connect as colleagues. The thing that we all need to acknowledge is that academia is constantly and rapidly changing and that we need each other to get through these changes together. The gaps between new and established scholars need to be breached and the only way to do that is through communication, bad practices, and bad behaviour needs to be shared as does good practices and good behaviour. I hope that the spirit of that Roundtable in Cork in May 2025 will spread and that we will continue to talk to each other face to face.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

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Can Precarity be Cinematic?

Response to “The Loneliness of the Cinematic Academic: Reflections on Reconnecting and Community”, by Veronica Johnson

Temmuz Süreyya Gürbüz

In her heartfelt contribution to this inaugural issue of the *Irish Screen Studies* Journal, Veronica Johnson writes of the interesting concept “cinematic academic”: a scholarly figure who experiences increased loneliness within cinema studies. I feel privileged to be given the opportunity to respond to Johnson’s piece, as this theme relates to formative ideas behind the *Irish Screen Studies* “Network”. This Network is first and foremost a space where we have been discussing possible strategies for building academic solidarity. It is also a space where the *ISS* committee and the participants of the annual conference convene around non-seminar issues. The need for some form of Network was also motivated by a desire to connect postgraduate researchers whose contributions and development are central to the foundations of this organisation. This led to “Professional Horizons” (PH): the final session of last year’s *ISS* Conference at UCC (May 2025). While early on in her piece, Johnson sees at the heart of academic loneliness “the gap between established scholars and early career researchers and how we communicate with each other” (2026, 100), later she reminisces on the session with hope, as she sees the gathering as a way of “facing the systemic problems” together (101).

This response emerges from my conflict between the urge to produce a speedy write-up that reflects the urgency of worsening conditions for the “cinematic academic” in Ireland, and on the other hand, the sense that the problem of academic precarity requires slower strategic planning. I felt a similar tension after the PH session, walking in Cork with Johnson: both of us energised, yet pensive. During the PH discussion, a central theme was how academic loneliness is systemically produced in Irish institutions. Emergencies can also be experienced as blockages in relation to writing: the perpetual need for further research, further depth, to understand the subject at hand, delays achieving an understanding that, counterintuitively, often only emerges through the writing activity itself. I am beginning to see through my conflict here, that there is a strong correlation between individual blockage and the ways in which an academic environment blocks one’s ability to settle within it.

This urgent map is yet to exist, and let’s acknowledge that this mapping is a tricky task for any precarious life in the university and actually calls for a dedicated collective effort. As Johnson notes, “the face” of the secure academic who hears about the conditions of precarious other, is “an expression unique to these circumstances [...] a mixture of sympathy and guilt” (101).¹ This expression is also evocative of how Judith Butler writes of media frames in *Frames of War*. There, ethics of responsibility come to the surface of recognition: “it is the face of the other that demands

from us an ethical response.” (2009, 77) This is a potentially egalitarian moment, as we reciprocally recognise our own security within a specific environment in a fundamental way through that of another’s precarity. This dependency is also what makes academic loneliness “cinematic” (beyond being the shared research field): there are aesthetic and ironic potentials in our reciprocal experience of discomfort in the face of the other. Reflecting this, therefore, albeit indirectly, also concerns how such academic loneliness and injury are concealed by the faceless (ghostliness) of administration, particularly through structural expectations shaped by industry-facing higher education models such as the Human Capital Initiative.²

One of the ideas discussed during the Professional Horizons conversation was how to expose systemic inequalities to wider audiences. Shall we share with our students how we are working without a contract? Perhaps the respect Irish society has for university education can be strategically addressed through infiltrating the mainstream channels? These questions are inevitably unanswered so far without enough time and research (though we all have some ideas). The PH session made it clear how strategies of exposure also stutter, get delayed, as one’s academic writing can. Because exposure makes one vulnerable to being perceived as a victim, even while attempting to figure out productive ways to resist that very victimisation.

In her conclusion, Johnson mentions certain “bad behaviours” as something we need to talk about in our Network. How bad behaviours – misconduct and abuse – are enabled by the institutions is a central concern. Ethical valorisation is also material valorisation, and the labourer should be respectfully provided with the security and safety necessary to sustain that labour. We can perhaps extend Johnson’s useful concept of the “cinematic academic” to one who understands the ethical charge of media frames. One might imagine a docufiction, a documentary of sorts, or even better, a mockumentary that is a public intervention, rendering visible, making use of the tragicomicality of the precarious academic who struggles to “stay in the game” and (therefore) call out systemic abuse. However, as long as the cinematic sensibilities among us are protected, such as the knowledge of ironic reclamation of mainstream aesthetics, such as the image of the poor academic, marking dissertations while they earn 15€ per dissertation (which is true in the case TU Dublin), the creative methods we can employ might not have to mean heavy risk of self-jeopardization. If we agree that intellectual labour can combine with expressive forms, perhaps it might be possible to articulate precarity as a shared phenomenon.

NOTES

1. In some cultures, recognising the other through their face can signal immediate danger, hence destruction, where survival corresponds to a violent logic of “kill the other before it kills you”. This suggests that “the face” is a unique moment (as Johnson notes) where our interrelationality

becomes recognisable; be it in the form of pre-emptive violence, or pre-emptive alliance. Perhaps in the case of the “cinematic academic”, the concept of face can be useful to give our encounters a cinematic quality, where our senses of security and precarity are recognized as entangled.

2. This leads me to the prospect of a “neoliberal academia without Humanities” where even the merit-based value assigned to academic work evaporates in the face of “capital needs”. Please see the key objectives of HCI here, centralising “high productivity growth sectors”: <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/what-is-human-capital-initiative-hci/>

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Representations and Significations of Isolation in Bo Burnham’s *Inside* (2021)

Eilís Nolan, *Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology*

American comedian Bo Burnham’s Netflix special *Inside* (2021) was a long-awaited new instalment of his typical dark-comedy musical performances. Having risen to fame as one of YouTube’s breakout stars of the 2000s, *Inside* is in some ways simply a return to form for Burnham. The humour is not atypical of his usual social observation and tongue-in-cheek commentary, with previous comedy songs that critique aspects of modern society such

as religion, relationships, and white victimhood. However, *Inside* differs from his previous work in both the time period in which it was created – during the 2020 spate of lockdowns in the United States – and the tone and length of Burnham’s critiques. Filmed entirely in his own guesthouse, Burnham claims to have completed the special alone and isolated. Until the credit sequence, nobody else is seen during the film which supports that claim. During one of the special’s many monologues, Burnham states that he had been approached to return to live comedy by Netflix, after poor mental health resulting in panic attacks while he was performing had led to him taking a five-year sabbatical. He then had begun writing *Inside* at the beginning of 2020 when COVID-19 became an epidemic in the United States, resulting in restrictions to live performance. This resulted in Burnham adjusting the format of *Inside* away from live performance, creating instead a solo film.

This format alone derives heavily from the conditions that COVID-19 imparted on society. *Inside* was created by Burnham alone, without a camera crew or production team on site. Therefore, isolation is a primary theme of the film, with much focus given to the ways in which Burnham is alone. The solitary nature of the production of *Inside* serves to represent the isolated atmosphere of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders during the period of isolation in 2020. Approaching the work in this experimental manner, he creates a type of deconstruction of live performance. Burnham creates the illusion across the film of performing for a live audience, by including laugh tracks and simulated chatter, while simultaneously emphasising isolation with his use of space in the solitary set of his guesthouse. Physically, the figure he presents is alone in the set he is filming within with physical barriers preventing him from external interaction. Emotionally and mentally, Burnham posits that much of the social disorder he is describes throughout the film, including late-stage capitalism, war, global warming, and more is equally responsible and is in itself inherently isolating.

This is reflective and intentionally representative of the stay-at-home orders and lockdowns that created spikes in mental health issues internationally during 2020. In a 2020 study, over half of participants in China, where the first lockdowns were instated, claimed these restrictions caused them psychological harm (Matias 2020). Meanwhile, in Ireland, a 2023 B&A survey showed almost half of Irish participants felt their mental health suffered as a result of both the pandemic and the restrictions instated to curb the spread (Brennan, 2023). In the US, where Burnham filmed *Inside*, the Pew Research Center surveys from 2020 to 2022 showed 41% of US adults reporting psychological distress at some time during the pandemic (Gramlich, 2023). In 2022, the WHO claimed the epidemic caused a total 25% uptick in anxiety and depression worldwide, solidifying the scale of the issue (Brunier and Drysdale, 2022).

However, *Inside* being a COVID-era film is also not explicit. Despite being a physical and visual representation of the spate of lockdowns imposed in the US and across the world during the 2020 public health

emergency, Burnham never invokes the pandemic or mentions COVID-19. While Burnham discusses a deterioration in societal normality that has led to this retreat “inside,” he does not explicitly state what that deterioration is or has been caused by. Instead, he vaguely alludes to a crisis which has caused his live performance to become a pre-filmed Netflix special without any reference to pandemic or disease; the closest he comes to invoking the pandemic is by saying that, while preparing the live performance in early 2020, “the funniest thing happened”. The audience could infer instead that any one of Burnham’s other societal critiques is the reason for his retreat “inside.” This leads to an illusion that Burnham’s isolation is self-imposed, furthering the narrative set by his persona that this is reflective of a mental health crisis.

Here, he further reflects the dichotomy between what is said and is unsaid with regards to COVID-19 media. *Inside* serves what Rancière describes as the dual function of the image (2007, 12), to both represent a concept visually and emotionally; however, more specifically, it becomes what Rancière has dubbed a “naked image” (26), in so much as it is representative of both what it shows and what it fails to show. In failing to explicitly represent COVID-19, Burnham’s performance becomes representative of a broader sense of crisis. Isolation, in so much as it is performed both as a cause and a symptom of deteriorating mental health, becomes the focal point without the emphasis on disease.

Yet, *Inside* is still culturally a COVID film. The act of producing the film during lockdown and releasing it to a COVID-era audience irrevocably makes it so. It cannot be separated from the sites that led to its creation and the sites in which it is interpreted in any way more meaningful than its status as a product of the pandemic. As posited by Derrida, any belief that one can look at all elements at once without tainting it through interpretation is false (1981, 63). Generally, understanding a text involves a process of unweaving centuries of interpretation. In *Inside*’s case, as a contemporary text, one cannot look at all elements without at least subjecting it through the interpretation of the lens of contemporary culture. While much of that is to do with Burnham’s explicit portrayals, it is not possible to avoid the significations of disease that are embodied in a work produced in the COVID climate. Burnham’s single body in isolation interacting with the space of his guesthouse, when viewed by a COVID and post-COVID audience, becomes charged with such signification and comes to visually represent a sense of quarantine that inherently taints every other interpretation. A pandemic audience, for whom isolation and quarantine were inextricably, visually linked, must use the contextual clues given to refer it back to their own situation. As Rose states, the social modality of the site of audiencing is pertinent as the “social identities” of those doing the looking/watching allow for vastly different interpretations of a text or media (2016, 40). As a film whose sites of production and circulation also emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, the site of the audience too is inherently situated as one culturally and socially impacted by the pandemic. While the specifics of lockdown measures differed internationally, and even

nationally with regards to essential workers, the cultural perception of the pandemic is that of the lockdown; of self-isolation. Thus, Burnham's represented self-imposed isolation becomes a signifier for the notion of disease itself; and the effects it ultimately had.

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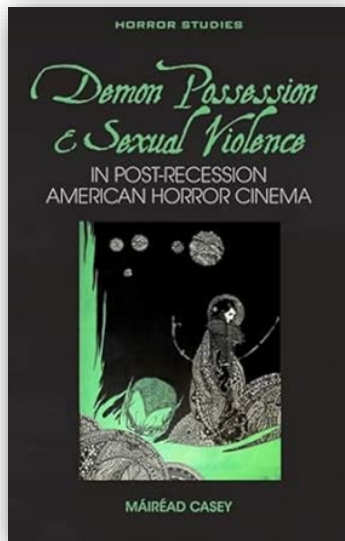
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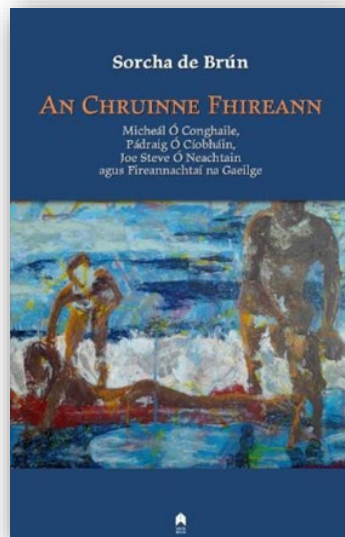
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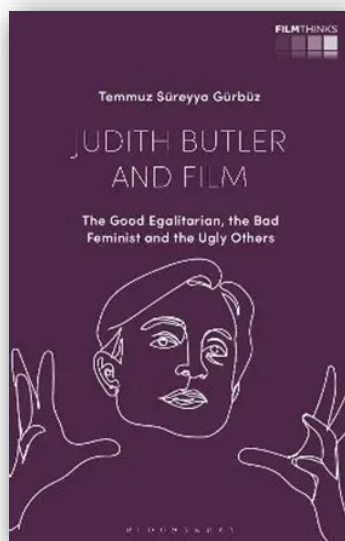
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