# FROM THE EDITORS

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# DIGITAL DISCOMFORT

## Revisiting *Perfect Blue* in the age of social media



by  ELLIE BOTOMAN

"WHO ARE YOU?" THIS IS the question that haunts Mima Kirigoe, the protagonist of Satoshi Kon's 1997 animated psychological thriller *Perfect Blue*. It is the question she is asked by fans, by interviewers, by her managers, a question that lingers on the landscape of her mind as her sense of reality begins to unravel.

When Mima leaves her J-Pop group *CHAM!* to pursue a career as an actress, she finds her private life and her public celebrity persona contaminated. A diary-style blog page titled "Mima's Room" appears to know Mima more than she knows herself—it digitally documents her innermost thoughts, worries about her new career, and picks up mundane details from her daily routine. Threats from a violent stalker upset by her decision to take on a dark TV role begin to fracture Mima's sense of identity. When members of the show's crew begin to die, Mima questions her own innocence, no longer able to keep a tight grip on reality. The boundaries between the digital and the everyday begin to spill into each other.

20 years later, Kon's film feels prophetic. While the Internet at the time was viewed as a utopian, egalitarian network of communication and information, Kon exposed the network's sinister potential long before we came to understand social media's danger, the possibility of monstrous identity formation as we increasingly disengage with the real world in favor of digital artifice.

To understand the disorienting psychology of *Perfect Blue*, it is important to consider Kon's particular style of animation. Its most salient feature is the use of doubling, a system embedded both in the film's narrative and visual anatomy.

Early in the film, Kon intercuts Mima's highwire pop performances with her grocery shopping; her low-level fame allows her to occupy the dual life of teenager and performer. When Mima is cast in the crime show *Double Bind* and comes across "Mima's Room," the balance between these lives starts to waver. The new digital "Mima" represents an idealized version of herself, except this version is not even of Mima's own creation—it is a product of fan fetish. Like a virus, Mima's attempts to split herself from this identity cause her digital doppelganger to multiply into a ghostly shadow. In one of the most disorienting moments of the film, Mima wakes up in what she believes to be her bedroom, only to realize that she's actually encased in a replica created by her murderous fan trying to "save" her conflicted identity. We see "Mima's Room" leak out of its digital containers into the physical world, a mirror for Mima's own mind.

This sense of uncanny replication is further emphasized by Kon's use of screens. Most of the time, our access to Mima's life is facilitated by additional viewing mediums, reflections or mirrored distortions. Her face is projected across television screens, security monitors, pop idol posters, and provocative photographs, as though her identity operates only on digital surfaces.

Mima's self-image is subjected to numerous transformations into

virtual alternate identities, oftentimes through predatory male gazes: Mima the innocent pop idol, Mima the sexualized actress, and Mima the victim of exploitative show business and hungry fans. She stares at her own reflection on the train; as she passes in front of an electronics store, her image is broadcast onto the set of TVs in the window. Conversations with other characters, especially those involved in the show, occur during filming, or, when Mima is in a car, she appears to speak through her reflection in the window. Even when Mima appears to be alone, running errands or sitting in her room, those moments are broadcast or reflected. In our unimpeded access to Mima's life, mediated as it may be, we become implicated in the violation of her privacy.

As the stalker's violence escalates, "Mima's Room" becomes the only tangible record of Mima's rapidly destabilizing world. She is no longer able to differentiate between her own actions and thoughts expressed on the blog. At one point, virtual Mima in her old *CHAM!* costume appears in Mima's reflection on the train window, vanishes for a moment, then reappears as a ghost bouncing on the tops of lampposts, demonstrating the doppelganger's growing power. Mima's public performance operates as a "mirror space" beyond her conscious agency, like "Mima's Room" existing in a cyberspace outside of her control. As Mima is surrounded interactive reflective surfaces, we see her private life externalized, subject to manipulation from the leering eyes of the outside world.

Perhaps the most fluid visual duality in *Perfect Blue* is Kon's use of color. Tones of blue and red map out Mima's psychological detachment from reality and her internal turmoil across the film's visual composition.

Caught in the throes of her breakdown, Mima sits in front of her computer reading the blog. The harsh light of the screen engulfs her face in the darkened bedroom. As she doubts her innocence, we see her turn to the blue-tinged artifice of this forged digital identity for stability. Blue outlines Mima's corrupted innocence in the artificial celebrity world. Initially, Mima moves through her cool-toned grocery store with no fear of being spotted by her fans. When she begins her role on *Double Bind*, the set is bathed in the same bluish hues, washed out by the stage lights. Blue light acts as the backdrop for her dangerous new reality. When she tries to visit her former pop group, she chases her doppelganger through the stark blue-white hallways, bursting out onto the bleak rainy sidewalk. When it appears that Mima has murdered a photographer who leaked nude photos of her (washed in the same pale blue, angelic glow), her body is illuminated by the light of pictures projecting her image. The color blue is supposed to preserve Mima's celebrity status, but instead her reputation is cheapened and tarnished. The worlds we construct can turn against us.

Despite the film's title, red appears to be its dominating color. In the traditional chromatic language of cinema, red is associated with seduction, sexuality, or anger. Kon's palette of red signifies Mima's encroaching madness, leaking
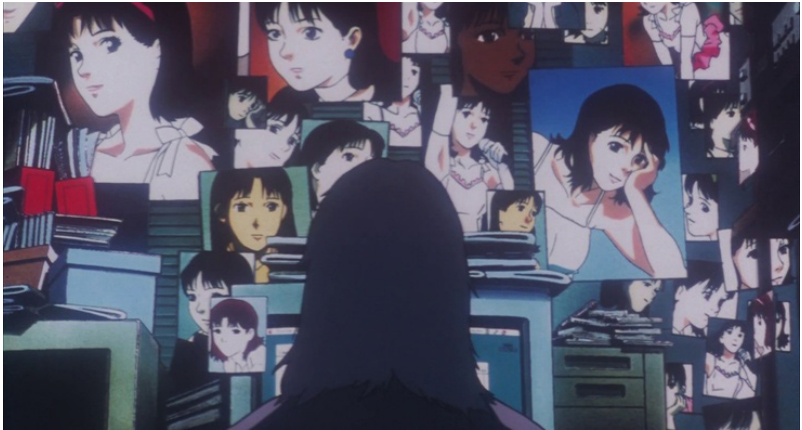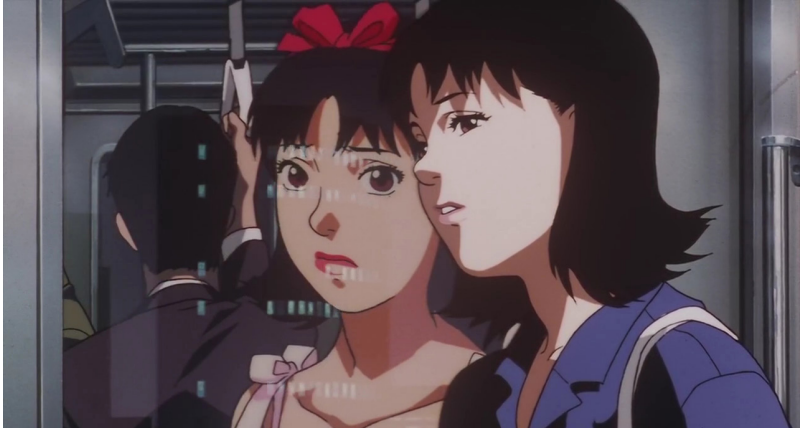
*PERFECT BLUE* (1997)

like a stain across the settings and characters. As Mima receives threats from her fans and she discovers the non-reality that is "Mima's Room", we see her body swallowed up by the vibrant red walls of her bedroom in the frame. Mima repeatedly occupies red settings, as when she confronts her doppelganger in the red tile bathroom after the photoshoot and when her face is framed by a red set piece as she's interviewed about her new career. As she tries to fight back against these forced identities, the warm red tones grow harsher, overwhelming the frame.

When the grisly murders begin (both on the show and in real life), the film is thrust into scenes of pulp violence with gouged eyes, slashed bodies, and bleeding hands. As if unable to differentiate between a fantasized virtual object and the flesh-and-blood of the real world, *Perfect Blue*'s violence forms a new hyperreality. Mima's torment rips out of her mind and her computer screen and into the bodies of those trying to exploit her. Her manager Rumi, early in the film, wears red, signaling her own psychosis long before it is revealed. When she appears to Mima dressed as Mima's murderous doppelganger, Rumi is dressed in a scarlet costume and, when she wipes blood on her face, we see that she has fallen deep into her own delusions.

*Double Bind* is a vehicle for Mima's identity transformation: the murder plot parallels her own experiences until she is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is scripted. Red and blue commingle. When Mima decides to participate in a rape scene that will bring her greater fame on the show at the cost of being traumatized, the sexual red of the strip club's curtains clashes against the blue-white stage on which she becomes the victim. As the taping continues and the boundaries between performance and genuine terror deteriorate, the scene is washed in an unusual purple glow. Before her decision, Mima's fish tank contains fish with blue and red stripes submerged in water, reflective and transparent; after her decision, the fish are found dead in the tank. The relationship between these two colors mimics blood itself: blue in our veins, turning red only when it escapes our skin.

Kon's elaborate visual vocabulary is emblematic of the unique style of animation which would come to define his decade-long career. The medium of animation allows the vivification of Mima's sense of psychological terror through rapid, disorienting cuts and mirrored shots. Kon's fantasy is crucially coupled with his realism, bridging the gap between our world and the animated world emerging across the burgeoning Internet culture of the late '90s.

This historical moment, as the Internet was becoming increasingly accessible to the world, is key to the film. As Rumi installs her first computer, Mima describes the Internet as "that thing that's been popular lately!" At one point, she interacts with her stalker "Me-Mania" through an online chat, indicative of the greater naivety of the day. Kon shows how the online representations of ourselves—doppelgangers or

avatars—become interwoven into our psyches. Mima sits alone in her room, utterly engrossed in an avatar someone has created for her, until she no longer knows what to believe about her identity.

*Perfect Blue* is also an early portrayal of cyberstalking, depicting it before it became a clearly-defined behavior. The film scrutinizes the Internet's potential to empower faceless fans to take violent action against their idols. Kon, a self-described cinephile, recognized how our consumption habits could turn us delusional, isolated, childish, vicious, and, most importantly, how the Internet could feed a desire to be anonymous.

Anticipating the daily documentation of Instagram posts, Snapchat stories, and Twitter updates, the viewer can follow Mima around on her errands and into her new career. The audience stands in for a surveillance camera or the paparazzi. "Mima's Room" embodies some of the earliest forms of celebrity fan pages as her fans roam free to comment on her life and pull hidden meanings out of her most mundane routines. They all want to get to know "the real Mima." Where is the line between authenticity and performance? The Internet gives fans behind-the-scenes access to the lives led by their celebrities of choice, but at what cost?

In *Perfect Blue*, cyberspace becomes a porous zone for waking life and dreams to intermingle. Through the visual cues of colors and screens, Kon draws our attention to the deterioration of privacy in the digital age. The film's realistic animation, diametrically opposed to the highly-stylized (and commercially successful) anime style of the time, allows us to experience the film's unromanticized violence and identify with the near-real characters, acting as a medium capable of breaking the rules of reality while creating new worlds for us to consume. In Mima's terror and uncertainty at the hands of digital anonymity, we see how the Internet leads us to question our immediate reality. As our identities transform into abstracted commodities traded across digital landscapes, we rely on other people to accept our constructed personas, which in turn allows the image we present to the world to suffer manipulation and distortion.

Satoshi Kon was fascinated by the way people are able to live multiple lives, to exist across multiple realities. *Perfect Blue* is as much a cautionary tale as it is a puzzling, immersive experience. This theme of creating new selves to make sense of the changing world threads through Kon's subsequent works, especially his final film, *Paprika*, and his television special, *Paranoia Agent*. He gives us very few answers, lingering on the precipice of self-doubt in a new digital age.

*"Who are you?"*

We never get a sense of who Mima really is, or what she will be become following the traumas sketched out in the film. In the final moments of *Perfect Blue*, she sits inside her red car, looks into her rearview mirror, and tells us, with a steady smile, "I'm the real one!" ◆

# "I LAY DOWN ON MY MATTRESS, THEN GOT UP AGAIN TO UNDRESS…"

*RECLAMATION OF SEX AND THE*
*FEMALE FORM IN WOMEN'S*
*CINEMA 1965-1975*



by MADELEINE COLLIER

THE FIRST HALF OF THE twentieth century was marked, in part, by a progressive consolidation of creative power in the hands of filmmakers and major studios who were largely interested in rehearsing the functions of the traditional family and presenting the most palatable and yielding model of femininity. As the events of the sixties and seventies precipitated serious examinations of gender, sexuality, and femininity in the public sphere, female artists harnessed this momentum towards the project of working to disrupt established visions of femininity within the collective cultural consciousness. Coupling second-wave feminist movements with cinematic new wave movements across the globe, many women found fertile artistic ground in the politicization of the personal, beginning to challenge traditional ways of seeing the female form as well as to conceive of new patterns of female desire and sexuality. Among the most acclaimed of these New Wave entries were Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974, Belgium), Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974, USA), and Vera Chytilova's *Daisies* (1966, Czechoslovakia). Through their manipulations of the touchstones of art history, dedication to complicating assumptions about how sex can be deployed within a visual medium, and interest in exploring the politics of the gaze, these three filmmakers were able to collectively establish the foundation for a new feminist cinematic imaginary.

In their three films, Rainer, Chytilova, and Akerman crafted heroines who, in their nondescriptness, are deployed as surrogates for the female individual and are capable of invoking a greater consciousness of femininity. Akerman's "Je" (also referred to as Julie), Chytilova's "Marie I" and "Marie II", and Rainer's "She" act as double agents, breaking down the barrier between the filmmaker and the character while also erasing the boundary between the character and the concept of the greater female archetype. This technique of narrative fusion has more in common with the innovations of postmodern Confessional poetry than with cinematic tradition; the prioritization of the female self as a worthy site of investigation was explored first a decade earlier by Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich.

Within the work of all of these poets, some of the strength of the composition is derived from the fact that narrative voice is assumed to be personal, an association which is far more difficult to convey in film. Thus, naming takes on a distinctive importance when creators attempt to construct characters which can be read as both personal and archetypal. In the case of Yvonne Rainer especially, the process of translating the ideological framework of these poets' work to a visual medium allowed her to bypass the exclusive language established by the male-dominated photographic/cinematic tradition. While *Film About a Woman Who...* is located squarely within the realm of the avant-garde, it is also heavily indebted to a centuries-old female literary canon, from which it derives some of its narrative force and authenticity.

When approaching the presentation of the body on screen, the conscientious female filmmaker

must consider the habits of seeing, sexualization, and consumption that have become ingrained in the relationship of viewer to the female form across centuries of art history and advertisement. Akerman, Chytilova, and Rainer were instrumental in constructing an alternate vocabulary for representing and witnessing women, experimenting throughout their careers with methods for drawing the female form out of its automatic sexualization and into the realm of human subjectivity. For example, in the first third of *Je Tu Il Elle*, Julie pushes furniture around her room, writes and rewrites a letter, and eats sugar out of a brown bag with a spoon, initially fully clothed and then nude. While Akerman takes care to position her body beautifully among the features of the room, Julie's nudity is fully for herself, an element of her experience of isolation, suspended in time within the confines of her own consciousness. Akerman's contribution to the discourse of the female form is a conceptualization of nudity not as ambiguous symbol or provocative display but as being.

By contrast, Chytilova and Rainer dramatically rehearse patriarchal patterns of seeing in their work, emphasizing and satirizing the values underpinning invocations of female nudity in cinema. In *Film About a Woman Who...*, the body of the titular woman is repeatedly undressed and caressed by her male lover and by another woman in a sequence which progresses agonizingly slowly; later, others watch. In a sense, by reducing this woman—who has already been established as the film's most complex and developed subject—completely

to a mute object to be viewed and touched, Rainer takes the conceit of female representation in patriarchal cinema to its extreme, allowing its very baseness and absurdity to act as self-refutation. The camera drifts off in a pan to the face of an adjacent woman, covered in ebullient cut-and-pasted declarations of love; Rainer indicates a disconnect between how a woman expresses herself or professes herself to be and how she is portrayed in relation to others sexually.

More than anything, sex within these films inscribes the body with power. Amidst the precarious terrain of relationships that carry the plot, sex emerges as one of the orienting landmarks around which these women initiate the project of self-definition. Akerman, Chytilova, and Rainer shy away from sex scenes as they are traditionally applied; in their films, sex is never deployed as titillation, nor is it called upon to provide a neat moment of narrative or emotional culmination. Instead, these filmmakers poke at the issue of sex with scientific zeal, sweeping the ground after its destabilizing earthquake for tangible moments where issues of desire, complacency, dissatisfaction, and control become prominent in its rubble. In the vast majority of films from the first half of the twentieth century, sex is premised upon a simple correspondence between male desire and the question of whether the object of this desire is ultimately possessed; sex is a full-stop period to emotional and relational issues. What Chytilova, Rainer, and Akerman propose is a far more complex manner of imaging and projecting sex, one in which sex emerges as a fertile ground

to investigate questions of the self in relation to others and the complexity of power exchanges in intimate spaces.

Notably, the protagonists of these films are not tethered by any restricting label of sexuality, nor are they in a traditional sense "bisexual"; each experiences sex as a boundless exchange between individuals where the stakes exceed a conventional binary of desire/release. In *Je Tu Il Elle*, Akerman's "Je" engages in two sexual exchanges, one with a man and one with a woman. The first, which takes place in the car of a man who has agreed to give her a lift, is not on her own terms, and the focus of the lens remains entirely on the male (receptor of pleasure) throughout. It is a prolonged exchange under his direction, ostensibly for his benefit alone, however, the exchange is modified by the the fact that it takes place under the unsettling and unblinking eye of Akerman's camera. The woman in the scene inhabits a curious dual participatory role; she is essentially absent from the exchange as it is performed physically and yet assumes a kind of power as a dispassionate witness to vulnerability. This literally "disembodied" involvement from the woman in the off-camera space provides an apt visual metaphor for dissociation during a nonconsensual sexual act while simultaneously exploring the power retained by the female gaze in the consumption of male vulnerability. Akerman complicates the motivations and consequences implicated in the exchange: maybe the woman is not complicit, but she is still curious; the man asserts a physical will to dominate and control, but his attempts are somewhat undermined by the woman as she assumes the power of the inherently cinematic role of voyeur.

The contrast between the first and second sex scenes in *Je Tu Il Elle* could not be more pronounced. In the second, a scene between the protagonist and her female ex-lover, Julie both initiates the exchange and could not be more fully present on-camera and in the realm of the "embodied". The scene represents an alternative kind of sex, simultaneously fully vulnerable and fully shared, wholly ecstatic and uninhibited. Presented in a static wide shot, black and white bodies cast against the white wall and the dark ripples in the clean sheets, Akerman here recasts and repurposes the marble nudes of the Renaissance. Accessing a prominent visual touchstone from art history, she draws attention to the distinctions between the performed and passive nudity commissioned by the male nobility of centuries past and this new incarnation, an organic, kinetic presentation of the female body as both desiring and participatory. The scene breaks out of a recognizable heteronormative-patriarchal script for sex; it seems endless, defying any three-act structure. The camera's singularity and intensity of focus partitions it from the body of the film, presenting it as an answer to the implied question of the previous hour.

As imbued with awkwardness as it is with classical beauty, the exchange elevates sex as an ideal while reveling in its inelegant shapes and the clumsiness of its female actors. The camera's gaze is not exploitative, nor is it meant to excite; Akerman's unblinking camera is here turned to the purpose of
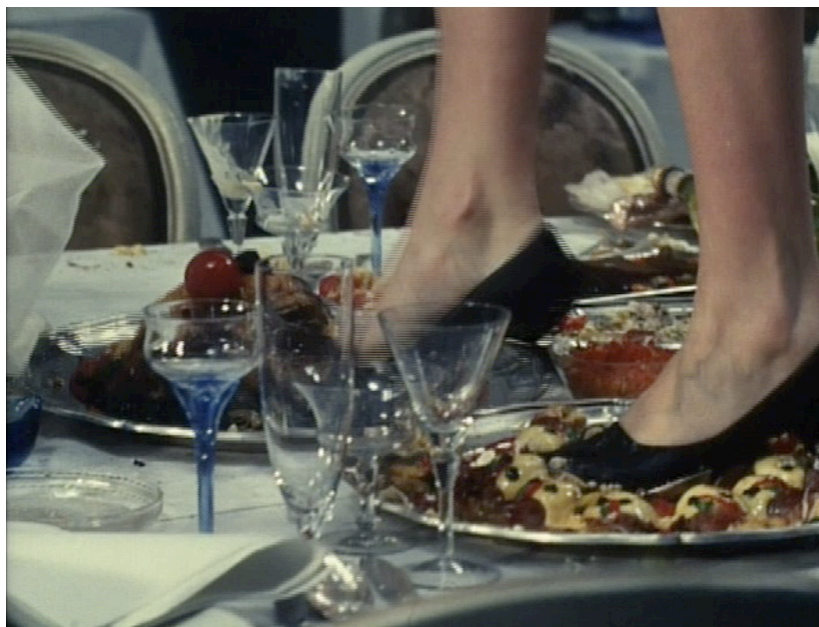
*DAISIES* (1966)

objective documentarian. *Je Tu Il Elle*'s twin visions of sex as it is encountered by the same woman is a complicating entry in the archive of cinema's sexual explorations, rejecting normative binaries of desire, participation, agency, and pleasure.

Like Akerman, Yvonne Rainer makes overt allusions to the historical production of the female body in art while distinguishing her own approach to portraying the female sexual experience. The protagonist of *Film About a Woman Who...* visits a museum in the early moments of the film and over a slideshow of Roman artifacts the disembodied narrator notes: "By the end of the day she was sick of Madonnas holding up their male infants, saints holding their bloody foreheads, martyrs holding their bloody heads, angels holding their fingers up, duchesses holding up their robes, dukes holding their falcons, soldiers holding their spears, lions holding up banners, and virgins holding up mirrors." The last item in the inventory was discussed at length in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972); he declared "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (Berger, 51). Recognizing the patriarchal imperatives underlying the depiction of woman as construed among the relics of art history, Rainer, in the span

of the brief museum montage, collects for demolition the sundry emblems of an artistic tradition that no longer services her frame of understanding.

Subsequently, her protagonist engages in the surreal and surgical deconstruction of a sexual exchange, which Rainer, tongue-in-cheek, dubs "An Emotional Accretion in 48 Steps." The scene is constructed around a series of forty-eight intertitles and brief, static visual interjections that describe twenty-four hours of a couple apparently incapable of any meaningful communication. At first the couple lies on an impossibly tall examining table/bed in the middle of a white room. Then they depart for a party where hysterically-pitched opera music sets the mood. They soon return to the bed to make love again, and finally the protagonist leaves in the morning, culminating in the narration: "45. She knows the crucial moment was when she said 'hold me'. 46. Somehow she had betrayed herself. She hadn't wanted to be held. 47. (Do you think she could figure her way out of a paper bag?) 48. She had wanted to bash his fucking face in." Through this overwrought deconstruction Rainer parodies the notion that women's emotional relationship to sex is impossibly complex while men are incapable of locating sex as an event within a framework of emotional minutiae. When held up against Akerman's vision of ecstatic sex, Rainer's sarcastic portrayal becomes an exchange evidently straightjacketed

*JE TU IL ELLE* (1974)



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by the limitations of sex conceived of as between a male body and a female body when both actors adhere to societally-propagated narratives about gender and sexuality.

A similarly satirical portrait of sex can be found in *Daisies*, which features a series of repetitive scenes wherein Marie I and Marie II, conwomen of sexual politics, capitalize on the generosity of their elderly male patrons for meals and monetary gain. Marie I and II, who live in an apartment plastered with the telephone numbers of men, seem uninterested in sex in and of itself, instead delighting in their ability to manipulate and control hypocritical suitors. At one point, the voice of one such suitor emanates pleadingly from the telephone while the Maries gleefully dismember and eat various phallic foods, an interesting inversion of Akerman's disembodied sexual participation. As in *Je Tu Il Elle*, though the second party is absent, he plays an important role in the fantasy enacted by the Maries, and when the phone is disconnected the pair are momentarily startled. Chytilova presents an instance in which the female actors wield the power completely in a sexual exchange; however, their pleasure emanates not from sex itself but rather from a kind of cooperative obliteration of the heteronormative system of organization.

Across the three films, appetite and the relationship of women to food manifests itself as an important extension of the relationship of the self to the body. Where a recognizable visual pattern has not been established for conveying female desire, hunger and ravenous eating jointly constitute a metaphor for sex that is both comprehensible and easy to translate. Julie's insatiable hunger in *Je Tu Il Elle* seems to find its satisfaction in the fulfillment of the meal and sex provided by her ex-lover, just as the Maries seem always to be indulging in food as a substitute for sexual exchange. Furthermore, eating in both *Je Tu Il Elle* and *Daisies* expresses not only desire, but also initiative to take up space in societies that will women to be small and want little. In the case of *Daisies* especially, where Chytilova operated under the oppressive censorship of the communist Czech regime, hunger and consumption provided one of her most useful metaphors. In the film's grand climax the Maries lay waste to a luxurious dining hall, devouring the meal set out for an out-of-frame aristocracy and asserting their will to obliterate a class and system of power that mandated their existence as doll-women.

Rainer, Chytilova, and Akerman all recognized that the project of claiming space for the female creator hinged, in part, on the ability to reframe the woman onscreen as subject. The recasting of the female form, stripped of the signifiers it has accumulated throughout history, is an ongoing project rightfully acquiring further dimension as femininity sheds its monolithic status. Nonetheless, the innovations of new wave women continue to leave an impression. ◆

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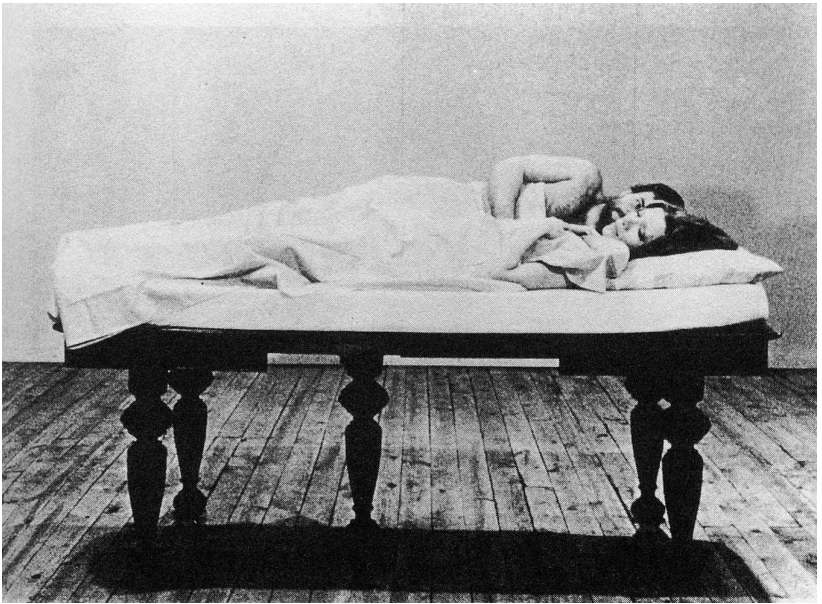
*FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO...* (1974)

*COLLAGE BY MILES EMANUEL*

# RESISTING 'CELLULOID DOMINANCE'

*Carolee Schneemann's* Fuses

by ADINA GLICKSTEIN

REFLECTING ON HER COLLABORATIVE relationship with friend and contemporary Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneeman lamented the relationship between image-maker and subject that invariably emerged when her male contemporaries put her on-camera: "whenever I collaborated, went into a male friend's film, I always thought that I would be able to hold my presence, maintain an authenticity. It was soon gone, lost in their celluloid dominance… I felt that whoever I really was had been obliterated and that they had needed to obliterate me."[1] Her observation anticipates two crucial revelations of feminist film theory: that images are constructed, and that they bear the traces of the conditions under which they are manufactured. But despite Schneemann's self-evidently feminist desire to control the conditions of her representation, her own film work is, at least upon first glance, somewhat at odds with the tenets of feminist film theory that began to emerge around the same time as her artistic practice.

The predominant feminist theory of the time, emerging mostly in Britain as a psychoanalytic approach to film theory and emblematized by Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," maintained that sexualized images of women were inextricable from male scopic desire. In the exhibition catalog for *Carolee Schneeman: Kinetic Painting*, a current retrospective of the artist's work at MoMA PS1 in Queens, Mignon Nixon writes that one early implication of this

1. *Imagining Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* by Carolee Schneemann, p. 35

theory was "the repression of the discourse of the body and sexuality altogether."[2] If, as Mulvey suggests in "Visual Pleasure," female spectators are unconsciously identified with the male gaze that renders women passive bearers of desire, how can art create an oppositional depiction of female sexuality that resists the objectifying mechanism of traditional spectatorship? A decade before "Visual Pleasure" was even published, Schneeman offered an answer.

*Fuses* (1965), just shy of 20 minutes long and shot on a wind-up 16mm Bolex (famously, Maya Deren's camera of choice), constitutes Schneemann's most direct response to the crisis of female (un)representability wrought by second-wave feminism. *Fuses* is a movie about sex, and never shies away from frank visual representation, taking as its subject a rendezvous between Schneemann and her then-partner James Tenney. *Fuses* is so sexually explicit, in fact, that Schneemann had to send every hundred feet of film to Brakhage's lab with a letter from her psychiatrist, noting that "the enclosed footage... is an archetypal study of the displacements of the cross," to prevent the FBI, ever on the lookout for deviant material, from intercepting and destroying it.[3] Bodies are on display, and they fill the screen unapologetically. Whether this is, as Mulvey might suggest, an unnecessary

foregrounding of the feminine "to-be-looked-at-ness"[4] or, as Schneeman asserts, a gesture of empowerment—a reclamation of women's scopic pleasure, or prerogative "to see what 'the fuck' is and locate that in terms of a lived sense of equity"[5]—is on some level up to the viewer. It is indisputable that *Fuses* places Schneemann's body at the forefront of its cinematic exploration; read through the lens of "Visual Pleasure," one might even argue that it situates Schneemann as the object of male desire.

The issue, then, is whether this



formulation renders Schneemann a *passive* object, complicit within the system of representation that appropriates female sexuality for male pleasure. Critics may argue that this

2. "Schneemann's Personal Politics" by Mignon Nixon. *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting* p. 44-53
3. Serra, "The Cat's Eye View: Carolee Schneemann" p. 2
4. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* p. 4
5. Kate Huang, "An Interview with Carolee Schneemann." from *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998) p. 26

is the case, attempting to deny her re-working of female eroticism any merit by maintaining that it plays to masculine fantasies. But *Fuses*' formal experimentation serves as its first line of defense against psychoanalytic feminist critique: Mulvey's essay refers to a specific tradition of cinematic representation, most often associated with classical Hollywood, defined by a set of formal mechanisms—continuity editing, narrative identification with one central, typically male protagonist—that Schneemann's work explicitly rejects.

*Fuses* opens with a series of images shot in such tight close-up that they are initially indecipherable. Already out-of-focus, their subject matter is further obscured by the gentle undulations of handheld camerawork, and any attempt to comprehend them is foreclosed as Schneemann rapidly cuts away. Finally, certain images become unmistakable: an eye, a cascade of hair, Schneemann's naked lower body. Moving away from these extreme close-up shots, Schneemann shifts to focus on a handful of other decipherable subjects—a woman on the beach, her blurred form visible as a black smudge against a vibrant cerulean landscape, and a lace curtain, illuminated in yellow, red, and gold, blowing in the wind. As the film goes on, interior scenes are sometimes tinted blue and exterior ones yellow, reversing this dialectical understanding of domesticity, effacing the boundary between the world within the home and "natural" realm outside.

Schneemann soon turns the camera to herself and Tenney. Their relations are shot from three perspectives: Schneemann filming Tenney, Tenney filming Schneemann, and occasional footage of the couple together achieved by mounting the camera on a stand or tripod.[6] Schneemann rapidly cuts between these three viewpoints, declining to establish one as authoritative. Even in depicting the sexual act, she undermines the very mechanism that enables scopophilic pleasure: no single focalizer is ever identified, no stable point-of-view offered as a platform for the viewer's pleasurable gaze. As the film goes on, Schneemann builds an intense focus on her relations with Tenney. Occasionally she cuts away, returning to depict the outdoors, or her cat, Kitsch. Mostly, we see bodies. Here, Schneemann is, in her own words, "both image and image-maker."[7] This drive to take the act of artistic creation into her own hands offers another defense against the critique that reads all eroticized representations of the female body as essentially derogatory. Schneemann puts the body on display to actively challenge the representations of female sexuality that predate her work, not to defer to them.

Interestingly, *Fuses*' contemporary manifestation, wherein it tends to be treated as "video art" rather than "experimental cinema"—a distinction cleaved mainly by exhibition practices—continues to resist the conditions of representation that Mulvey wrote

6. Wentrack, Kathleen. *Female Sexuality in Performance and Film: Erotic, Political, Controllable? The Contested Female Body in the Work of Carolee Schneemann and VALIE EXPORT*. p. 158
7. http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/eyebody.html

against. A fundamentally constitutive component of scopophilic pleasure, Mulvey explains, is the physical space of the cinema: the "hermetically sealed world" characterized by the "extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen."[8] This construction, analyzed at length by film theorists of the 1970s who concerned themselves with the psychoanalytic properties derived from the "cinematic apparatus," is said to bolster the effect of voyeuristic separation, offering the viewer illusory private access to the on-screen world. In *Fuses*' current incarnation, this, too, is disavowed. At the time of this writing, *Fuses* is available for viewing on a consistent basis in two primary locations: a handful of poor-quality online streams, or MoMA PS1's retrospective of Schneemann's work, *Kinetic Painting* (on view through March 11, 2018).

Suppose, first, the more widely accessible of the two scenarios: the viewer streams the film; they will likely watch it on a laptop or portable device, probably alone, with the power to start and stop at will. The cinematic mechanism that Mulvey identifies as central to the viewer's interpellation into masculinized spectatorship is, under these viewing conditions, nonexistent.

But even in the gallery context where *Fuses* is currently being presented, which more closely resembles theatrical spectatorship, the conditions that universally defined moviegoing at the time of Mulvey's writing are destabilized. At PS1, *Fuses* is presented in a black-box movie theater within a larger gallery, with entrances on two sides, maintaining the flow of movement through the exhibition. *Fuses* is positioned as one of many works within a major retrospective, alongside the rest of Schneemann's oeuvre. Her other film works are exhibited in varying arrangements: projected onto gallery walls, screened on small monitors with individual headsets, or as part of larger multimedia pieces like *War Mop* (1983), where a mechanized arm occasionally mobilizes a household mop to pummel a television set. Rather than presenting Schneemann's films as a single program for theatrical exhibition, the *Kinetic Painting* curators position them alongside her paintings, photographs, and documentations of her performances. Whether or not the viewer regards each film in its duration is their prerogative; even in the case that they choose to sit down and watch *Fuses* in its entirety, their experience is likely to be disrupted by the flow of other patrons between the theater and adjacent gallery. Under these circumstances, as in online streaming, the possibility of theatrical viewership as early feminist film theory imagined it is foreclosed. The setup that catalyzed the viewer's identification and resulting scopic pleasure is destroyed. Now, in the absence of these conditions, the film remains only as a document of Schneemann's desire to wrest the power of the image and appropriate it to determine her own representation. ⬩

8. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 3
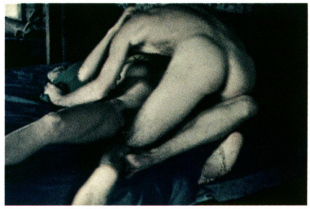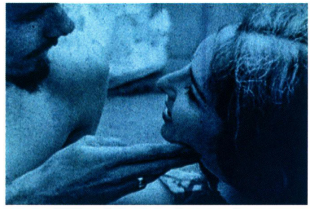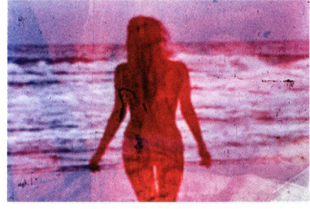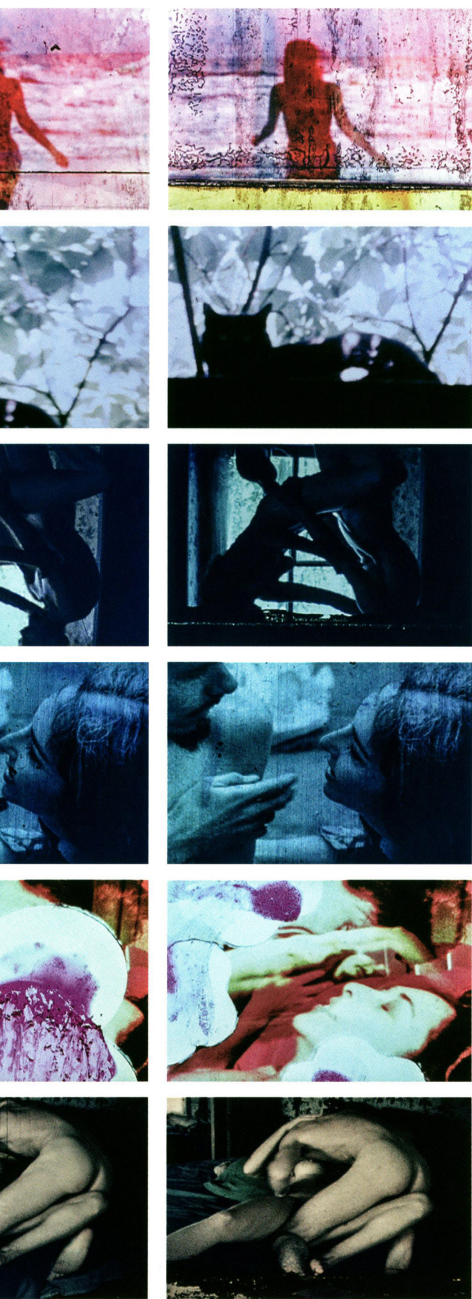
*FUSES* (1965)

# THE ELUSIVE
# BEDROOM

*sex ellipsis in the Golden Age*

by SAM FENTRESS

> "A long way off through trees I could see the lights of a big house. Some Hollywood big shot, probably, some wizard of the slobbery kiss, and the pornographic dissolve."

Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister*

IN THE 1934 FILM *MEN IN WHITE*, a relatively obscure picture in the dusty Warner Bros. back catalog, Clark Gable plays a doctor who impregnates one of his interns. The film's release came just before the institution of the Hays Code, hence its surprisingly casual attitude towards extramarital sex and a lot of veiled references to abortion. Code or no code, the presence of any kind of sex scene in a film from this period is unthinkable, so the moment of intercourse is buried in implication— as in so many films from the 30s, 40s, 50s—with only a conspicuous dissolve to mark its grave.

*Men in White* is an early example of intercourse swept under the rug of the dissolve. It's certainly not the first, but the magnitude with which this scene acts upon the rest of the film marks a huge moment for the role a sex act—and for these films, a crucially *unseen* act—could play in the narrative of a film. The child conceived in the ellipsis engenders the film's dramatic central question.

It's typical of these scenes to dissolve at a passionate embrace and show the characters waking up in bed the next morning, but *Men in White* doesn't exactly do even that, making it an interesting place to start the discussion. One character leaves the room entirely, telling the other one to leave. It is her *not* leaving, and instead her positioning of herself on the hospital bed, that leads us to believe the dissolve that follows is marking something else. When we find later in the film that she is pregnant, and that the doctor is responsible, our assessment of the dissolve's function is retroactively certified.

But given that the dissolve does not seem to actually *show* us anything, can it justly lead us to any kind of inference about the film's story? Every cross-dissolve says something unique about its film's epistemology. There is a fine, and in some sense unknowable, boundary between the sex scene that *must* have taken place (as in *Men in White* or Cassavetes' *Shadows*) and the sex scene that *might* have (as in noirish stories like *The Big Sleep* and *Double Indemnity*). What's most salient upon returning to these non-scenes is how crucial they are to the films they inhabit, despite the fact we can't be sure they're even there. Chandler's dismissal of these transitions as "pornographic" misses the point in this sense. These moments are hardly gratuitous. But they are, not unlike any number of things in this era of cinema— like blackness, or queerness—relegated mainly to the shadows.

The question of whether a film is better with or without these instances doesn't really overlap in any significant way to the question of what is lost, or gained, by each individual moment of ellipsis. Part of the difficulty in recognizing these moments' force is that they are purposefully buried, as in *Double Indemnity*, where the sleight of hand is so smooth that the sequence—the

quintessential *femme fatale* Phyllis Dietrichson's first visit to insurance salesman Walter Neff's apartment—can go by barely noticed.

Prior to this scene, every meeting of the two characters has been punctuated by an entrance and an exit. In Dietrichson and Neff's first encounter, Neff comes to her house, talks, and leaves. No possibility of a missed physical encounter. Because we have viewed every moment Neff and Dietrichson spend together, we feel a certain omniscience as viewers. Any sense omniscience is, of course, totally illusory, and the moment of sex ellipsis at their meeting in Neff's apartment puts this noirish deconstruction of our epistemology on display.

Neff and Dietrichson are locked in an embrace on the couch (Neff has just told her that she'd be crazy to try and kill her husband, which would leave them with a lot of cash) and the camera pulls out as the scene dissolves with it. We sense what's about to happen. But instead of immediately dissolving to the post-coital moment, we're cut off, thrown into the battered Neff's office (the present)—a reminder that we are witnessing all of this only by virtue of his narration. He speaks for a moment ("... Maybe she had stopped thinking about it, but I hadn't; I couldn't...") and when we fade back to the apartment (the past), things have changed. The lamps have been turned off. Neff and Dietrichson are on opposite sides of the couch. He smokes. She powders her nose with a pocket mirror. We've missed it.

Wilder's decision—or Chandler's, Wilder's co-writer —to punctuate the sex ellipsis with an appeal to the narrator is, in some ways, the most reflexive moment of the film. The author seems to say: "I can't show you this, but even if I could, Neff wouldn't." The truly modernistic, stream-of-consciousness capacity of the ellipsis in this moment is its shifting of the narrative responsibility from the shoulders of the film's makers to its characters. This moment is the turning point of the entire film: after Neff and Dietrichson have sex, they are suddenly resolved to kill Dietrichson's husband, and this is the falling domino of the narrative. That the moment of ellipsis actually dominates both the narrative and the viewer's epistemology suggests we are dealing with a device that is not merely a matter of addition or subtraction, but something more exponential—something that, as in *Men in White*, reverberates in every subsequent frame of the film.

(A digression: the suggestive dissolve is not always so central to its narratives, and one less important instance in *The Big Sleep* better fits Chandler's dismissive turn of phrase. Humphrey Bogart, who plays the sexually-punctuated script with the blasé Marlowe now seems associated with ("I'm a private dick on a case"), plays word games with the flirty bookseller feels like the setup to a porno. Martha Vickers, the bookseller, is not glamorized here (that kind of modesty, if it can be called that, is reserved for leading lady Lauren Bacall), but she is sultry—and limber enough with her words that Marlowe admits, condescendingly, that she'd "make a good cop."

Vickers draws the blinds, and after they've toasted each other's paper cups, there's a truly awful moment where she takes off her glasses and prompts a kind of buffoonish catcall from Marlowe. Then there's some loud romantic string music, and we dissolve into a shot looking out

of the bookshop window in the early evening rain. It's darker after the ellipsis, and Marlowe's crass farewell—"So long, pal"—makes the following moments, as Vickers gazes a bit longingly out onto the storefront, feel even more empty. The visual poetics of the scene aren't nearly as rich as the similar moment in *Indemnity*. The scene feels, like Marlowe, shallow and misguided, successfully embodying the word "pornographic" in its inability to amount to anything more than afternoon delight.

It's hard to say exactly how this scene functions in the film's story, and that's part of what makes it come off as both a narrative digression and considerably sexist. The "proprietress," as she is referred to in the script by William Faulkner and Leigh Brackett, seems to function only as a way for us to understand Marlowe's irresponsibility, his penchant for getting sidetracked by a drink or a woman (a quality that sets him apart from Chandler's Marlowe). In the script, it's not even clear how obvious an implied sex scene would have been to Hawks; instead of dissolving into the rain, the script dissolves into the couple with an empty bottle, indicating that perhaps the two had merely spent the afternoon guzzling rye.)

Having stressed how these moments of ellipsis tend to act forcefully on the films in which they lurk, my discussion from this point on will focus more on the formal implications of the ellipsis itself, eventually attempting to arrive at some understanding of the cinematic quality of the technique.

My personal understanding of the sex ellipsis is necessarily wrapped up in what David Bordwell calls the "cognitive perspective," a term that emphasizes the ongoing cerebral dialectic between reader/viewer and text/film:

> Instead of a communication model, which treats meaning as dropped in upstream to be fished out by the spectator, we have a constructive model that treats meaning as an expanding elaboration of cues located in the text. This shift implies as well that, armed with certain schemas and knowledge of certain norms, the spectator could "go beyond the information given" in ways unforeseen by the filmmakers. What makes a film understandable is not necessarily exhausted by what the filmmakers deliberately put in to be understood.

The casual, unmotivated sexual encounter is rare in the cinema of the 1940s and 50s. Most omitted sex in Golden Age films is likely to be, even if random, operative in the plot of the film. Two films from the middle of the 50s—as rules and codes were beginning to bend—exemplify this quality.

Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* doesn't quite fit the category since it doesn't offer a before/after dissolve like the rest of these scenes, but when Cary and Ron (Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson) first kiss, it's a very familiar feeling—we sense what is inevitably coming when the characters move off screen and the camera pans onto a pigeon that seems to wink at us, acutely aware of what we're being denied.

The apparent scandal in *All that Heaven Allows* concerns older woman Wyman becoming romantically involved with younger man Hudson (she was eight years his senior—the horror!). The thought of this pairing, for the film's

**from top**
*THE BIG SLEEP* (1946)
*...AND GOD CREATED WOMAN* (1956)
*SHADOWS* (1959)

suburban inhabitants, is repulsive, but all the more horrific is the actual sight of it—when Ron and Cary go to a party together, the frenzy nearly derails the couple entirely. What's truly at stake, though, is under the surface; the issue is not so much a divorced woman deciding to take up the reins with a younger man, but the implication that this woman, by selecting the beautiful Ron as her husband's successor, has revealed her sexual desire at an inappropriate age.

No one who has watched the film would probably like to imagine a scene of intercourse, and yet its absence is felt on some level because of the film's clear, if implicit, concern with female sexuality. It is a special kind of vacancy, not at all the same as wondering, "Why don't we ever see these characters tying their shoes or using the bathroom?" but more like the feeling of leaving home and thinking "Have I forgotten something?"

Roger Vadim's … *And God Created Woman* (1956) is a movie essentially about the moral tightrope the audience must walk—how far ought we lean in to our judgment of the main character? The question of what we think of Juliette (Brigitte Bardot) at times overtakes the questions posed by the plot, like who she will eventually wed. Bardot's idiosyncratic performance is an impenetrable display of waywardness, and the film avoids any and all potential moralizing turns, leaving the viewer to make decisions about who is justified, or whether that question bears any relevance to our experience of the film.

The famous moment of sex ellipsis happens on a beach, where the muscular Antoine—the brother of her husband—carries her to a clearing and lays her down. (If there has been any doubt about whether sex has indeed taken place

in ellipses of previous films, there can be none here.) Once we clear the hurdle of the dissolve, the camera has been strangely repositioned. The pre-dissolve frame is a classical long shot, with the two figures lying horizontal in the center of the frame. Their position mimics the landscape; in physical union they form an arched structure like the bent-over tree above them or the mountains in the far distance. But after the dissolve, this classical sensibility is disrupted. This new shot is deep focus, with Juliette buttoning her blouse in the immediate foreground and Antoine slinking away into the far reaches of the frame.

At its simplest, the sex ellipsis is a product of montage, a juxtaposition of two disparate images. It allows us, via temporal manipulation, to eliminate from our perspective any cause, and limits our understanding to only what we can deduce from an effect. In *God Created Woman*, this effect is a repositioning of the protagonist, which creates a similarly disorienting experience for the viewer. In John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, which contains one of the most loaded sex ellipses in all of cinema, the effect is, basically, a separation.

The scene in *Shadows* brings a number of unexpected aspects to bear on the sex ellipsis, one of which is an actual post-coital discussion. It's rare for a 50s films to depict characters discussing sex, even in vague terms, as Tony and Lelia (two young lovers, though Tony is a bit older) do here. The discussion's focus on female sexuality and female pain—Lelia has just lost her virginity—also seems progressive for 1959.

More pertinent is the scene's clear demonstration of the nature of the ellipsis. To digress briefly, one way of thinking about the montage quality

of this ellipsis is to think about diet commercials. What the diet commercial is trying to sell you is a cause. On either side of that cause are two images—the "before" photograph, and the "after" photograph. Because our causal tendencies are so strong, we cannot help but fill in the blank—the cause. This is the most powerful tool of the televisual marketer, because our inclination as viewers is to create information where we don't see it directly. The ellipsis, both in the diet commercial and in the fiction film, gives the causal moment over to the viewer's imagination. The film becomes porous, soaking up our own inferences into its reality.

Some pores are necessary. All narrative action relies upon gaps and miscalculations; per Bordwell, "No ignorance, no conflict; and no conflict, no plot." And although an entirely porous film would seem nonsensical—generally, we need enough onscreen causes to read a film as a contiguous text—we must remember that as an audience we are inclined to expect a pore at the moment of intercourse; it constitutes a cinematic norm.

In *Shadows*, the effect is expressed simply. As Tony and Lelia become intimate, they cannot seem to unlock their gaze. Lelia's makeup emphasizes her totally rapt eyes, and as the two embrace into the dissolve they face each other earnestly. When the camera pans down from the dissolve, however, the two lovers no longer face each other—Lelia's gaze is fixed on some unidentifiable point beyond the camera. She has moved from passion into anxiety. We feel the total absence of the shot of unity, and what has been lost in that omission seems fundamentally related to what has been lost between the two lovers. A sense of trust, of security, has been violated. The dissolve carries a temporal change, but also a complete change in temperature; the lovers can no longer look into each other's eyes.

So the effect is a change in stance: from looking *toward* to looking *away*. It's simple, yes, but the power is in implication, and this moment in *Shadows* is another example of an ellipsis that becomes a kind of touchstone for the film, a moment in conversation with everything that happens before and after it. Lelia's pleas to Tony ("Please don't touch me. Please don't touch me—I wanna go home!") feel like the pleas of a victim, indeed, of a real crime, and it is not hard to see the relationship between the ellipsis of this kind and the ellipsis of grotesque violence in noir and horror pictures. The ellipsis, even in its earnest stimulation of the imagination, can be a tool for secrecy, for deception, for the burying of a sinister crime.

The power of ellipsis is dependent on the manner in which everything around it has been dressed, and this is the sense in which it is a truly cinematic device, engaging the viewer in a cognitive dialectic that shapes our construction of the film. In the noir films, it hacks at our sense of an epistemological firmament. In other films it pushes at our predisposed sense of sexual norms. In *Shadows*, the dissolve first reveals to us a mask positioned above the bed, a mask resembling the kind of African facewear that inspired a whole period of Picasso paintings. This is Cassavetes calling our attention to a third-party viewpoint that we, even as viewers of cinema attempting some version of partiality, will never have. When we enter the movie theater, we are never mere onlookers; we are always face-to-face. ◆

*DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (1944)

# MANIPULATION

### Busby Berkeley's Living Tessellations



by LIZ SOBOLIK

THE INSIDE OF A THEATER IS dangerous. To get to the stage, one must navigate serpentine corridors, windowless dressing rooms erupting with plumes of hairspray and makeup, a forest of taut ropes and sandbags holding up sets. Populate this labyrinth with showbiz divos and divas, and all that's left to do is pray the whole thing doesn't go up in flames.

Perhaps no person was better at navigating that labyrinth than the choreographer/director Busby Berkeley. Born in the theater to actress Gertrude Berkeley, he developed a natural taste for spectacle and made his stage debut at five. Naturally, his fascination with the theater and the people in it defined his career; to understand his contributions to cinema one need not look further than his 1933 film co-directed by Lloyd Bacon, *42nd Street*. The film exposes the theater's machinery in motion, putting the process and the product on the same plane of scrutiny. To see the dazzling monstrosity come together injects a level of investment in the individual that Berkeley's kaleidoscopic production numbers tend to resist. That is not to say that we learn about the origins of every chorus girl, but to see one woman plucked from a sea of nearly identical beauties forces us to consider these women as more than "biotic tile" bringing Berkeley's visions to life.[1] That said, Berkeley's vision is

1. A term borrowed from *The Image of Women as Image: The Optical Politics of Dames* by Lucy Fischer

orchestrated in the film by a mercurial director and an elderly but sexually-predatory producer who consider the women in the cast as women with that sickening mix of reverence and debasement that continues to define Hollywood's relationship with women on and off screen. The result of the producer and director's efforts is undeniably grand, a perfect example of those who cling to the idea that torture, degradation, and domination are signs of artistic commitment and therefore essential to great art.

Backstage musicals capitalize on the audience's insatiable appetite to connect with the performers and the performers' insatiable desire to perform. This relationship is complicated slightly by the fact that *42nd Street* is fiction. The interplay between fact and fiction here is as circuitous as it sounds. In his essay "Emotional Curves in Linear Narratives," Patrick Keating draws attention to the ways in which narrative and spectacle can elicit emotional responses in concert with one another. "Attractions are more than just interruptions," Keating writes. "Narrative is more than just an organizing structure." Keating's point is that even Berkeley's most dramatic, abstract set pieces can never completely achieve isolation from the larger narrative. The scenes between the characters relay emotional information so when it comes time for the Berkeley numbers, we watch them with pride, satisfaction, and sympathetic relief, for the performers themselves.

Though Berkeley's work is useful for studying the relationship between narrative and spectacle, it needs no narrative framework to be analyzed. Lucy Fischer uses Berkeley's 1934 film *Dames* as a touchstone, zeroing in on his ability to visually demonstrate the scope and persistence of Hollywood femininity, untextured and pristine. The symbols he constructs are frightfully universal. "For rather than present us with a narrative from which we must decoct a feminine 'image'," Fisher writes, "Berkeley's plastic abstractions present us with the essence of image itself—a vision of female stereotypes in their purest, most distillate form." Like *Dames*, *42nd Street* provides analytical avenues that span not only the worlds of the film (i.e. the rehearsal space and the stage), but also the worlds of Hollywood, popular cinema, and women in entertainment at large. Furthermore, it is possible to collapse these avenues—real, fantastical, narrative, spectacular—onto a single moving image: legs.

*42nd Street* is part of the particular, transient burst of creativity that occurred during the pre-Code era—a brief period before the implementation of the Production Code in 1934. After 1934, each film produced in Hollywood went through "prior censorship"—the denial of exhibition permits on any grounds the Production Code Administration saw fit. Berkeley's exploration of choreographed symbols was certainly influenced by the written regulations on narrative taboos. His musical numbers are saturated with innuendo, but also human bridges made of spread legs in high heels—hardly subtle. Still, in a 1960s interview with the French magazine *Cinéma*, Berkeley dutifully insists he "never had the intention of making eroticism or pornography." The projection of feminine identity onto legs as opposed to breasts expands

the characterization of women's utility and strength to some extent, though this refocus was probably more out of censorship's necessity than overt symbolic exploration on Berkeley's part. The sexual innuendo is inextricable, but if breasts represent nourishment for children and mothering instincts, then legs in *42nd Street* are a means of aesthetically satiating hungry adult male artists.

The relationship between choreographer and dancer has more potential to be truly collaborative than any other. Berkeley's style actively resists such collaboration; his maximalist tendencies breed awe and also anonymity. He described his own process of winnowing three girls from an audition group of 723: "My sixteen regular girls were sitting on the side waiting; so after I picked the three girls I put them next to my special sixteen and they matched just like pearls." Much of Berkeley's work is hardly dance; in fact, it is the camera, the sets, the lighting that dance around his pearls: "I never cared whether a girl knew her right foot from her left so long as she was beautiful." He took great care in his tools—rigged cameras and elaborate stages and hordes of pretty young things—then manipulated time and space with his cinematic paintbrush. His subjects need only stay put. Women in *42nd Street* are *authorized* to be attractive; their talent, beauty and grace are means to an end in which they have little agency. Berkeley loves to spread his girls' legs to make stars, though in *42nd Street* the finale is a bridge of gambs that the camera passes under to reveal the happy couple, together at last. There are examples of more traditional dance numbers in

*42nd Street* that serve to construct a competitive arena for talent, beauty, and dedication. This arena is run, in the film, by the director Julian Marsh, who defines dedication as willingness to submit. Entering the arena requires approval of each set of stocking feet by Marsh. Even Abner, the producer, admits that eventually he can no longer distinguish between "good" legs and the "best" legs. He declares, "after three weeks, a leg ain't nothing to me but something to stand on."

Tracing the path of women's legs through the film produces a fairly simple chain: beauty belongs to women, women belong to men. Resisting this flow requires strength and sacrifice, though that fight usually plays out behind the curtain. In the film's opening scene, Abner (the producer) peeks around a sheer white curtain to reveal Dorothy (the star) lounging; the camera pans her from ankle to face and Abner promises to fund any role her heart desires. What he doesn't say is that the funding is contingent on Dorothy allowing him to keep her like a pet—something he can shower with love and money, whose beauty he can admire and *touch*, and in return get her unconditional loyalty. The terms of this relationship come crashing down when Dorothy resists and breaks her ankle in a drunken frenzy. With her ankle goes her starring role and her status as a starlet; she decides to go back to the cabaret in order to be with Pat, her true love. Berkeley's notions of his own work contradict Dorothy's actions:

> It is the nature of the woman to be passive, receptive, dependent on male aggression … In other words she is not normally outraged

at being manipulated; on the contrary, she usually enjoys it. I have plenty of evidence to assume that no woman, as opposed to male, has ever failed to enjoy this possibly mortifying experience of being reorganized in the course of incarnating my vision of her.

Berkeley's description is not inaccurate in terms of defining a successful career-strategy for a woman in entertainment. Dorothy's act of resistance destroys what she had been cultivating and Abner reaping; it derails her career.

On stage the women stick to the script, so their passivity is sexualized with greater ease than offstage. In "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," the main characters spend the train ride to their honeymoon in a bed behind a curtain. The song and dance culminates with each woman on the train placing their heels, designed to simultaneously immobilize and display beauty, in the hall to be shined. We pan down the line until we reach the only couples car—a pair of hands holding pumps appears from behind the curtain and drops them carelessly, haphazardly onto the floor. It's a brilliant, subversive wink, if also terribly cliché. Dorothy and Peggy are more than the sum of their parts when they're off the stage. After Dorothy's climatic injury, she comes to Peggy's dressing room with a cast on one foot and a high heel on the other, against Marsh's orders, to give some advice. The scene speaks to the communion of a role; Dorothy tells Peggy she "wanted to tear [her] hair out" when she first walked into the theater, but that rage has dissipated. Especially in dance,

the most valuable mentors are those who've been there before—keepers of steps. There is strength in numbers, but the aggregation of beauty in a chorus makes degradations of the individual permissible. To stand perfectly still, to give up one's body to endless scrutiny is at best a sacrifice at the altar of beauty and at worst purely vapid. Allegiance to physical aesthetic can be cruel, and who gets to rise above the overwhelming beauty of the chorus seems arbitrary. Therein lies the opportunity for the Abners of the world to assert their power.

The creative tenets of Busby Berkeley's work persist. So does the notion that masterpieces are born from the torture and domination of performers. Berkeley's methods have that written in: hefty cameras and tricky editing to subvert space and time in the name of pretty patterns.

The present iterations of Berkeley's style use it to tacitly contradict his dancer/choreographer relationship. In September, Daniil Simkin, a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater, presented *Falls the Shadow* in the Guggenheim rotunda. It was a live performance designed to be viewed from above, along the spiral gallery. Simkin's father developed real-time motion sensors to record and project shadows, light, patterns onto the dancers. It magnified their movements, but the dancers could manipulate the shadows in real time. The result was evocative of Berkeley's geometry, but with the agency of the movement clearly shifted. Work like Simkin's is proof that it is possible to lift aesthetic pursuits from past cruelties. It's a matter of manipulation. ◆
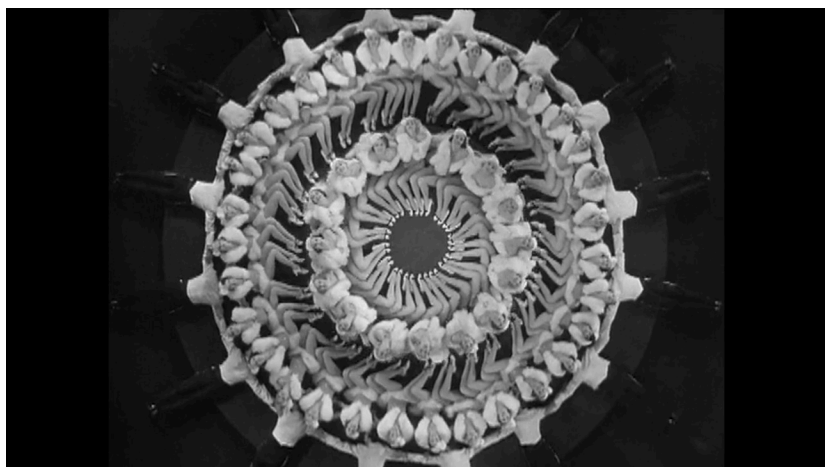
*42ND STREET* (1933)

*FALLS THE SHADOW*

# TORNADOES OF TIME



*"Your future's all used up."*
Marlene Dietrich in *Touch of Evil*

by MATTHEW RIVERA

THE STREAM OF CHEAP NOIR films made in Hollywood in the '40s and '50s exists in a world of polarized differences between past and present, light and shadow, sinners and saints, wealth and poverty—the nightmares they turn into are born of these extremities, warping time to disarm and corner us as we descend into hell. The noir sage Ann Douglas called John Farrow's *Where Danger Lives* a "little tornado of a noir." Noir, at its best, sends you out of the movie theater feeling like you've survived a twister by the skin of your teeth.

It starts with speed. Whether it's the velocity of a hurtling car, as in *Double Indemnity* or *The Lineup*, or a fresh crime as in *The Killers* or *The Big Heat*, the aggressiveness of these beginnings locks you in for the ride. In their speed is the feeling that you're trapped, spiraling into the dark. No matter how bad things get, you're always in the thick of it. The desperation of these films is their utter *presentness* which manifests itself in the massive long take, the real-time scene (or entire film), and the dramatic jump cut. With these devices, noir elasticizes time into a hypnotic, elliptical experience.

**"Today is already yesterday."**
Juanita Moore in
*Affair in Trinidad*

In this domain of temporality, Orson Welles's famed long take opening of *Touch of Evil* is the proverbial "stuff that dreams are made of." But Welles preceded the heights of his gaudy masterpiece with *Citizen Kane*, the film which most famously broke us free from cinema's first rigid grammar, and without which film noir would be inconceivable. Welles's camera in *Kane*, sweeping past a billboard, between letters of a neon sign and through a roof window all in one shot, was a triumph that countless directors attempted to top but usually just skirted. Michael Curtiz came close with a breathtaking scene in his noir *The Unsuspected*, where the camera flies out of a train window and rapidly glides through a town into a cheap hotel with a big lighted sign flashing PEEKSKILL. The camera goes into the hotel room where a man lays on the bed staring out the window. From his perspective, the sign taunts him with a blinking word: KILL . . . KILL . . . KILL. But even Curtiz has to cut to make this moment work. Welles was the only one who could outdo some of *Kane*'s most virtuosic moments. Made near the end of the classic noir cycle in 1958, *Touch of Evil* feels like *Citizen Kane* on a merry-go-round spinning out of control.

The long shot became a crown jewel of so many film noirs because it was so essential to conveying the ceaselessness of the nightmare. 1950's *Where Danger Lives*, the aforementioned "noir tornado," climaxes in a triumphant seven-minute shot set in a border town hotel room wherein Faith Domergue's character slowly reveals her psychopathy, nearly suffocating Robert Mitchum under a pillow and leaving him for dead. The camera keeps rolling and by some miracle Mitchum pulls himself up and manages to crawl out the door after Domergue. In another noir jewel of 1950, the Bonnie and Clyde love-on-the-run film *Gun Crazy*, director Joseph H. Lewis filmed a bank robbery in a single continuous shot from the back of a modified car. Unlike *Where Danger Lives*, the long take

*CITIZEN KANE* (1941)
*THE UNSUSPECTED* (1947)

in this film turns a potentially cliché action scene into a drawn out real-time heist, remarkable for positioning a suspenseful crime within the banal rhythms of a small town.

Anything can happen in an endless long take—there is no structure of cutting to contain things. We are left out in a furious storm, subject to the forces of nature. The camera roves off on its own or sits and records the action with agonizing tedium. We learn too much, see too much, feel too much. By the time Robert Mitchum's character drags himself out of that hotel in *Where Danger Lives*, limping down the middle of a neon-lit street of a crummy town on the Mexican border, we feel the weight of his exhaustion. We ask, "is this really where we've found ourselves?"

**"That's life. Whichever way you turn, it sticks its foot out to trip you."**
Tom Neal in *Detour*

A response to post-World War II America's listless ideal of "progress," the classic film noir cycle was about the traps we set for ourselves on the disillusioned path to betterment. The films move forward with the speed of a fighter plane, the rapidness of a machine gun, the force of an atomic bomb, putting light on the corpses left behind by a country that stood unapologetically victorious. As the films race into the future, victims are revealed in flashes from the past.

The flashback is a storytelling device and an ideal of knowledge. The past is a fixation because it provides answers. It's something to hide, run away from, forget about, and be stuck in. But the past will always catch up

with you, and many a noir begins just that way, unraveling in the scenes to come. Two hitmen stride into a small town diner in New Jersey at the start of *The Killers*. They demand to see "the Swede," bullying the waiter and short-order cook. Quickly the film will muddle its established language of good and evil (the minor chords at the killers' entrance and their long black coats hint at conventional villainy). The killers eventually leave, and a kid who was in the diner runs off to a shabby apartment to warn the Swede. "Why do they wanna kill ya?" he asks. The Swede, Burt Lancaster, in a cold sweat whispers almost to himself, "I did something wrong—once." Could these brute mobsters be justified in their task to kill? Only the past will tell. The film unfolds in a series of flashbacks upon flashbacks that increase in their complexity and seem to provide fewer and fewer answers. If the truth really is in the past, it might as well be buried forever.

Like *The Killers*, 1949's *Act of Violence* is a film about an incriminating secret from the past, shaping moral ambiguity into a burning condemnation of World War II's unrivaled victors (the U.S.A.) and the hypocrisy of the suburban sprawl that followed. The film sets up a rigid boundary between light and dark. The main character, played by Van Heflin, is a prosperous and well-loved family man from a small town in California and the film begins with him winning an award for a community-boosting housing development. But a shadowy stalker played by Robert Ryan will soon loom outside his idyllic house, casting darkness over the bright sunny oasis Heflin's character has built. Heflin's

deflections of his wife's (Janet Leigh's) questions about Ryan's motives hint at a dark past. But hide he cannot. Ryan sticks, and as he gets closer and closer, Heflin eventually tells his wife about how he survived a Nazi POW camp during the war by informing the Nazis of his comrade's plot to escape so that he could survive. All of his comrades died except for Ryan.

By the end of the film, Heflin has run away from the peaceful suburbs and into the hell of downtown Los Angeles, captured in some of the grandest photography of urban desperation in any noir. After a series of happenstance incidents at L.A. dives in the old Bunker Hill district, Heflin puts a hit on Ryan. Here is our role model of the community, our war hero turned domestic saint. The heroes of today are the criminals of yesterday, or as Balzac put it centuries before, "Behind every great fortune is a great crime."

> **"You're the only one that knows
> what he did, you're the one
> that's got to find him . . ."**
> Robert Ryan in
> *Act of Violence*

Noir protagonists try desperately to keep the past under the rug, whether to hide their own crimes or forget about the crimes committed against them. The past is an obstacle in the progression of life and the ability to keep living it. The past may wait around any corner, and when it catches up with you, it's curtains.

This principle inspired some of Noir's most radical films and is undoubtedly what made it an attractive genre for Hollywood's outcasts. Noir was produced both by and against the system. For every MGM *Father of the Bride* there was an RKO *Where Danger Lives*, for every Disney *Cinderella* there was a King Brother's *Gun Crazy*. As the glamorous miracles on screen shone bigger and brighter, their shadows loomed longer and darker. Most noirs (even those many produced in the major studios) were the cheap B films on double bills. That the B picture makers turned to noir did not only have to do with the fact that these films cost little to produce. It was their directors' B status (an injustice, considering that many would now rank as some of the finest artists working in Hollywood at the time) and their outcast vantage point, both in America and Hollywood, that made them a voice from the darkness.

Ida Lupino is a hallmark example of the freedom and artistry of the B movie director. Lupino turned noir into an expression of the horrors of being a woman during an era of unquestioned patriarchy. By accident, she became the only female director in Hollywood in 1949 (the great Dorothy Arzner had retired near the start of the 1940s), which gave her a freedom of expression that she never would have had at a major studio. *Not Wanted* was her first film, a noir tornado about a young woman named Sally (played by Sally Forrest) who falls in love with an irresponsible, playboy jazz pianist. Shortly after he skips town on her, she learns she's pregnant. Left with nowhere to turn, she has the child but gives it up for adoption. The film starts with Forrest kidnapping a baby on the street and being thrown in jail. "How did I get here?" she wonders in a heavy-handed voice over, and the screen brings us back to the events that led up

IDA LUPINO BEHIND THE CAMERA

to this confusing opening.

*Not Wanted* could easily have been a low-brow exploitation flick promoting chastity before marriage, but its director Elmer Clifton died only a few days into the production and Lupino (who wrote and produced the film) stepped in to direct. Under Lupino's eye, it became a pointed critique of the norms that leave a young woman trapped in domestic duty while a man does what he pleases. In a home for women pregnant with "illegitimate" children, Sally lays in bed next to another woman whose story echoes her own. In a fit of tears, the woman stops to muse, "You can certainly get a rotten deal, can't you?" But Lupino leaves little to fate. The birth father explains that he is abandoning Sally because of his dedication to his art, while Sally has no choice but to have the child. In one scene she reminisces on her dreams of becoming an actress, an ambition which at no point seems plausible.

Lupino uses the formal fun-house style of noir to express Sally's nightmare situation with a voice that screams against the unspoken crimes cornering her. Early on in the film, as Sally is running away from home to be with her lover, the initial moment of seduction echoes: "How old are you?" "Around 20" . . . "How old are you?" "Around 20." Later, sitting by a merry-go-round, the spinning lights remind her of a childhood trip to the circus with her father, a halcyon memory from before the trap of female maturity. In the film's most stunning gesture of memory, we witness Sally giving birth from her point of view. A bright light shines into the camera as the image of nurses holding forceps racks in and out of focus. Under all of this we hear the song her lover played on the piano when first seducing her—a reminder that Sally's past will always influence her present. She cannot run away from it as her child's father could. The smallest cue, a child on the street for instance, triggers a flood of trauma. Memory is central to noir's metaphysics of entrapment.

Though Lupino's independent company, The Filmakers, didn't afford her much production value, it allowed her to tell the stories she wanted the way she wanted. Noir could speak out loudly enough against the crimes she wanted to put into the public consciousness.

The B movie director was a hero of the underdogs in this sense. It is in low budget noirs where issues such as gender, racism and class difference come to the fore. In a more prestigious noir like *Double Indemnity* or *The Big Sleep*, the settings are middle class, and no character feels like they are living on the verge of poverty. *Double Indemnity*'s Walter Neff kills for "money and a woman," an explanation of his crime as decadence and seduction, not necessity. The poverty row noirs are by default more class-conscious because their central tragedy concerns the very necessity of crime in poverty. In Edgar Ulmer's singular crown jewel of the genre, *Detour*, money is more than an arm of fate; it's a key part in an existential question of being. To be someone is to have capital, but even to *be* at all requires money.

Tom Neal, playing a broke jazz musician in New York trying to travel to his love interest in L.A., is forced into a series of accidental murders after he tries to hitchhike his way across the country without a dime to his name. Neal says in a voice over, "Money. You know what that is, the stuff you never have enough of. Little green things with George Washington's picture that men slave for, commit crimes for, die for. It's the stuff that has caused more trouble in the world than anything else we ever invented, simply because there's too little of it." For Ulmer, a director who never found footing at the major studios despite his already remarkable work in Europe, the need that *Detour* expressed was as personal to him as Lupino's gendered nightmares were to her. The film renders America as a stagnant wasteland where people are defined not by where they want to go, but by where they started. Even when Tom Neal comes into some dough (by his first accidental murder), it merely serves as evidence later on that he committed a crime. He simply can't shake the past.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud understands mourning as the period during which we recuperate from a loss, and melancholia as the loss we never get over. Noir, in this sense, is classically melancholic. The burnt-out loser at a cocktail lounge chain-smokes to no end, the petty thief cornered by the law continues to run when doom is clearly in sight. After all, what else can they do? The answer is as inconclusively disconsolate as an atomic blast (*Kiss Me Deadly*) or a car hurtling off a cliff (*Angel Face*). From the trap of looping trauma screams out a wail of stubborn indignation—the only escape from the dark past that haunts us wherever we go, whatever we do. ◆