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Mind to Screen:
The Conveyance of Disordered Mental States in Film

Hayley Jayne Merchant

Submitted for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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Film and Television Studies Department

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the way in which film as a specific medium is capable of communicating a subjectivity that is troubled or otherwise compromised by mental illness. It is traditionally held that the written word is a far more suitable medium for communicating interiority than the medium of film, as the word is characterised as complex, abstract and conceptual, whilst the image is characterised as straightforward, obvious and concrete. This thesis will argue, however, that the medium of film is entirely capable of dealing with the abstract and conceptual, and can in fact construct extremely complex frameworks of subjectivity due to its multitrack character. Using detailed textual analysis, I will interrogate the way in which film utilises the multiple channels available to it (the visual, verbal, and aural) to create complex systems of meaning.

Due to the tendency of filmmakers to appeal to literary sources for guidance when conveying mental states, the issue of adaptation is crucial to my entry into this discussion. My corpus primarily consists of films that are based on literary accounts of troubled subjectivity (either biographical or fictional). My thesis will compare and contrast filmic and literary conveyances of mental illness to establish the symbols, metaphors and analogies that communicate complex interiority. My key case studies are: *A Scanner Darkly* (dir. Richard Linklater, 2006), *Clean, Shaven* (dir. Lodge Kerrigan, 1993), *A Beautiful Mind* (dir. Ron Howard, 2001), *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999), *Secret Window* (dir. David Koepp, 2004), *The Hours* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002), and *A Single Man* (dir. Tom Ford, 2008).

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by generating alternative readings of these films that take into account the multitrack character of the medium. These readings will highlight the specific techniques and vocabularies that are drawn on and developed to communicate disordered interiority.

Introduction

The psychology textbook *Movies and Mental Illness*, which is now in its 4th edition, has a film index which categorises over a thousand films in terms of their interaction with certain groups of mental disorders (such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders, dissociative disorders, and schizophrenia). Within this book, psychology students can read fictional patient assessments of characters and discover filmic case studies for particular disorders. John Norcross, editor of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* and President of the Society of Clinical Psychology, says that the book ‘is a powerful medium for teaching students, engaging patients, and educating the public,’ as well as giving its readers a greater understanding of the ‘human experience.’¹ The editors argue that films enable students to understand illnesses in a way that textbooks cannot, providing ‘a richness and intensity that simply cannot be captured by a classroom lecture or the printed page.’² The fact that films are being used in clinical psychology as a key way of understanding mental disorders, and are in many cases considered by psychologists to be accurate and successful in their communication of disordered mental states, makes this an issue that deserves serious and urgent attention from the discipline of Film Studies.³

Many of the interactions with film in the field of psychology utilise the characters as illustrations of certain disorders, since they are essentially case studies free from the complexities of ethical issues.⁴ One could argue that it is the wealth of

¹ Danny Wedding, Mary Ann Boyd, Ryan M. Niemic, *Movies and Mental Illness: Using Films to Understand Psychopathology*, (USA: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 2nd revised and expanded edition, 2005), p. x.

² Ibid.

³ Wedding and Niemic actually refer to (and outline a case study of) ‘Cinematotherapy’ in the article ‘The Clinical Use of Films in Psychotherapy,’ *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Volume 59, Issue 2, (February 2003), pp. 207–215.

⁴ ‘Using a film vignette that vividly depicts a psychiatric disorder circumvents the ethical issues (confidentiality, securing releases and permission, etc.) associated with using real cases and clients as illustrations in the classroom.’ Wedding et al, *Movies and Mental Illness*, p. x.

representations offered by film (as opposed to the opportunity to sympathise with or understand interior mental processes) that makes them so useful. However, there is evidence that psychology's engagement with film is more complex than this. For example, there is an acknowledgment within psychology journals that the multitrack nature of the medium allows for a different engagement with otherwise impenetrable disorders.⁵ My main issue with the use of characters as case studies is that it leads to a narrowness of interpretation that leaves no room for appreciating *how* things are achieved within a given text. Many film analyses undertaken by psychologists contain praise for how successfully the films communicate things from the psychological perspective of the protagonist, but this praise rarely contains reference to the textual detail that facilitates the construction of this subjectivity.⁶

This project undertakes research to assess *how* film as a specific medium can present us with a mind state that is disordered, and will interrogate the way in which the multitrack nature of the medium is utilised to convey the interior and abstract. This thesis offers readings of films that communicate a disordered mind state, analysing them using the techniques of detailed textual analysis. My approach generates alternative readings of these films by taking into account the multitrack nature of the medium and identifying the visual and aural vocabulary that they draw

⁵ For instance, Peter Byrne, reviewer for the British Medical Journal, writes about the portrayal of schizophrenia in *Some Voices*: 'One of the film's strengths is its depiction of Ray's descent into perplexity and paranoia, with poorly formed auditory hallucinations, which he describes as his ghosts. The use of sound is particularly effective, and the film makers have made full use of the Dolby digital soundtrack.' Peter Byrne, 'Some Voices' film review, *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, Vol. 321, No. 7263 (23rd September, 2000), p. 770.

⁶ Numerous examples of this can be found in *Movies and Mental Illness*, as well film reviews in the *British Medical Journal*, including Anthony David's article 'A Beautiful Mind,' *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, Vol. 324, No. 491.1 (February. 23, 2000). There are also examples in the 'Minds on Film' blog featured on the Royal College of Psychiatrists website. Notable reviews include Dr J Almaidá's review of *The Aviator*, which can be accessed at: <<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/discoverpsychiatry/mindsonfilmblog/theaviator.aspx>>, accessed 8th December 2012, and *Spider*, <<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/discoverpsychiatry/mindsonfilmblog/spider.aspx>>, accessed 8th December 2012.

on and develop to convey a disordered subjectivity. In my readings I will demonstrate the sophisticated way in which meaning is developed across a film text, and will argue that even apparently simple metaphors or symbols are densely packed with meaning and are therefore actually incredibly complex in the way they operate.

In order to respond to the claims made about the capabilities of film in *Movies and Mental Illness*, this thesis begins by exploring medium specificity theory in relation to mental states and examining how different media intersect when dealing with interiority. The opening chapter undertakes a literature review of the medium specificity debate and then focuses on the significance of the binaries encountered there in relation to the visual communication of abstract mental states. The chapter examines traditional notions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of various media, and then challenges George Bluestone's argument that film, being visual in nature, is less able to communicate interiority than the written word.

Bluestone presents an account of medium specificity that deems film entirely incapable of dealing with abstract and invisible mental processes. I outline the claims made by Bluestone and others regarding this alleged limitation and examine the reasons they propose for why film is specifically less capable of communicating interiority than the written word. This interrogation involves examining the word/image debate that dominates medium specificity theory and unpacking the idea that the word is abstract and conceptual whilst the image is obvious and concrete. After focusing on the problems presented by these frameworks, I offer solutions by illustrating that the adaptation of written accounts of disordered subjectivity into the medium of film is a theoretical possibility, and arrive at an understanding of film that deems it entirely capable of dealing with the conceptual.

The solutions I present involve pointing to contradictions within Bluestone's own film analyses, utilising Kamilla Elliott's work on interart analogies and the figurative, and undertaking an in depth analysis of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. I also refer to the art and literature of Sylvia Plath in an examination of what Plath felt to be the fluid exchanges that occur between different media within her work, and assess the significance of this in reference to Elliott's looking glass analogies. The way in which I analyse the shifting meanings in these visual works will serve as a blueprint for the approach I adopt when analysing my case studies, as these multichannel film texts utilise the complex visual/verbal/aural relationships accessible to the medium to create systems of meaning.

Chapter Two develops the solutions to the problems I identified in Chapter One by exploring the devices used by graphic novels to communicate subjectivity. These solutions stand in direct opposition to traditional theories that deem the visual incapable of communicating the conceptual and abstract. I explore the conveyance of subjectivity in Nate Powell's *Swallow Me Whole*, a graphic novel which deals with schizophrenia and obsessive compulsive disorder, and demonstrate how meaning can be visually constructed across a text. The second half of the chapter is devoted to a detailed case study of Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, a rotoscoped film which serves as a useful bridge between the graphic novel and the medium of film. This case study applies the theoretical interactions between word and image I explore in the beginning of the chapter and demonstrates how these devices are deployed to present a warped and disordered mind state. My reading provides a vignette of the way in which I approach my key case studies.

Chapter Three undertakes an in-depth study of the conveyance of schizophrenia in two central case studies: Lodge Kerrigan's *Clean, Shaven* (1993)

and Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). I present these case studies within the context of current medical models of schizophrenia and examine the inherited imagery that is traditionally associated with the illness. I identify the key motifs that emerge in cinematic depictions of the disorder and argue that the films both organise their representations of schizophrenia around key binary oppositions.

Chapter Four continues to explore the cinematic vocabulary used to convey a disordered subjectivity by focusing on the cinematic communication of dissociative identity disorder in David Koepp's *Secret Window* (2004) and David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). This chapter explores the way in which the medium of film is capable of communicating interiority by utilising our understanding of the mechanisms of its form, and argues that our understanding of certain mental processes is linked to our complex conceptualisation of the medium.

Chapter Five, which investigates the cinematic construction of the experience of depression in Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009) and Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), explores how the capacities of the medium are utilised to communicate subjectivity and returns to the word/image debate I engaged with in my opening chapters. Both films employ a very similar vocabulary to convey mental illness, but this vocabulary is then nuanced by context and deployed in different ways to create specific constructions of subjectivity. The case studies thus far have all focused on a central protagonist, whereas my final case study of *The Hours* demonstrates the way in which the medium is capable of communicating the effect of mental illness on a wider scale. The thesis will arrive at an understanding of film that demonstrates the sheer wealth of strategies that are employed to construct a disordered mind state, and will ultimately argue that film is distinctive in the way its multitrack character develops frameworks of subjectivity.

Since my thesis is dealing with disordered subjectivity, it is understandable that one might expect to find within its pages an investigation of the films made in the context of popular Freudian psychoanalytic theory in the 1940s and 1950s. However, this is not the case, as these films are responding to a broad Freudian conceptualisation of disordered mental states that is not compatible with the majority of contemporary psychology theory. What these films deal with is the unconscious *in general* as opposed to specific mental disorders. The tendency to characterise all mental disorders as manifestations of unconscious conflicts is the primary reason I will not be using films from this earlier era as case studies. For this reason, neither will I be investigating the use of psychoanalysis within film studies in general. I will be engaging with films that were made in the context of mental disorders as they are currently understood within contemporary psychology, using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness* as the framework for this categorisation.⁷ A focus on *specific*, defined illnesses, as defined in the current *DSM*, will thus determine the main corpus of this project.

My thesis will also not involve investigating the media's engagement with mental illness and issues of social responsibility, or addressing the stigmatisation of mental illness due to the cinematic representation of people experiencing mental disorders as violent or dangerous (as Steven Hyler et al do in the article *Media Madness*, published in 1991). This is terrain that has been thoroughly covered by sociologists, psychologists and film theorists seeking to address the effect of filmic representations on public perception of those living with mental illness.⁸

⁷ Although the *DSM's* taxonomic approach to mental illness is problematic in many ways, it is nonetheless the official categorisation that is used by mental health professionals and the framework through which the authors of *Movies and Mental Illness* organise their case studies.

⁸ An awareness of film's problematic use of mental illness can be appreciated in the 'Time to Change' mental health awareness campaign, which recently ran an advert throughout cinemas that posed as a film trailer for a film called *Schizo*. Using the tropes associated with horror, we are eventually taken

This thesis provides an original contribution to knowledge by focusing on the way in which film texts textually construct a mind state that we would consider to be ‘disordered’ with an *explicit* and *conscious* reference to a particular mental illness. What is key here is that these films are being made in the context of current definitions of various disorders.⁹ Since I will be looking at how film *specifically* constructs these mental states, my corpus will consist mainly of films which are adaptations of literary accounts of mental illness, from Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* to Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, so that I can also address the issue of adapting mental processes in different media.

This thesis will argue that it is theoretically possible for films to convey complex mental states and will establish how this is achieved textually in key case studies. The project will highlight the specific techniques and vocabulary that these films utilise and will demonstrate the nuanced way in which these devices, symbols, and motifs are deployed to communicate disordered subjectivity.

to a shot of a door. The camera tracks towards this door (with the shot interspersed with crackling sounds, sharp noises, apparent glitches in the film reel, and near subliminal flashes of another shot accompanied by a scream-like sound), but it is revealed that behind the door is a light, airy kitchen which stands in stark contrast to the dark palette and grainy quality of the previous sequence, and a man making a cup of tea. He says to the camera: ‘I’m sorry to disappoint you if you were expecting a lunatic with a knife on some sort of rampage. My name is Stuart and I was diagnosed with schizophrenia twelve years ago.’ The advert aims to undermine the many cinematic representations of the mentally ill as violent or dangerous and represent the reality of living with mental health problems. The advert can be viewed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJC-AJWNES8>>, accessed October 2011.

⁹ An acknowledgement of this can be seen in the fact that Martin Scorsese had a psychiatrist present for consultation during *Shutter Island*, despite the film being based on a work of fiction.

Chapter One **The Medium Specificity Debate**

As I addressed in my introduction, analysing my selected texts with constant appreciation for the multichannel form of the medium is a crucial aspect of my approach. When compiling a preliminary list of film texts engaging with the issue of disordered subjectivity, an overarching tendency immediately made itself apparent: most of these films were adapted from a literary source. Not only do these sources include autobiographical accounts of mental illness, they also comprise fictional constructions of compromised subjectivity, often encompassing medical definitions and the frameworks for the various psychological or neurological disorders that they document. The tendency to appeal to these sources immediately marked the medium specificity debate as the crucial entry point into my discussion, and initial reading revealed longstanding assumptions about the weaknesses and strengths of the filmic medium that have direct implications for the approach I adopt in this thesis. The question of adaptation is consequently a key factor in my analysis of my key film texts. My interrogation of the arguments shaping the medium specificity debate will bring to the fore the quest to isolate film's unique capabilities, a particularly important issue when confronted with the complex task of conveying or communicating compromised thought processes or troubled mental states. This will inevitably lead us into a discussion about value judgements and their relationship to medium, which will involve an engagement with pertinent issues in art theory.

The following literature review will give a comprehensive overview of the key arguments in the field and will reference key debates in art theory. I will also illustrate the numerous ways in which the medium specificity debate has influenced adaptation theory. This attempt to map out the terrain will also highlight exactly

what is at stake in relation to my discussion of film's ability to convey mental states. For the sake of clarity, I have organised this chapter around the prevalent themes and dichotomies that have arisen during my research into medium specificity, and have narrowed the parameters of my discussion mostly to exclude the fidelity debate, which really holds little relevance for my central question of whether or not film can convey subjectivity, and if so, how successfully. I feel it important to highlight that the fidelity debate is tangential to the issues I am interested in, and I will only engage with it when it throws light on theory concerning film's capabilities as a medium. This literature review will take into consideration the extent to which the fidelity debate has influenced adaptation theory and the interrogation of an established hierarchy within the arts with an awareness of the many ways in which this topic has had the effect of veiling or complicating more fruitful (and interesting) lines of enquiry.¹ As well as tracing the nature of the debate that has taken place, I will unpick, along the way, the thread that runs throughout adaptation theory that assumes film to be more or less completely incapable of conveying mental states.

Ginette Vincendeau opens her survey of the field in *Film/Literature/Heritage* by stating that 'the topic of "film and literature" is almost limitless.'² It is easy to understand why this issue has provoked so much scholarly study. Value judgements in the arts have always been interlinked with medium specific capabilities, and thus the drive to categorise has permeated criticism of artwork. Theorists focusing on medium specificity have often referred back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) as the work which

¹ Brian McFarlane notes that 'The study of adaptations has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue' (Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8) and Ginette Vincendeau argues that this is because 'writers on the subject often come from literary criticism' and thus "'fidelity" becomes a negative yardstick with which to beat film.' Ginette Vincendeau, ed., *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, (BFI Publishing, 2001), p. xii.

² Vincendeau, *Film/Literature/Heritage*, p. xi.

established the scientific approach towards categorisation that still echoes throughout scholarship in the field. Kamilla Elliott explains how the ancient tendency to discuss one art in terms of the other (a tendency built on Horace's claim that 'as is painting, so is poetry'³) was challenged by Lessing's essay, which 'waged war on interart analogies.'⁴ Elliott argues that Lessing 'pressed the higher priority of the bond between form and content, arguing that poetry is a temporal art and should therefore limit itself to representing temporal action, while painting is a static and spatial art and should limit itself to representing static bodies in space.'⁵ With Lessing's work began the concept of the spatial/temporal divide between the visual and literary arts, and the implications that these designated characteristics have had for the discussion of film and literature in medium specificity theory will be explored throughout this chapter.

George Bluestone's seminal work *Novels Into Film* (1957), which built on Lessing's work, again constructs a framework that relied on the belief that 'the ultimate definition of a thing lies in its unique qualities,'⁶ and 'novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture.'⁷ Elliott examines how Bluestone's work is 'integrally connected' to Lessing's, since 'while Lessing's classifications waged war on interart analogies, Bluestone aimed his against the practice of literary adaptation.'⁸ The interart analogies critiqued by Lessing are in a sense epitomised by adaptation, which

³ C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: the 'Ars Poetica'*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 361.

⁴ Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 12.

⁵ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 10. Referencing Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962; originally published 1766). Yet, as Elliott goes on to argue, 'logically ... if films contain words and words are linear, temporal, conceptual, and symbolic, then film must to some degree be linear, temporal, conceptual, and symbolic as well' (p. 13).

⁶ George Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1957), p. viii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 12.

‘purports to fulfil such analogies by making one art into the other.’⁹ Bluestone recognised that the filmed novel is an example ‘where both media apparently overlap,’¹⁰ and thus investigated medium specificity by systematically noting the differences between novel and film adaptation, and exploring instances of interpretation or alteration.¹¹ The conclusions that he made about the capabilities and strengths of each medium as a result of his investigation will be explored in the second half of this chapter.

The examination of the logic underpinning this model of categorisation reveals that this framework is largely dependent on the identification of traits that are said to be determined by the technical constraints of a medium, and also by the theoretical boundaries that result from/as a consequence of these constraints. This essentialist approach is based on technological determinism, and has many implications for value judgements and for the assessment of the capabilities of each medium. We can see the impact of this conception of medium when we look at the case study of the arrival of sound to film and the effect it had on the form. Bluestone refers to the initial perception of sound as a threat to film’s particular mechanical constraints, and explores the implications for film’s specificity. He explains that: ‘Sound films, like the early silents, aroused curiosity as a toy and, in the process, were almost talked to death. Intelligent critics were quick to attack this fault, and some even argued against the sound track itself. An art, they said, thrives in the limitations of its materials and every gain in realism (like painting plaster of Paris figures in lifelike colors) must be accompanied by an aesthetic loss.’¹²

⁹ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. viii.

¹¹ This method instantly places the source text as an ‘original,’ a status challenged by Sarah Cardwell in *Adaptation Revisited*, which will be addressed later.

¹² Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 28.

Sarah Cardwell traces this line of argument in order to critique it, referring to the problematic way in which many critics felt that when film utilised the traditionally literary device of dialogue, it was in some way ‘cheating.’¹³ Morris Beja also criticises this attitude, and in his exploration of this issue in *Film & Literature* he refers to Erwin Panofsky’s essay ‘Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures’ and critiques the way in which he stresses the visual, so that ‘anything which detracts from its centrality is intrusive.’¹⁴ Beja notes how the element of sound is downplayed in film theory, and argues that ‘although some critics who emphasise film as a visual art are still reluctant to acknowledge it, the fact is, films talk: dialogue, after all, is no more forbidden to the filmmaker than to the dramatist.’¹⁵

After surveying the wary response to the arrival of sound, Bluestone goes on to say that ‘the aesthetic loss was temporary and the film learned the proper use of its new dimension,’¹⁶ drawing attention to the importance of shifting conventions in the definition of a medium. Bluestone’s reference to the importance of a medium thriving ‘in the limitations of its materials’ highlights parallel debates in art theory, a field which has frequently battled with the notion of medium specificity and its importance in value judgements.

Medium specificity has long been an essential consideration in art criticism when evaluating the success or significance of an artwork, with an evaluative

¹³ Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*, (Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 2002), p. 38. Elliott also explores this ‘tendency to cast film words as literature and to resent them as encroachments on film’ in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, pp. 83-87. This negative response to film not utilising characteristics that belong solely to its medium, and the subsequent value judgement made based on this fact, is explored by Murray Smith in his essay ‘My Dinner with Noël; or, Can We Forget the Medium.’ Smith also investigates the importance of the ‘historically-embedded nature of artforms.’ Murray Smith, ‘My Dinner with Noël; or, Can We Forget the Medium?’ *Film Studies*, Issue 8 (Summer, 2006), p. 145.

¹⁴ Morris Beja, *Film and Literature: An Introduction*, (Longman Inc., New York, 1979), p. 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29. The notion of film as a ‘multitrack’ medium is also discussed by McFarlane in *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*.

¹⁶ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 28.

process that assessed works on the grounds of whether or not they embraced the medium whilst pushing the boundaries of its possibilities. Yet exactly *what* constitutes the unique qualities of any medium is still contested territory, and herein lies the struggle for clarity that has influenced art theory since Clement Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting' in 1960¹⁷ (which was fuelled by the aesthetic considerations he outlined in his earlier seminal work 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' in 1939). Greenberg explored the manner in which modernist painting admitted and emphasised surface without trying to conceal its two-dimensional nature with illusions of depth, 'for flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art.'¹⁸ He focused on the issue of reflexivity and self-criticism, explaining how 'the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.'¹⁹

In opposition to the essentialist approach described by Greenberg, Stanley Cavell argues that a medium is specified by circumstances that change over time. Therefore, it is impossible to presume what constitutes a specific medium, as what would have been sufficient in the past may not be sufficient in the future to compel conviction: 'What we take to be necessary in a given period may alter. It is not logically impossible that painters should now paint in ways which outwardly resemble paintings of the Renaissance, nor logically necessary that they now paint in the ways they do.'²⁰ Indeed, in his essay 'The Specificity of Media in the Arts,'

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting,' written in 1960. The essay can be viewed at: <<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>>, accessed 19th February 2010.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, 'The Normal and the Natural' [1979], *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall, (Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996). p. 39.

Noël Carroll argues that even ‘the physical structure of a medium does not remain static,’²¹ and builds up a defence for the appreciation of the shifting, developing nature of media in an attempt to expose what he believes is the ‘medium-specificity myth.’²² Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein acknowledges the importance of convention, and contests the depth of ‘essence,’ a notion that underpins much writing on medium specificity. Cavell argues that the essence of a given human practice is a shadow of the bodies of convention within that practice, and thus, as practices change, so will the perceived ‘essence.’ The search for an essence is deemed misleading, since what we are actually being presented with is overlapping categories or truths that allow us to identify an object or concept. The possibility for shifting parameters makes the search for the distilled qualities or characteristics of a medium complex and potentially unfruitful, and thus when discussing medium specificity we are on much firmer ground observing the framework of conventions through which a medium appears. Cavell’s work, based on Wittgenstein’s arguments against essentialism, represents a move away from technological or philosophical essentialist arguments and constructs an understanding of medium specificity that does not depend on essentialism.

Cavell grapples with the problem of ‘compelling conviction’ as a medium through reference to past conventions in his essay ‘The Normal and the Natural.’ Talking about painting, for example, Cavell states that ‘what is necessary is that, in order for us to have the form of experience we count as an experience of painting, we accept something as a painting. And we do not know a priori what we will accept as such a thing.’²³ The philosophy underpinning this notion could in fact be

²¹ Noël Carroll, ‘The Specificity of Media in the Arts,’ in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Stam, Robert and Miller, Toby, (Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), p. 53.

²² *Ibid*, p. 50.

²³ Cavell, ‘The Normal and the Natural,’ p. 39.

applied to any medium, suggesting that rather than there being technical conditions for the definition or appreciation of film as a unique medium, we in fact refer to past conventions (that have arisen out of frameworks defined by human capabilities within a set medium) to establish what we will accept as film. Since this notion of medium is grounded in human behaviour, it takes into consideration the overlapping nature of shifting historical practices and signals our ability to identify resemblances in constantly mutating expressions of any given medium. Despite Bluestone's statement that 'whatever the standards of the future, however, it is highly probable that the film's basic materials will remain more mechanically fixed than those of the more traditional arts,'²⁴ the mechanical nature of film is not the thing that defines our response to it as such so much as what we experience at any given time to be the boundaries of its capabilities. This is ultimately what is at stake in this discussion.

Michael Fried's landmark text 'Art and Objecthood,' originally printed in *Artforum* in June 1969, made a great impact on art theory and presented a robust account of the inextricable relation between artistic media and judgements of value. Fried claimed that judgements of value are only truly meaningful within a specific art form, and that artworks that fall between media consequently lack quality or worth.²⁵ This stance at first appears limiting and rigid, and seems to support Carroll's claim that 'the medium-specificity thesis guides us to sacrifice excellence in art'²⁶ due to creating a priori conditions for what constitutes significant artwork and excluding anything that steps outside the boundaries of a specific medium or falls between two (if indeed such a thing is possible).

²⁴ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 15.

²⁵ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology*, (1969).

²⁶ Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media in the Arts,' p. 47.

But Fried's seemingly rigid approach to medium specificity experienced a shift when he began writing about the work of photographer Jeff Wall.²⁷ Fried championed the photographer's work, despite the fact that it seemed to pose a threat to Fried's earlier theory regarding medium specificity, as Wall's method seemed to mix photography with painting. However, in light of Cavell's previous notion of 'compelling conviction' by reference to convention, we could argue that Jeff Wall's work compels conviction as painting, because he is digitally altering the work in order to create compositions in the manner of a painter and the work refers to paintings of the past, placing it in that tradition. In the same way, it could be argued that Gerhard Richter's painting compels conviction as photography, since the image forms itself in the same automatic way that a camera would produce it and it has an indexical relation to reality like that of a photograph. Thus, Richter is not imitating the *appearance* of a photograph, but *creating one*. Conversely, Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*, (1993), painstakingly constructed fragment by fragment, and with no relation to anything that actually happened in real space or time, follows the conventions and methods of painting, not photography.

For Fried, then, this eliminates the concern of there being a blur between media – as long as the work compels conviction as a painting or photograph, then it has not fallen in the gap between them and can be evaluated meaningfully. Unlike Clement Greenberg, who was concerned about the literal physical conditions necessary to create a painting, Fried was far more concerned with the *conceptual* process behind a work, and we can see this most clearly in his emphasis on theorising the artwork's reference and relationship to past convention. But the very insistence that an artwork needs to compel conviction as a particular medium at all is

²⁷ Michael Fried, 'Without a Trace,' printed in *Artforum* (March 2005).

deeply rooted in the perceived notion that a value judgement of the work is dependent on its utilisation of the capacities unique to that given medium, which is a logically unsubstantiated notion. In addition to this, the notion of ‘compelling conviction’ in itself constructs a romanticised understanding of the artist as someone in the position to control directly and manipulate our response to something as a specific medium. Bringing the artist into the framework in this way is problematic if we understand the shifting boundaries of a medium as a process that happens organically.

I have devoted considerable space to this issue in art theory because of the relevance it holds to the discussion of adaptation in the film/novel debate, in which the relationship between value judgements and medium is repeatedly interrogated in comparative analyses of novel and film. Following this path leads us to another strand of medium specificity theory, because it presses the significance of examining the relationship between form and content. Béla Balázs describes this link by critiquing the assumption that ‘the adaptation of content to a different art form can only be detrimental to a work of art, if that work of art was good.’²⁸ The division between form and content is far from clear-cut, and many theorists argue that they are in fact inextricably bound, particularly in the case of the ‘great’ works, which are felt to owe their success in part to the suitability and utilisation of the medium in which they are created. In opposition to Balázs, Morris Beja argues that ‘Form and Content determine one another in a sort of artistic version of the Heisenberg Principle in physics,’²⁹ and that great novels are harder to adapt because ‘they are the ones in which form and content have already been perfectly matched.’³⁰ Attitudes

²⁸ Béla Balázs, ‘Art Form and Material,’ *Theory of Film*, (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1970), reprinted in Harrington, p. 6.

²⁹ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 80.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

such as these are particularly relevant for my analysis of case studies such as *The Hours*, adapted from Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize Winning novel, and my exploration of literary cult classics like Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* and Chuck Palahnuik's *Fight Club* which have been translated into the medium of film.

Much of narratological adaptation theory deals with the distinction between the 'story' (or 'narrative') and its 'telling,' (or 'enunciation'), and these are usually the terms in which form and content are discussed. The scholarship surrounding this issue has significant value for my exploration of film's ability to convey mental states because it investigates the ways in which content (in this case, the communication of a mental state), is tied to the form in which it is communicated. This is a particularly important concern when considering adaptations of autobiographies utilizing the 'stream of consciousness' format, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* or Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*. Bluestone uses the example of the creation of a character to describe what he feels as the indivisibility of form and content, stating that the character 'cannot be liberated in order to make a personal appearance in another medium.'³¹ Robert Stam explores the questions that necessarily arise from the analysis of this relationship, such as: 'Can stories "migrate" from a less appropriate to a more appropriate medium?' and 'Do stories pre-exist their mediation?'³² (Sarah Cardwell argues that this in fact could be the case, as will be explored in the following section.) Elliott challenges the belief that form and content are indivisible by interrogating the structuralist argument that would logically conclude that adaptation is theoretically impossible, and then pointing to the existence of adaptations as

³¹ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 48, quoted in Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 195.

³² Robert Stam, 'Introduction: the Theory and Practice of Adaptation', in R. Stam and A. Raengo (eds), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 16.

indisputable evidence that this theory is flawed. Catherine Constable notes that despite ‘demonstrating that structuralist tenets render adaptation logically impossible, Elliott also argues that the general acceptance of two key premises, the irreducibility of words and images, and the bond between form and content, has spawned the dominant model within adaptation theory.’³³ This dominant model, and the oppositional framework it creates between word and image, will be explored shortly.

The tension between form and content necessarily feeds into the fidelity debate because it poses questions about what can and cannot be adapted. The issue of finding ‘equivalences’ has dominated much scholarship on adaptation, and fuelled research into semiotics and the construction of film as a language. McFarlane explores this in an examination of the work of Christian Metz (*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*) and Roland Barthes (*Image-Music-Text*). Barthes separates the text into ‘functions proper’ which are the actions and events, and ‘directly transferrable from one medium to the other,’ and ‘indices,’ which include elements such as character formation and atmosphere, and are more complicated when it comes to the issue of translation.³⁴ There have been long-standing assumptions about what elements of a novel can and cannot be translated by film, and Stam critiques the way in which ‘a cinematic essence is posited as favouring certain aesthetic possibilities and foreclosing others, as if specific aesthetic norms were inscribed in the celluloid itself.’³⁵ After an engagement with fidelity theory, which is often disguised in discussions of form and content and notions of equivalences, Stam

³³ Catherine Constable, *Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and the Matrix Trilogy*, (Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 47.

³⁴ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 14.

³⁵ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 19.

concludes that ‘there can be no real equivalence between source novel and adaptation’³⁶ and thus defends the appreciation of each text as an independent work.

McFarlane quotes Dudley Andrew saying that the distinctive feature of the adaptation is ‘the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system.’³⁷ Aside from the designation of the source text as the original and ‘prior’ text, an issue that will be discussed in my examination of the work of Cardwell, Andrew’s assertion has implications for our understanding of film as a language and the idea that there can be equivalences when translating from word to image. This has led to rather clumsy attempts to compare word and image, or even a process of breaking down film sequences to compare them to sentence structures, a method described by Beja: ‘Sometimes, just as the word is seen as the equivalent of the frame, so the sentence is compared to the shot, the paragraph to the scene and the chapter to the sequence.’³⁸ He concludes that these ‘one-to-one analogies ... are in fact basically misleading.’³⁹ McFarlane argues that ‘frame-following-frame is not analogous to the word-following-word experience of the novel,’ and due to the visual complexity of the image it is ‘never registered as a discrete entity in the way that a word is.’⁴⁰ As my film analyses will demonstrate, the way in which we interpret imagery is actually a deceptively nuanced and complex process that entails drawing on a learnt or inherited language (both visual and verbal) of symbols, metaphors, and associations.

The study of semiotics served to level the ground between media, since it established the possibility of there being a signifying system specific to each medium and thus promoted the study of each on its own terms. Yet, the bias towards

³⁶ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 18.

³⁷ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 21.

³⁸ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁰ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 27.

the literary is still evident. Elliott notes that whilst ‘Barthes’s recategorization of nonverbal representations as “texts” has had certain levelling and democratizing effects, in terms of interdisciplinary dynamics his rhetoric continues the long-standing favouring of words over pictures and subjugates pictorial signs to linguistic paradigms.’⁴¹ The drive to categorise and differentiate media is a symptom of a long-standing rivalry between the written word and visual art forms, and is a war that comes to the foreground in adaptation theory.

Sarah Cardwell’s rigorous investigation of adaptation theory in *Adaptation Revisited* interrogates the ways in which language and methodology have biased theoretical approaches towards filmic adaptations of classic novels. Criticising the way in which all adaptations are compared to the literary ‘original text’ – an approach that she describes as a ‘stubborn project of dehistoricisation’ – Cardwell argues that this ‘denies the linear, textual history of adaptation available to each new adapter, and the relationships through time that an adaptation might bear to other adaptations.’⁴² She criticises the fact that this ‘fails to appreciate the historical gap that separates the source novel from the adaptation in question, seeing meanings expressed in both novel and adaptation as somehow transhistorical and unalterable.’⁴³ This draws again on the notion of essence, but this time it is the perceived essence of an original work (as opposed to a medium in general).⁴⁴

⁴¹ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 28.

⁴² Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, pp. 13-14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ There is much discussion about how adaptation and copies affect this ‘original’ work. Stam investigates the Derridean idea that ‘the prestige of the original is created by the copies, without which the very idea of originality has no meaning.’ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 8. He later discusses hypertextuality, noting that ‘when Victorian novels are adapted scores of times, hypertextuality itself becomes a sign of canonical status; the “copies,” within the logic elaborated by Jacques Derrida create the prestige of the original’ (p. 31). Yet the very notion of an original is questioned in Derridean deconstruction, which ‘dismantled the hierarchy of “original” and “copy,”’ (Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 8) and Vincendeau notes that ‘postmodern theory certainly discredits the idea of pure originality.’ (Vincendeau, *Film/Literature/Heritage*, p. xvi.) See also Kamilla Elliott for a study on the notion of the ‘spirit’ of a work, pp. 133-183.

McFarlane refers to fidelity criticism as being dependent on there being ‘a single, correct “meaning,”’ and examining whether the adaptation has remained faithful ‘to the “letter” or to the “spirit” or “essence” of the work.’⁴⁵ He concludes that ‘the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating,’⁴⁶ and that discourse on fidelity has ‘led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation.’⁴⁷

Cardwell critiques traditional medium specificity and argues that ‘comparative theory is more theoretically sound than earlier medium-specific theory, because there is a strong link between the theoretical conception of what adaptation is and the methodology proposed for studying it, whereas medium-specific theory, as we have seen, cannot adequately explain convergence between novel and film and would seem to negate even the very possibility of “adaptation” in the sense in which it is pre-theoretically understood.’⁴⁸ Yet Cardwell then points out that the comparative approach is ‘less concerned with the technical, and thus formal, capabilities of each medium, and more concerned with the specific conventions that constitute its system of signification.’⁴⁹ She presents this approach as oppositional to medium specificity theory, but this reference to conventions and signification echoes the later medium specificity in art theory that I discussed previously, and allows for inter-art exchanges without a medium being tied to technological constraints.

Throughout not only Cardwell’s writing, but also the work of Elliott, Stam and McFarlane, is the issue of the hierarchy between word and image that permeates medium specificity theory. Stam argues that ‘too often, adaptation discourse subtly

⁴⁵ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literature to film.⁵⁰ According to Stam, the superiority of literature ‘derives ... from deeply rooted and often unconscious assumptions about the relations between the two arts’⁵¹ and is also drawn from ‘the assumption ... that older arts are necessarily better arts.’⁵² Much of the discourse negotiating this rivalry between film and the written word has arguably drawn its fuel from those attempting to theorise film’s specificity and uniqueness as a distinct medium. Cardwell notes that this theorising takes place in the face of the belief that is ‘emotionally “felt” as much as intellectually “thought”’ that ‘literature is an inherently superior medium to television and film.’⁵³ Vincendeau argues that ‘literary adaptations are symptomatic of interesting power struggles,’⁵⁴ and Stam refers to the assumption of ‘a bitter rivalry between film and literature.’⁵⁵ Essentially, this rivalry is defined by a perceived superiority of the written word due to its appeal to the mind as opposed to the senses. Stam explores the way in which this has affected the development of medium specificity theory, describing how ‘the body-mind hierarchy which informs the image-word prejudice gets mapped onto other binaristic hierarchies such as surface-depth, so that films are dismissed as dealing in surfaces, literally “superficial.”’⁵⁶ Elliott also interrogates this underlying belief, critiquing the notion that the ‘novel holds the higher organ, the brain, while film garners only the sensory, bestial, materialistic eye.’⁵⁷

We can see this hierarchy presented in Plato’s *The Republic*, in which he sets about illustrating that the arts do not appeal to reason or the intellect, and that rather

⁵⁰ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Vincendeau, *Film/Literature/Heritage*, p. xiv.

⁵⁵ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁷ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 54.

they encourage indulgence in emotions or responses that should be controlled in favour of the rational faculties. He concludes that ‘representative art is an inferior child born of inferior parents.’⁵⁸ Stam refers to this ‘iconophobia,’ stating that ‘contemporary theorists hostile to the cinema often replay, whether consciously or not, Plato’s rejection of the fictive arts as nurturing illusion and fomenting the lower passions.’⁵⁹ This negative reaction to the visual can also be seen in the work of Fredric Jameson, who as Stam notes ‘sees the filmic image as “essentially pornographic.”’⁶⁰ Film is thus seen as a victim of its own materiality, a materiality that is often taken for granted, in that being able to *see* something holds numerous possibilities structurally and creatively, and yet these possibilities are seen as inferior because of their alleged appeal to the senses over the mind.

In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), Joseph Conrad stated that his aim was, above all, ‘to make you see,’⁶¹ and this possibility is available in the visual arts (both in the literal sense of the word and in its reference to understanding). Not only is the assumed hierarchy of the mind over the body theoretically concerning, but so too is the unaccountably absent link made between the senses and the intellect; the sensual is presumed not only to be unintellectual, but indeed to be its polar opposite. This is obviously a crucial issue for my investigation into film’s ability to communicate mental states, since it characterises the medium as not only weak at appealing to the intellect, but also incapable of conveying anything but physicality. More recently the idea that ‘film can only provide crude, literal,

⁵⁸ Plato, ‘Part X: Theory of Art,’ *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, (Penguin Group Ltd, 2003. First published in this translation 1955), p. 346.

⁵⁹ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Joseph Conrad, preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, (J. M. Dent and Sons: London, 1945), p. 5.

visual symbols that do not convey the complexity of the word⁶² has been robustly challenged.

After outlining the prejudices of language and the hierarchical structures that have shaped medium specificity theory, I will now address another crucial and long-standing distinction between word and image: the ‘conceptual/perceptual’ divide. This distinction is significant because of the relationship that the conceptual has to thought and understanding, and it is this relationship that will prove pivotal in my assessment of film’s ability to communicate complex interiority. So invested is the medium specificity debate in this opposition, that all other conflicting qualities of the medium seem to be drawn from these categories, particularly when it comes to designating film’s weakness as its inability to deal with anything but the visual (making it traditionally completely incapable of dealing with anything as complex and subjective as mental states). Constable explores the various models of this dichotomy in *Adapting Philosophy*, interrogating the theoretical frameworks ‘in which the “perceptual” nature of the filmic image renders it *necessarily* incapable of the complex symbolisation and conceptual abstraction of language.’⁶³ In much theoretical writing on this subject, this opposition is treated as a given, and is rarely challenged.

Theorists are often unaware that this assumed distinction is being reaffirmed within their own work. McFarlane maintains the divide between the conceptual and perceptual as being the necessary characteristics of the appeal of each media by referring to the functioning of the sign system of each. He writes: ‘The verbal sign, with its low iconicity and high symbolic function, works *conceptually*, whereas the cinematic sign with its high iconicity and uncertain symbolic function, works

⁶² Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

directly, sensuously, *perceptually*.’⁶⁴ He argues that ‘because of its high iconicity, the cinema has left no scope for that imaginative activity necessary to the reader’s visualization of what he reads.’⁶⁵ He describes the codes in the medium as unfixed and shifting, and part of a multi-track consisting of language codes, visual codes, non-linguistic sound, and cultural codes.⁶⁶ He argues that film ‘lacks a structuring syntax, instead of which it has conventions in relation to the operation of its codes,’⁶⁷ which allow us to ‘read’ film. The study of film as a language, as theorised by Christian Metz, is often complicated rather than clarified by interart exchanges, particularly when breaking down structures into units.

Constable notes how theorists, including Stam and Cardwell, trace the philosophical argument for the inferior status of the image back to the myth of Plato’s cave in *The Republic*, in which he describes images as illusory. Constable notes that ‘in this myth, the shadows’ ontological status as copies of copies is equated with a state of delusion. As a result, the parallel that is frequently drawn between shadow play and the cinematic image must be regarded as a particularly problematic way to characterise the cinema.’⁶⁸ Plato’s ‘characterisation of the image as an insubstantial shadow’⁶⁹ thus presents the image as conceptually empty and illusory, defining the image ‘as copy, reflection, ghost and shadow,’ metaphors which ‘are currently circulated in writing on ... adaptation.’⁷⁰

Elliott addresses the way in which throughout the novel/film discussion, it is taken for granted that the film appeals to the eye whilst the novel appeals to the mind, thus maintaining the divide between the perceptual and conceptual. Constable

⁶⁴ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁸ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 43.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

refers to this, drawing our attention to the ‘conceptual nature of the mental image and the perceptual nature of the visual image.’⁷¹ Beja refers to what he perceives as the limiting quality of the perceptual, again reinforcing the idea that film appeals to the senses and not the mind: ‘It is impossible for us to overcome the visual image; that is all there is, it is right in front of us, and we cannot make it any different. Moreover, a film can only show us what can be shown: the eye can only see what can be seen by the eye, a limitation not shared by the mind’s eye.’⁷² What is interesting about this is the fact that, when in the mind, an image can be ‘conceptual.’ There is no explanation given for the assumption that the image is robbed of this power if it is physically before us.

Constable refers to Elliott’s presentation of the argument that ‘the mind/eye dichotomy has its roots in the Christian valorisation of the spirit over the flesh,’⁷³ and that this ultimately constructs a paradigm that will ‘downgrade materiality.’⁷⁴ This not only denies that the physical image is in itself capable of internal structures that communicate complex concepts, but also seems to neglect film’s ability to trigger the ‘mind’s eye’ that is so esteemed by Beja. Many films, for instance, revolve entirely around what we *cannot* see, and exploit the mind’s eye to their advantage. In pointing to this capability of film I do not wish in any way to *valorise* the mental image over the physical one, or imply that an image can *only* be conceptual if it is in the mind. Rather, I am trying to point out the fact that the scope of a film text reaches far beyond its alleged materiality, and it is not only the written word that relies on the ‘mind’s eye’ when communicating to the audience/reader.

⁷¹ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 44.

⁷² Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 64.

⁷³ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The idea that the image is somehow a victim of its own physicality is a prominent theme throughout the novel/film debate. Constable writes: ‘The intersection of different philosophical/theological definitions within writing on adaptation generates opposing conceptions of the image as pure surface and corporeal substance. The image is thus a paradox, simultaneously too insubstantial and too substantial; however, its position either side of the binary is utilised to the same effect – it is barred from being abstract/ conceptual/ symbolic.’⁷⁵ This results in an idealisation of the written word ‘as the sole repository of complex symbolisation and conceptual abstraction.’⁷⁶ Through an analysis of Elliott’s looking glass analogy and Michèle Le Doeuff’s investigation of the imagery used in philosophical texts, Constable challenges the literary monopolisation of the conceptual, illustrating the extent to which image can play a pivotal role in communicating ‘abstract thought’, and as such it is ‘integral to philosophy,’⁷⁷ thereby reaching a conclusion that essentially shatters the alleged conceptual/perceptual divide between word and image.

Referring to the work of Metz, which ‘challenges accounts of the necessarily perceptual nature of the filmic image,’⁷⁸ Constable explores the use of metaphor and metonymy in communicating complex concepts through figural codes. This holds significance because, in the case study examining the use of the balloon in *M* (Dir. Fritz Lang, 1931), the metaphor ‘cannot be regarded as purely perceptual or immediate, given that it is reliant upon the audience remembering and augmenting the symbolism established in the earlier scenes.’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 45.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Constable also addresses the written word as visual (the written word is, after all, just as physical as the image), noting that ‘Barthes’ failure to consider the pictorial dimension of words is due to his absolute separation of the graphic and the iconic.’⁸⁰ Because of the emphasis on mental imaging that the written word can trigger, Elliott observes that this limits images ‘to one particular sense, while words are given access to all the senses through the brain. In consequence, image arts are often presented as sensorially disabled by comparison with words, which are represented as sensorially enhanced.’⁸¹ Elliott challenges this dominance with reference to cognitive theory:

Verbalizing and visualising ... prove to be connected rather than opposed cognitive processes. But they are not simply “connected”: rather, they inhere looking glass fashion. The cognition of mental images and of perceptual images has been shown to be a directly inverse process.⁸²

She goes on to conclude that ‘certain pictures inspire verbal thinking ... in ways inversely comparable to words that inspire mental images,’⁸³ creating a circular relationship between the medium in the mode of a mirror reflection. She notes that ‘looking glass figuration is by no means limited to puns, but extends to other verbal-visual figures like metaphor,’⁸⁴ and argues that ‘metaphor presses further towards a less linear, more cyclical, less binary, more multiplicative process of metamorphosis.’⁸⁵ This focus is really the foundation of Elliott’s crusade to reshape the medium specificity landscape, in which she stresses intertextual similarities over oppositions and offers a convincing argument for adaptation theory to progress in this direction, ultimately providing richer and more varied interpretations. Elliott

⁸⁰ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 48.

⁸¹ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 220.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

systematically illustrates the importance of analogies in conceptualising interart exchanges. Her work points to the conclusion that ‘concerns with categorical correctness and doctrinaire dogmas have done a great deal more to obscure than to elucidate interdisciplinary engagements, which are much more lively, unstable, agenda driven, and topsy-turvy than categorical lenses have revealed.’⁸⁶

This literature review has served as an introduction to the medium specificity debate and has explored the deeply rooted assumptions about film’s capabilities as a medium that have been shaped by it. Metz refers to ‘the obviousness of film, and ... also its opacity,’⁸⁷ and it is these ascribed characteristics of film that have largely prevented the issue of its ability to deal with the conceptual being explored within adaptation theory. Film is traditionally regarded as best suited to deal with the concrete and exterior, as opposed to the abstract and interior, and thus there are certain topics that are understood to be ‘off-limits’ to film. The communication of complex mental states is one of them. As we have seen, this perceived limitation is based on several strands of medium specificity theory that cast film in the role of the material, the superficial, and the illusory, and almost always in opposition to the written word.

Appealing to other arts for insight into the conveyance of subjectivity will be an important element of my thesis, since they provide key examples of the visual communicating the conceptual. Beja, for instance, when referring to the notion that ‘one picture is worth a thousand words,’ argues that this ‘is true when the given conception is best comprehended in visual terms.’⁸⁸ Here we have an uncharacteristic admittance that the image may at times be more suitable for

⁸⁶ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 243.

⁸⁷ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), Ch II: Problems of Film Semiotics, p. 69.

⁸⁸ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 56.

conveying certain concepts than the written word, and I am interested to investigate whether this insight is relevant to the conveyance of troubled subjectivities.

The second part of this chapter will explore the way in which the binaries outlined in my literature review specifically intersect with the question of whether or not film can successfully communicate interiority and mental states. This will entail a detailed interrogation of Bluestone's assertion that film is incapable of conveying mental states, since attempts to do so will be accepted 'as cinematic conventions' as opposed to 'renditions of conceptual consciousness.'⁸⁹

Challenging Bluestone

Bluestone presents an account of medium specificity that deems film incapable of dealing with mental processes. I will offer solutions to the dilemmas Bluestone presents by illustrating that the adaptation of written accounts of disordered subjectivity into the medium of film is a theoretical possibility, arriving at an understanding of film that deems it entirely capable of dealing with the conceptual. The solutions I present will involve pointing to contradictions within Bluestone's own film analyses and returning to Elliott's work on interart analogies and the figurative. I will also refer to the art and literature of Sylvia Plath in an examination of what Plath felt to be the fluid exchanges that occur between different media within her work, and will assess the significance of this in reference to Elliott's looking glass analogies. This process will serve as a blueprint for the approach I will be adopting when analysing my case studies, as these multichannel film texts utilise the complex visual/verbal/aural relationships accessible to the medium to create specific conceptual frameworks.

⁸⁹ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 48.

Bluestone argues that certain abilities belong solely to the realm of the literary, and we can see this clearly in his belief that the ‘abandonment of “novelistic” elements’⁹⁰ by film results in the loss of the ability to convey particular mental processes or states:

With the abandonment of language as its sole and primary element, the film necessarily leaves behind those characteristic contents of thought which only language can approximate: tropes, dreams, memories, conceptual consciousness. In their stead, the film supplies endless spatial variations, photographic images of physical reality, and the principles of montage and editing.⁹¹

Bluestone’s use of the loaded word ‘abandonment’ is a consciously emotive way of describing loss which presents the adaptation as inferior and lacking. Robert Stam addresses the significance of words like this, arguing that ‘the conventional language of adaptation criticism has often been profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that imply that the cinema has somehow done a **disservice** to literature. Terms like “infidelity,” “betrayal,” “deformation,” “violation,” “bastardization,” “vulgarization,” and “desecration” proliferate in adaptation discourse, each word carrying its specific charge of opprobrium.’⁹² Stam argues that such rhetoric is reflective of a ‘discourse of loss’⁹³ in adaptation theory, and we can see this in Bluestone’s assertion that certain abilities belong solely to the realm of the literary, and are lost when conveying something in the medium of film. Bluestone designates language as the only form capable of communicating certain mental states, and consequently is arguing that ‘photographic images of physical reality’ are completely incapable of performing this function. The moving image is thus presented as relying on a particular set of figures (that are spatial in nature, since the image itself is

⁹⁰ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. Viii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. Viii-ix.

⁹² Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, eds., *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 3.

⁹³ Stam, *Literature and Film*, p. 3.

characterised as spatial), and with its ‘abandonment’ of the literary is presented as abandoning its access to the conceptual, because, according to Bluestone, the spatial *cannot* be conceptual. We are given no explanation as to why the image should be inherently disadvantaged in this way. It is treated as a given that by not having language as its ‘sole and primary element’ film ‘*necessarily* leaves behind those characteristic contents of thought which only language can approximate’ [my emphasis].

Bluestone goes on to make another distinction between the two media. Articulating the difference in process when a novelist and director attempt to ‘make you see,’ Bluestone writes that ‘one may ... see visually through the eye or imaginatively through the mind. And between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media.’⁹⁴ What Bluestone underestimates here is the link between visual images and mental images, as articulated in the work of Elliott. He presents the filmic image as somehow victim of its own materiality, reinforcing the perceptual/conceptual divide.

Bluestone describes Virginia Woolf as ‘especially sensitive to the unique power of the figure of speech. The images of a poet, she tells us, are compact of a thousand suggestions, of which the visual is only the most obvious.’⁹⁵ Not only is the visual presented as the most obvious manifestation of a ‘thousand suggestions,’ and entirely incapable of carrying complex conceptual content as a result of this literal and obvious interpretation, but more troublingly it is implied that meaning is only fluid and multiform until it is converted into matter. Visualisation is portrayed as an act which solidifies and freezes not only the form which the interpretation and its manifestation take but also the meaning. The word is portrayed as capable of

⁹⁴ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

carrying shifting meanings whilst the visual can only communicate the most obvious of these. It therefore finds itself stuck in a single rigid manifestation of one interpretation, and is entirely incapable of morphing its meaning once it has been frozen into the concrete materiality of the image. Woolf argues that the medium of film is unable to access the sheer wealth of connotation and expression that is available to language, arguing that the cinema destroys this subtlety with its explicit realism:

Even the simplest image: ‘my love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June,’ presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the flow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and the hesitation of the love. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.⁹⁶

Yet, cinema often relies on complex systems of meaning and understanding that allow viewers to decode conceptual and abstract content. Appreciating the extent of the medium’s complexity in this respect poses a direct challenge to Woolf’s characterisation of the visual as simple and obvious. In addition to this, film is equally capable of drawing on the creative ‘mind’s eye’ as the written word is, and also of suggesting subtle and numerous connotations to images and visual relationships within the frame. What is perhaps perceived to be the limitation of film is its materiality, and yet this completely negates film’s ability to refer to that outside of itself and to create mental images as opposed to visual ones, and – more crucially – that the image is *in itself* capable of complex internal relationships that communicate the conceptual. It is also important to point out that the claims made by Woolf and Bluestone about the limitations of film are only understandable when related to a conception of film as inherently realist. This is significant because of the

⁹⁶ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, quoting Virginia Woolf, ‘The Movies and Reality,’ *New Republic*, xlvii (August 4, 1926), 309. It is interesting that Woolf fleshes out this argument by inserting a figurative speaker with her use of the word ‘voice,’ thus gesturing to an interaction between the physical and the conceptual.

traditional conception of ‘realist’ being synonymous with the literal, thus fitting neatly with the depiction of film as obvious and simple.

Bluestone argues that despite its attempts to convey the abstract and interior, ‘the realistic tug of the film is too strong,’⁹⁷ and as such it is incapable of presenting complex mental processes in the way that language can:

Dreams and memories, which exist nowhere but in the individual consciousness, cannot be adequately represented in spatial terms. Or rather, the film, having only arrangements of space to work with, cannot render thought, for the moment thought is externalized it is no longer thought. The film, by arranging external signs for our visual perception, or by presenting us with dialogue, can lead us to *infer* thought. But it cannot show us thought directly. It can show us characters thinking, feeling, and speaking, but it cannot show us their thoughts and feelings. A film is not thought; it is perceived.⁹⁸

Bluestone’s work encapsulates the word/image, perceptual/conceptual opposition, and his statement here illustrates the bizarre ramifications of applying such logic to the medium of film. Bluestone’s argument is contradictory and muddled, and he notably slips between his discussion of the filmic characters and his discussion of the audience viewing them. His conclusive statement that ‘A film is not thought; it is perceived,’ which is intended to act as the final word on exactly why film is incapable of communicating thoughts and feelings (and is only able to show the characters feeling them), is a problematic one that needs unpacking. Bluestone fails to identify the subject of this assertion, so that we are left wondering when he says that a film is not ‘thought’ whether he means by those viewing it or the creators of the film. Exactly what is meant by the phrase ‘show us thought’ is also unclear, because the word ‘show’ is so diverse in its application. Bluestone argues that ‘dreams and memories ... cannot be adequately represented in spatial terms,’ but this statement is founded on the notion that the spatial (and thus the visual) is incapable

⁹⁷ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 48.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

of conveying the *conceptual*, and this is the assumption I ultimately wish to challenge.

We must also ask: In what sense does Bluestone feel anything is ‘thought,’ but thoughts themselves? Regarding the novel, for instance, does sub-vocalisation count as remaining in the realm of ‘thought’ or is it external once committed to dialogue, even if that dialogue is internal and mediated through the written word? Morris Beja engages with this question, arguing that ‘it could be countered that written literature itself has only words on pages to work with, and that putting them there is also an act of externalisation – and that, in any case, thought is less exclusively “verbal” than Bluestone’s distinction seems to imply.’⁹⁹

Bluestone reiterates the alleged limitation of the medium when arguing that since ‘the film has difficulty presenting streams of consciousness, it has even more difficulty presenting states of mind which are defined precisely by the absence in them of the visible world.’¹⁰⁰ Any attempts to render mental states such as ‘memory, dream, [or] imagination’ are, according to Bluestone, accepted ‘as cinematic conventions’ as opposed to ‘renditions of conceptual consciousness.’¹⁰¹ Here, Bluestone approaches the convention as another version of the literal when it is anything *but* literal; cinematic conventions rely on an incredibly complex framework of meaning and signification for them to be understood by the viewer. It is interesting that Bluestone designates the understanding of something as a ‘convention’ within cinema specifically as a barrier to our appreciating it as a ‘rendition of conceptual consciousness,’ since surely literary writing about subjective consciousness is also subject to systematic frameworks of meaning and is equally dependent on the reader being able to understand the form’s conventions. We accept

⁹⁹ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

certain writing styles as expressive of particular mental states or emotions, particularly when dealing with a fragmented and disordered subjectivity. In Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, for instance, Palahniuk often uses stilted sentences, even single words, to replicate the fragmentation of the Narrator's thought patterns and to signify the framework of those mental processes. Reading literary or film texts is dependent on an understanding of convention (for example, Palahniuk's protagonist often thinks up Haikus, an overt reference to systematic form and structure and its importance in conveying meaning). Thus, Bluestone's idea that if we recognise something as a convention we are consequently unable to respond to it as significant in other respects, such as understanding it as symbolic or reflective of interiority, is theoretically flawed.

Whilst I have focused here on Bluestone, it is important to note that the claims he makes about film's limitations have remained largely unchallenged by other theorists. In an otherwise balanced account of the medium specificity debate, McFarlane also refers to film's inability to convey thought processes and interiority, arguing that 'while cinema may be more agile and flexible in changing the physical point of view from which an event or object is seen, it is much less amenable to the presentation of a consistent psychological viewpoint derived from character.'¹⁰² What is problematic for McFarlane is that the sole narrator in a novel offers *one* perspective, and this singularity is difficult to replicate in film. What film lacks, argues McFarlane, is the ability to be *consistent* in the perspective it delivers. However, not only do films such as *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999) and *Shutter Island* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2010) illustrate that a worldview *can* be constructed and consistently represented from one perspective, but reading their

¹⁰² McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 16.

literary sources also shows that McFarlane's distinction between novel and film underestimates the extent to which we are invited to interrogate what we are being presented with in the novel. We are aware with most literary narratives that we are being given a subjective account of events, and thus it *is* possible to adopt another perspective when engaging with the story. It is not always the case that the perspective we are being presented with in the novel is the only one on offer to us as readers, so to differentiate the novel in this respect in relation to film is problematic.

Commenting on the use of oral narration in film, McFarlane writes that: 'Those words spoken in voice-over accompany images which necessarily take on an objective life of their own. One no longer has the sense of everything's being filtered through the consciousness of the protagonist-speaker.'¹⁰³ To demonstrate this he uses the example of David Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations* (1946):

The grotesques who people Pip's world are no longer presented to the viewer as an individual's subjective impressions. One now 'sees' everything the camera 'sees', not just what impressed itself on the hero-narrator's imaginative responsiveness.¹⁰⁴

This account seems to underestimate film's ability to focus our visual (and consequently mental) attention on one particular aspect of the image. McFarlane bases this judgement of film on the objectivity of the camera, stating that this may indeed 'include what the protagonist sees,' but that it also 'cannot help including a great deal else as well.'¹⁰⁵ The trustworthiness of the narrator is discussed in opposition to the objectivity of the image recorded by the camera, but this notion is challenged in films dealing with disordered subjectivity. For example, in a film such as *A Beautiful Mind* (dir. Ron Howard, 2001), the image recorded by the camera is entirely unreliable in an objective sense. The film constructs reality from the

¹⁰³ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

protagonist's point of view. Hallucinations appear real to us (just like they do to the character), and we are positioned in the place of the person with schizophrenia, unable to discern reality from delusion. Thus, the assumption that the medium of film is objective due to its mechanism is flawed. The fact that we see characters or events on screen does not mean that they exist in the diegetic world of the film.

Films such as *A Beautiful Mind* not only defy the realist conception of film that we find in adaptation theory, they also actively utilise this conception to position the viewer in the place of the person experiencing mental disorder. In *A Beautiful Mind*, for instance, characters we believe to be real are in fact the delusions of John Nash and a result of his schizophrenia, and our assumption that the camera is a reliable and objective source of information means that we never question their existence in the diegetic world, just as Nash does not. In the beginning of the film we treat the camera as reliable in the same way that we trust our senses, and like the person with schizophrenia we are unable to discern reality from illusion. The assumption that putting something onto film makes it objective draws on a technologically determinist approach to film and links to Bluestone's belief that film – notably realist film – is literal.

McFarlane also refers to the 'perceptual immediacy'¹⁰⁶ of film as something which limits film's ability to convey the conceptual, yet there is nothing necessarily any more immediate about the image than the written word, it just may entail a different type of engagement. One could also argue that the visual immediacy of the image allows the 'reality' of the hallucinations to the person with schizophrenia to be illustrated much more effectively than the written word, since hallucinations are themselves visual in nature.

¹⁰⁶ McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, pp. 18-19.

In addition to McFarlane, Beja also makes a comparison between the strengths of film and language, asking: ‘Are there aspects of the human experience that are better or worse served by written literature than by film?’¹⁰⁷ We are then launched into the perceptual/conceptual divide between the visual and the literary, with Beja noting that: ‘Probably the most common distinction is one that sees the novel as more appropriate to the presentation of *inner* mental states, while the film is seen as being better able to show what people do and say than what they think or imagine ... The reason is that film depicts what is external and visible, physical and material.’¹⁰⁸ Again, these characteristics of the visual (that it is external and concrete) are seen to work against its ability to convey interiority. I will challenge this assumption by considering the success of visual artwork in communicating emotional or mental states, focusing on the example of Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*. My analysis will demonstrate that the logic underpinning the notion that the visual cannot communicate the abstract is that the visual is synonymous with the realist and literal.

Alastair Wright describes how Munch was fascinated by the work of Van Gogh and adopted the idea ‘that painting should not imitate the appearance of things, that it should set itself a more profound or deeper goal which is to get to things that you can’t see with the naked eye ... to get to emotions, to try to be able to represent or to present in your painting deep, psychological states ... to present to the public a tortured soul.’¹⁰⁹ In light of the inherently visual nature of the medium it is significant that Munch chose painting to communicate that which cannot be seen with the naked eye. This choice poses a direct challenge to the notion of the visual

¹⁰⁷ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Munch and The Scream,’ Broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Thursday 18th March 2010. Discussion between Melvyn Bragg and guests David Jackson, Dorothy Rowe and Alastair Wright. Quote from Alastair Wright.

being directly linked to objective reality, a link that allegedly makes it incapable of dealing with the abstract and interior. As Reinhold Heller writes in his exploration of Munch's work, 'painting served to make the invisible visible, in direct antithesis to realism's dictum that only what is seen can be painted.'¹¹⁰ Munch's paintings signify a 'turn from visually faithful contemporary scenes to emotionally faithful memories.'¹¹¹ Munch was fascinated by 'inner moods,'¹¹² and felt that the visual arts, despite their characterisation as external and literal, had the ability to express these moods in a way inaccessible to language.

Munch's inspiration for *The Scream* (Fig. 1) was a moment of extreme anxiety he experienced whilst walking with friends at sunset, in which he was overwhelmed by the blood-red sky. There are various versions of his description of the moment, but in all accounts it is the final line that reveals the source of his anxiety: 'I stood there, trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature.'¹¹³ Heller notes that 'it is because the sunset aroused a mood of desperation through introspection that Munch's friends were unable to recognise the bloody, deadly quality of the nature he experienced.'¹¹⁴ We cannot underestimate the significance of this shift in attitude towards the notion of truth and reality, an attitude which holds the inner psyche as the real source of reality and in which the external world 'becomes a visual correlate of the invisible mental reality.'¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 27.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹² Dorothy Rowe, 'Munch and The Scream,' BBC Radio 4.

¹¹³ Reinhold Heller, *Munch: The Scream*, (Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1973), p. 65.

¹¹⁴ Heller, *Munch: The Scream*, p. 68.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

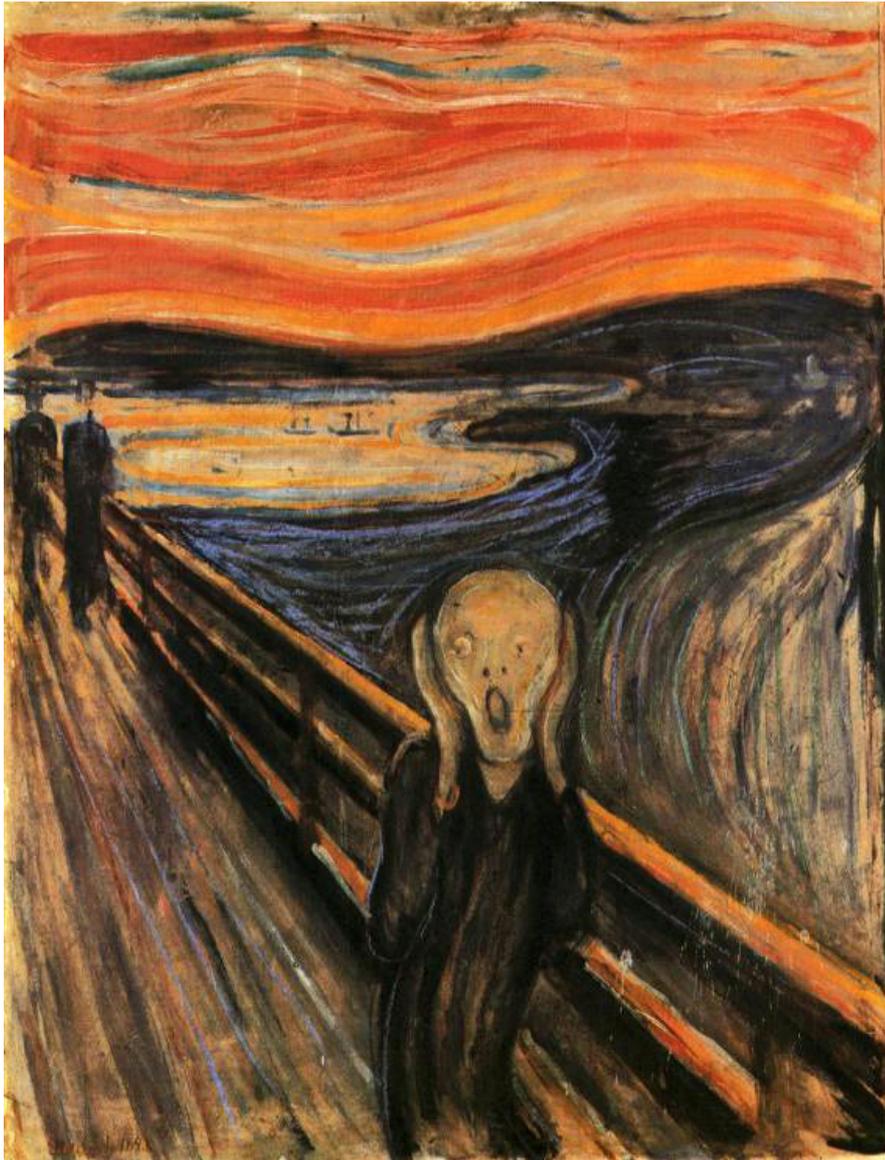


Figure 1. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893 (oil, tempera, and pastel on cardboard).

Heller explains that ‘Munch sees nature solely as a reflection or mirror of a subjective mood’ and ‘external nature became an element of his psychological state.’¹¹⁶ For Munch, the visible world ‘constantly changed under his subjective glance,’ causing him to argue that ‘if he experienced clouds as blood during an agitated mood, then it would be false to paint the clouds in a normal manner, but rather he was explicitly bound to paint them as he experienced them, as coagulating

¹¹⁶ Heller, *Munch: The Scream*, p. 74.

blood.’¹¹⁷ Heller describes how the scream through nature was something ‘synaesthetically felt,’ and the painting’s subjective content is ‘symbolic of something non-visual.’¹¹⁸

Munch, who was friends with Dr Julius Elias who assisted the editor of Lessing’s *Laocoön*,¹¹⁹ actively sought to challenge Lessing’s categorisation of the word and image by creating his *Frieze of Life*, a series of paintings which constructed one whole artwork that took time to navigate and comprehend. Lessing argued that ‘the artist had one moment in which to capture the past, the present, and the future,’ and that the visual arts could not unfold in the same way literature could.¹²⁰ Munch’s series of paintings, which worked almost like a collage or storyboard, illustrated that the pictorial arts were not confined to the category of the spatial and could engage with the temporal. Heller explains that ‘literature’s element of time, the revelation of a number of actions following upon each other, became an aspect of Munch’s art as the content of each painting added to the content of the preceding one and pointed towards the following one; a plot was created whose totality was greater than the specific content of the paintings creating it.’¹²¹ Munch himself describes how the ‘various paintings had connections to each other through their content. When they were placed together, suddenly a single musical tone passed through them and they became totally different to what they had previously been. A symphony resulted. It was in this way that I began to paint friezes.’¹²² An interart analogy is used to express the quality or experience of a medium through the

¹¹⁷ Heller, *Munch: The Scream*, p. 75.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹²⁰ Dorothy Rowe, ‘Munch and The Scream,’ BBC Radio 4.

¹²¹ Heller, *Munch: The Scream*, p. 30.

¹²² *Ibid.*

language of another, and as I will explore this revealing interplay is referred to by Sylvia Plath in her poetry and journals.

The example of Munch's *The Scream* highlights the connection between the claims made by Bluestone about cinema's inability to engage with the abstract and interior and a conception of cinema that is realist and literal. It is only under this limiting understanding of cinema that Bluestone's statements make any sense theoretically. However, Beja does at first seem to challenge Bluestone's understanding of cinema by referring to Eisenstein's fascination with the work of James Joyce and the fact that 'Eisenstein believed that film, even more forcefully than literature, could make such mental processes accessible, comprehensible, and vivid.'¹²³ Yet Beja goes on to suggest that film's ability to convey interiority relies solely on its ability to contain language, which is depicted as capable of smuggling in this ability to the medium of film:

Often, verbal means such as the voice-over, narration and dialogue are used to get round a fundamental limitation within the visual image: it cannot easily and immediately convey abstract concepts ... Such abstractions are of course not completely beyond the capabilities of film so long as film uses words; nevertheless it does seem true that ideas are more economically treated in written literature than in film.¹²⁴

Unlike Beja, who argues that language is the only form capable of conveying abstract concepts, poet Donald Hall is notably critical of the ability of the written word in relation to the visual, as can be seen in his response to Munch's painting. In the second part of his poem *The Scream*, Hall moves on to an evaluation of the two forms, seeking to understand their relationship. In *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, a study of ecphrasis, John Hollander describes how Hall uses the opening description of the painting 'as an occasion to discourse both of

¹²³ Beja, *Film and Literature*, p. 58.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

ut picture poesis [as is painting so is poetry] and of the question of thought and feeling.¹²⁵ After describing the artwork, Hall writes:

We, unlike Munch, observe his *The Scream*
making words, since perhaps we too know
the head's "experience of extreme
disorder." We have made our bravo,

but such, of course, will never equal
the painting. What is the relation?
A word, which is at once richly full
of attributes: thinginess, reason,

reference, time, noise, among others;
bounces off the firm brightness of paint
as if it had no substance, and errs toward
verbalism, naturally.

The poem focuses on the capacity of the visual to make the verbal seem insubstantial and lifeless, a capacity which both Stam and Elliott argue is the danger that the visual has been seen to pose to the verbal in medium specificity theory. Interestingly, the attributes Hall credits to the word characterise it as a physical thing (with the word 'thinginess' being the first attribute named), and the fullness of the word is conveyed as almost a literal fullness, as if it is packed full of physical elements. The word 'noise' draws attention to the fact that the phoneme is a sound as well as a corresponding graphic letter, again characterising the word as physical. Yet, despite Hall's attempt to characterise the word as substantial and concrete, it responds to the vivid physicality associated with the painting 'as if it had no substance,' portraying the word as inadequate and concluding that the intense emotion constructed by the 'firm brightness of paint' is impenetrable by the literary.

We can begin to look for solutions to the problems presented by Bluestone by utilising the inconsistencies within his own work. In his writing about *The Informer*

¹²⁵ Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit*, p. 287.

(Dir. John Ford, 1935), for example, Bluestone's observations about the way in which interiority is dealt with in medium of film holds particular interest:

Internal monologue and literary figures of speech are all but impossible to translate to celluloid. The film, which must render its meanings in moving images, resists both these devices. And yet the texture of the narrative prose, which is so largely supported by both monologue and metaphor, must be rendered in cinematic equivalents. Ford and Nichols have solved this problem by devising an elaborate set of symbols which function on both literal and analogical levels. These symbols are in turn supported by a careful arrangement of visual and aural renditions of Gypo's subjective conflicts. Some of these symbols, like the all-pervasive fog, relieved only occasionally by the flare of light from a doorway or the bloom of a fireplace in a room, are direct carry-overs from the novel.¹²⁶

The conveyance of interiority is crucial in *The Informer* because the film is all about the guilt that crushes Gypo after he informs the police of his fugitive friend Frankie's whereabouts to gain a monetary reward, consequently leading to Frankie's death when he is shot trying to escape. The paranoia and guilt experienced by Gypo is the central focus of the film, and thus the conveyance of his troubled subjectivity is fundamental to the film's narrative structure.

Bluestone explores the function of metaphor and symbolism throughout the film in relation to characters' mental states, referring to the way in which way Ford and Nichols construct 'a series of full-blown cinematic details which become suffused with subjective ideas.'¹²⁷ The reward poster with Frankie's face on it symbolises betrayal throughout the film. It follows Gypo around, catching on his shoes or blowing in the wind next to him in the street, and at one point burning in the fireplace, showing Frankie's face distort and disappear into the flames. Bluestone writes that 'no such poster appears in the novel, but its adoption enables the filmmakers to render O'Flaherty's meaning in purely visual terms.'¹²⁸ The poster is also used to communicate Gypo's initial temptation and turmoil when faced with the choice of whether to turn Frankie in or not. When he first sees the reward poster, an

¹²⁶ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, pp. 80-81.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

image of himself and Frankie drinking and singing in a bar together is superimposed onto it, conveying the sense of history the friends share and Gypo's loyalty to Frankie. However, when Gypo meets up with Frankie in person, the emphasis of this association is reversed, as the reward poster is now superimposed onto his vision of Frankie. Gypo has begun to see his friend as representative of the money he would receive if he informed the police. Gypo's shifting thought patterns in relation to his dilemma are communicated by the juxtaposition and content of key images, such as the reward poster featuring Frankie's face, which accrues meaning across the text.

Bluestone also picks out the significance of the musical accompaniment at key moments throughout the film, as well as the way in which Ford 'finds visual and aural substitutes for Gypo's interior monologues.'¹²⁹ It is perplexing that Bluestone does not see in these instances the potential for the cinematic medium to convey interiority, and even more so when we consider his statement that 'in the novel, Gypo undergoes a kind of psychological division of identity'¹³⁰ and during the film Ford uses 'every resource of the camera to render the tortured consciousness of Gypo Nolan.'¹³¹ This observation appears to stand in direct opposition to earlier statements Bluestone makes about the inability of film to deal with such abstract subjects.

Bluestone also offers accounts of a more direct relationship between the physical and the interior. In his analysis of an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Robert Leonard, 1940), Bluestone highlights the fact that 'when Collins condescendingly offers to marry one of the Bennet girls, Lizzy strikes a discordant

¹²⁹ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 86.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

note on a harp. Her disturbance is rendered acoustically.’¹³² For some reason, Bluestone does not appreciate the significance of this moment for the way in which it communicates Lizzy’s inner reaction so effectively. The act has meaning because of the complex series of figurations that allow for our instantaneous understanding of it. The harp is an instrument of love, and is associated with romance, tenderness and sweetness, and yet here it is playing a jarring note that is fully reflective of the blunt form of Collins’ marriage proposal. The discordant note on the harp has such impact because of its place within a constructed web of meaning, allowing for a specific complexity that is unique to the multitrack nature of film.

But, according to Bluestone’s account of film, these examples still fail to ‘*show* us thought’ [my emphasis] since they rely on the external and physical, which allegedly can only allow us to *infer* thought. Throughout his film analysis Bluestone continues to reinforce the inability of film to deal with thought or interiority, and describes this as a necessary result of its visual nature: ‘Dreams and thoughts are purely mental functions. Externalized and clothed in the kind of factual reality ... essential in photography, dreams and thoughts lose their qualitative properties. They cease being dreams and thoughts.’¹³³ There are many things we can take issue with here: Firstly, although dreams and thoughts *are* mental functions, they often contain very vivid images and can by their nature be very similar in experience to the act of watching a film. The idea that film is *less* able, for example, to construct a dream or hallucination than the written word is absurd when we consider its immediate advantage in that the thought in its original manifestation was visual in nature. We

¹³² Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 138. Since I am showing the contradictions within Bluestone’s own reasoning I have analysed the importance of this sequence as he relays it. It should be noted, however, that Bluestone is actually mistaken in his description of exactly when Lizzy strikes the note on the harp. (It is actually deliberately struck upon Collins’ reference to Lady Catherine De Bourgh speaking to him ‘as she would to any other gentleman,’ taking away the specifically romantic connotations of the harp and marriage and giving the moment a more humorous tone.)

¹³³ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 210.

cannot imagine what it would be to dream *without* images. Freud's work on plasticity in dreams and the ability of images to represent or morph into other things illustrates the complexity of visual symbolism and meaning, and reflects the importance of the visual in communicating the conceptual.¹³⁴ Bluestone also says that:

Simply because cinematography cannot penetrate consciousness, it naturally and systematically bends all its creative, formative efforts toward finding new and significant spatial structures. We can see how another person *sees*; but not how he *thinks*. Only language can approximate the quality of thought.¹³⁵

I would suggest that Bluestone is denying a fundamental link between how a person sees and how they think, and that he has divided these two processes far too neatly.

The importance of the link between seeing and thinking can be appreciated in films in such as *A Beautiful Mind*. In the film's opening sequence we see John Nash (Russell Crowe) view the spatial relationships between the fragmented sunlight shining through a crystal glass and the patterns in sliced lemons, and these shapes are then superimposed onto a classmate's tie, leading Nash to announce sheepishly to his friend that 'there could be a mathematical explanation for how bad your tie is.' Here, the image is of fundamental importance in communicating to the audience how Nash sees the world as a complex web of mathematical relationships. Here, seeing *is* thinking. One would wonder if the written word could convey this particular type of visual thought process so effectively. The fact that Nash chooses to share this observation with a classmate he has just met signals immediately to the audience that he is interacting with the world and those around him in a way reflective of his unusual mental processes.

¹³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1954). First German edition: *Die Traumdeutung* (Leipzig and Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1900).

¹³⁵ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, p. 208.

In addition to Bluestone's inability to appreciate the connection between seeing and thinking, he seems to be implying that any act of externalisation puts an end to the unique abstract quality of thought, and continues to argue that it is the 'factual reality' of the film that 'clothes' these thoughts so that we no longer accept them as thought. This denies our ability to suspend belief or understand the language of film, (for instance when viewing a dream sequence or memory), which is a necessary act if we are to understand film meaningfully at all.

Elizabeth Wurtzel admits the difficulty of attempting to communicate her mental anguish through the medium of the written word, supporting the argument that *any* medium has limitations in this respect. In her account of depression in the autobiography *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel expresses that she 'wanted to be completely true to the experience of depression – to the thing itself, and not to the mitigations of translating it.'¹³⁶ She goes on to address the limitations of the written word: 'I could never even begin to hope that anything as flat and two-dimensional as words on a page could project outwards and into someone else with the power and alacrity that rock 'n' roll has always been able to enter me, but I wanted to try.'¹³⁷ Wurtzel continually expresses the barrier between the feeling and its expression in her autobiography, and yet we are still given the impression that, despite its limitations, the written word can approximate mental states in a way that the visual cannot. This bias can be seen in Wurtzel's reference to Sylvia Plath as she appeals to readers:

Don't think of the striking on-screen picture, the mental movie you create of the pretty young woman being wheeled on the gurney to get her shock treatments, and don't think of the psychedelic, photonegative image of the same woman at the moment she receives that bolt of electricity. Think, instead, of the girl herself, of the way she must have felt right then, of the way no amount of great poetry and fascination and fame could make the pain she felt at that moment worth suffering.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), p. 356.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

The language Wurtzel uses (*striking* on-screen picture, *psychedelic*, *photonegative* image) gives us the sense that the visual is somehow illusory and tricky, luring us away from a contemplation of interiority towards a simplistic, literal, ‘mental movie’ of a ‘young pretty woman.’ Plath is thus reduced to a superficial, obvious element in the arrangement of the image. It seems, then, that Wurtzel deems the image (mental or material) incapable of rendering intense mental suffering.

The ideas and categories within adaptation theory intersect to create a framework in which film is deemed the less suitable medium for communicating complex interiority. I would suggest that what really lies at the root of Bluestone’s objections about the ability of film to deal with mental states is the ever resurfacing literal/abstract divide that so permeates the medium specificity debate, and it is this opposition that needs to be contested theoretically. Having searched Bluestone’s own work to explore possible solutions to the problem that his definition of film presents, I will now turn to the work of Kamilla Elliott in an attempt to establish a framework for understanding the fluid exchanges that take place between media, with the aim of finding the key to unlocking film’s theoretical ability to deal with the abstract and conceptual.

Elliott’s work on Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* sheds light on observations made earlier within this chapter about the importance of the relationship between the mind and the eye, and thus between thinking and seeing. Referring to a sequence in which Alice witnesses what she then concludes to be the meaning of the word ‘suppress’ (after seeing guinea pigs put in a canvas bag and sat upon to stop them cheering in court), Elliott observes that ‘seeing is not only believing, it is also understanding, meaning, signification.’¹³⁹ This involves re-evaluating the

¹³⁹ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 227.

importance of the visual in relation to the mind, and also challenging the division of seeing and thinking. Elliott highlights the importance of imagery in conveying the conceptual, and offers examples such as hybrid puns which she describes as puns in which ‘the picture *makes* the pun happen, rather than merely illustrating it.’¹⁴⁰

Elliott’s examination of the Caterpillar sequence in *Alice in Wonderland* is illuminating in this respect. The animation plays with the relationship between graphemes and phonemes and what they signify. One example involves the Caterpillar exhaling ‘I do not see’ and the smoke he breathes out ties itself into a knot. Elliott notes that ‘the mockery extends from language to the representational capacities of pictures: how would one illustrate the word “not,” unless with another letter, an “X” that would turn it back to a linguistic symbol?’¹⁴¹ The usefulness of this example lies in the challenge it represents to the hierarchy of the mind over the image, and also its engagement with the conceptual. Elliott explains that ‘Homonymic puns are particularly elucidating figures through which to probe and connect verbal-visual and form-content issues, for they run along the eye/ear discrepancies used to differentiate verbal and visual arts as well as between words and images more generally, yet they do so inside signs, pitting their phonic against their graphic elements to disrupt signifier-signified bonds. Here eye and ear join to confuse the mind rather than lying in hierarchical subordination to it.’¹⁴² What Elliott presents here is a triumph of the senses over the intellect, a triumph that causes the mind to laugh at a joke made at its own expense. The puns reveal the connections we make and take for granted in our comprehension of linguistic and graphic signs and the way they interact with each other, and mocks the way these systems of thought run unchecked.

¹⁴⁰ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 227.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

Elliott uses the example of the March Hare's half a cup of tea (which is illustrated as a cup of tea sliced vertically in half) as an example of such a pun and as an illustration of 'a fluid path between verbal and visual modes and posits each as the content of the other.'¹⁴³ She argues that 'rather than displacing Carroll's violation of linguistic laws with Švankmajer's of physical laws, Disney's half-cup of tea, sliced in half yet still miraculously holding tea, encompasses both: it violates both linguistic conventions and physical laws,'¹⁴⁴ pointing to the possibility of a redefinition of the relationship between the word and image. Elliott sees in figuration the 'potential to reorganize literary and filmic systems in relationship to each other and, beyond that, to reorient word and image and form and content dogmas.'¹⁴⁵ The quickness with which we grasp the joke that has been made when we see the Hare's half cup of tea belies the complex process of figuration and the mechanisms that have allowed us to understand it. Constable refers to this inherent complexity of the film text, writing that 'the swiftness with which we can grasp the significance of filmic figures leads to an underestimation of the work required to do so, what Robert Stam ably describes as "intense perceptual and conceptual labor – the work of iconic designation, visual deciphering, narrative inference and construction – inherent in [viewing] film."¹⁴⁶

Elliott seeks out a solution to the mind/eye dichotomy that dominates medium specificity theory by recognising the disruption of hierarchy caused by the 'reciprocal looking glass analogies' that have 'for centuries fostered the sister arts

¹⁴³ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 223.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, p. 162.

tradition.’¹⁴⁷ The circularity of the mirror and its reflection sets up the reciprocal relationship between the arts, pointing to:

a cognitive process in which the painter’s images arouse linguistic processes in the viewer and the poet’s words evoke mental images in the auditor. Though a painting lacks actual words, it evokes verbalizing and narrative effects in cognition so that it seems to possess a silent eloquence. Though a poem lacks illustrations, its words arouse mental images, so that it seems to possess the vocal powers of painting.¹⁴⁸

This interaction suggests a theoretical bridge allowing exchanges between media, particularly in reference to our understanding of their identifiable characteristics, and consequently suggests that each can interpret and communicate the conceptual since they are able to interact with each other.

It is useful here to turn to the work of Sylvia Plath, since it often grapples with the theme of mirror and reflection. In *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Pamela J. Annas explores the importance of the mirror in Plath’s work, noting its circularity and role as boundary and arguing that it ‘stands for an undefined and dangerously shifting area of uncertainty and tension.’¹⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that Plath was very aware of Lewis Carroll’s work, referring to Alice as ‘my muse Alice’ in a poem.¹⁵⁰ Annas’ work on Plath has resonance when bearing in mind Elliott’s use of the looking glass analogy. Although Annas is dealing with the subject of ‘true self,’ the following framework could be interestingly applied if we replace the notion of self with the object of a text in a specific medium:

There are these possible fates for the person who looks in mirrors, and they recur throughout Plath’s poetry in various ways: (1) you may, like Medusa who saw herself, see something in the mirror that turns you into stone and locks you rigidly into an identity; (2) you may pass through the boundary of the mirror and dissolve, losing a separate identity; (3) you may,

¹⁴⁷ Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 210.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, (New York: Greenwood, 1988), p. 2.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

caught between two mirrors, see only a shimmering and infinite series of reflections and never have the question of identity resolved; (4) you may see nothing at all, and that is death.¹⁵¹

It is arguably the third possible consequence that is similar to Elliott's solution to the problem of interart exchanges, since 'looking glass analogies maintain oppositions between the arts, but integrate these oppositions as an inextricable secondary identity. Two arts contain and invert the otherness of each other reciprocally, inversely, and inherently, rather than being divided from the other by their otherness.'¹⁵² Yet, there are differences between the two approaches. In Annas' mirror analogy, there is a reaching for an identity which is ultimately lost, as if the infinite series of reflections results in the end of identity. In Elliott's work, however, the 'question of identity' is approached with an appreciation of the inherent position each art takes 'in the rhetoric of the other.'¹⁵³ There is thus a fluid sense of identity which offers multiple ways to 'be,' binding the two media together in a complex interplay (and not, as Annas suggests, dislocating them). The looking glass analogy, with its 'shimmering and infinite series of reflections' as one mirror faces another, allows for the possibility of conveying nuanced interiority in differing media. The significance of the mirror when communicating issues of identity, reflection and fragmentation can be seen in Plath's art.

Famous for her literary work, Plath's devotion to visual art is rarely considered as worthy of equal consideration, despite the fact that her writings are characterised by their vivid use of imagery (indeed, she referred to her own work as 'kaleidoscopic'¹⁵⁴). An exploration of Plath's 'imaginative expressions'¹⁵⁵ is

¹⁵¹ Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, p. 3.

¹⁵² Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 212.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Sally Bayley and Kathleen Connors, *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007), p. 3.

conducted by Sally Bayley and Kathleen Connors in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Plath frequently expressed emotions or memories in metaphoric terms, describing her early years by the seaside as a child as 'sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine white, flying myth.'¹⁵⁶ Plath's engagement with the communicative capacities of the visual was marked throughout her life, and from childhood she drew illustrations of her dreams or stories, going on to study art alongside literature at college. Bayley describes how 'Sylvia Plath was fascinated – and perhaps obsessed – with the symbolic and literal uses of color in her written compositions and artworks, as well as in the clothes she wore,'¹⁵⁷ noting also that 'Plath used colors to symbolize emotional and physical states, or to develop symbolic meaning around objects in her writing and her environment.'¹⁵⁸

Plath was extremely interested in the problem of communicating interiority and thought processes, and in her journals expressed much praise for Virginia Woolf's rendition of consciousness in *Mrs Dalloway*. She writes of the work:

Imagine that you could peer into the brain of any passer-by at will. Would the thoughts be arranged in grammatical sentences, paragraphed with careful regard as a subject? Far from it. Our thoughts are inconstant and always changing – a kaleidoscope shifting of images, recollections and impressions. So it is in Mrs. Dalloway.¹⁵⁹

Plath discussed synesthesia within her journals and expressed a desire for her work to be a 'full sensory encounter.'¹⁶⁰ She writes of the fluid exchanges between the arts, arguing that 'Our ear isn't tutored to hear music in its own terms alone; as

¹⁵⁵ Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

we listen, tunes turn to color, chords vibrate into words.¹⁶¹ We find here an echo of the interart analogy used by Munch, pointing to the reciprocal relationship between media theorised by Elliott. Fan Jinghua argues that ‘Plath’s poetics is developed out of the interaction between the visual and the verbal.’¹⁶² She describes Plath as a ‘word artist,’ saying that her poems not only ‘configure the reader into a viewer of a painting,’ but that they also ‘create a complicated if not exquisite verbal mosaic for the eyes.’¹⁶³ She goes on to explore Plath’s ‘visual thinking’¹⁶⁴ by addressing the significance of emblems in her work and their role as ‘semi-decontextualised vehicles or units of meaning’ which ‘may function as nodal links to recreate a new context for the represented images in the poems and put a third dimension into the thematic planarity of them.’¹⁶⁵

However, Jinghua’s execution of her approach is problematic, because rather than appealing to figuration to explore the interaction of the visual and linguistic in Plath’s work she appeals to equivalency theory to express the cinematic quality of Plath’s poems. She argues, for instance, that ‘every stanza in “Elm” can be seen as a scene taken by a camera lens’ and that the poem ‘Blackberrying’ can be ‘seen as one long sequence shot taken by a panning camera moving toward the end of the lane’ whilst ‘Getting There’ can be viewed as ‘montage with inserted images by association.’¹⁶⁶ Reducing Plath to a camera lens in this way is the inverse of what is usually found in literary criticism, which usually emphasises the complexity and irreducible nature of the written word with all its nuances (as argued by Woolf). Jinghua’s problematic attempt at trying to articulate what is ‘cinematic’ about Plath’s

¹⁶¹ Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 96.

¹⁶² Fan Jinghua, ‘Sylvia Plath’s Visual Poetics’ in Bayley and Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 205.

¹⁶³ Jinghua, ‘Sylvia Plath’s Visual Poetics,’ p. 208.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221. Jinghua has misused the term ‘panning’ here, since what she describes is clearly a tracking shot.

poetry illustrates exactly what is at stake when exploring the complex interaction between media, and highlights the danger of pushing interart analogies too far. This kind of simplification fails to appreciate the complexity of the relationship between word and image and the conceptual framework in which they interact, particularly when considering the ‘infinite reflections’ possible in Elliott’s conception of interart exchange.

The question of identity and mirroring as addressed in Elliott’s looking glass analogies can be seen not only in Plath’s writing but also in her visual work, in which we find images of fragmented selves and inverted representations. In ‘Triple-face Portrait’ (c.1950-1, Fig. 2), we see an image constructed from fragmented blocks of colour, drawing attention to the puzzle-like way in which the shapes fit together to create a disrupted whole marked by opposition and boundaries.



Figure 2. Sylvia Plath, ‘Triple-Face Portrait’ c. 1950-1, tempera.

Two faces stare at each other in profile, creating a mirror type reflection of one another. These reflections feature shifting shapes, patterns and colours, and thus are not ‘faithful’ reflections, reminding us of Elliott’s theorisation of interart exchanges and the infinite possibilities for reconfiguration and interpretation created by the ever shifting refraction of light and reflection in two opposing mirrors. At the centre of the work, a third face confronts us with an unflinching pupil-less gaze. This third face is constructed from the shapes that comprise the other two faces. Vertically through its centre, triangular points of overlap push to the fore the question of fragmentation and the threat of split and division, reminiscent of light fracturing through a cracked mirror. The painting also deals with the issue of perspective and interpretation, since the viewer must choose which face to construct when viewing the work (it is not possible to see both images at the same time). It is the reflection of one face in the other due to the imaginary mirror that runs through the centre of the work that creates a new, fragmented identity.

Connors analyses the painting with attention to the form of the faces: ‘The gender of the profiled faces appears to be masculine, yet the combined portrait is a more feminine face, whose pure black eyes look forward in a suggestion of hidden depths behind what resembles a bright colored mask – a topic related to the theatre, multiple identities, and self-analysis that fascinated Plath, and a form of duplicity that many critics address in analysing her life and writing.’¹⁶⁷ Commenting on this and Plath’s self-portrait, Connors goes on to note that ‘these carefully designed works are among her final attempts to manage large-scale, full-color figures, for she would soon after transfer her challenges in color patterning and visual play to the

¹⁶⁷ Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 38.

written word.’¹⁶⁸ The suggestion that this play with colour and form, which can clearly be seen in this painting, was transferred to *another* medium, makes this work seem like a vivid illustration of Plath’s engagement with interart exchanges and the possibility of distortion and reflection. The painting engages with the notion of intricate frameworks that construct meaning and can be understood as a visual representation of Elliott’s facing mirrors, except here we see a single third face emerging from the opposition as opposed to the infinite reflections discussed by Elliott.

After exploring the conceptual terrain of medium specificity theory, this chapter has challenged Bluestone’s assumptions about film’s inability to convey interiority and has also critiqued contemporary theorists who have replicated the dichotomies he described. By pointing to the answers Bluestone himself provides for solving the problem of adapting the mental states constructed within literature, I have illustrated that the theoretical resistance Bluestone exhibits to film’s engagement with the conceptual is often contradicted by observations he makes within his own film analyses. I developed the interrogation of film’s capacity to deal with interiority further by addressing the link between the act of *seeing* and the act of *thinking*, and suggested that particular thought processes, due to their visual nature, could possibly be communicated incredibly effectively by film due to its mechanisms. I have also challenged the conception of film as realist and literal, and demonstrated that the multitrack nature of film allows for complex conceptual constructs to be communicated. An understanding of film that considers the medium capable of conveying interiority is one that is dependent on a framework allowing the linguistic and visual to interact, to reflect, and ultimately to translate into one

¹⁶⁸ Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 38.

another, since this is indeed how linguistic and visual signs interact in the mind, without any medium being in subordination to the other. I would suggest that the framework Elliott provides is a convincing model for this interaction. By referring to the work of Plath, I have engaged with the issue of communicating interiority through different media with an appreciation of their identity in relation to one another. I would argue that it is this interaction that is essential to appreciating the capability of the visual to convey abstract mental states.

Chapter Two
The Possibilities of the Line:
An Investigation into the Language of Comics

After looking specifically at the visual artwork of Edvard Munch and Sylvia Plath in the previous chapter, I will now explore another medium that communicates the conceptual visually: the graphic novel. This art form has been at the centre of the word/image war that has dominated medium specificity theory due to its operation on both ‘the visual and verbal channels,’ and utilises the same effects Munch aimed for in his *Frieze of Life*.¹ This dual channelling makes it an interesting medium regarding the communication of disordered mental states. Despite being historically discounted by most academics and art theorists as ‘low art’ unworthy of serious scholarly attention,² the medium has continued to thrive and develop into one that fully embraces the possibilities open to it. As argued by Maurice Horn, ‘it is the fate of all new art forms to be greeted with derision,’³ and this acknowledgement has placed the medium in a long tradition of art forms that are initially met with suspicion and hostility but go on to gain validity as objects of study within the academic sphere.⁴

Julia Round and Chris Murray, editors of the emerging journal *Studies in Comics*, note how ‘comic scholars have sometimes struggled to see themselves as part of a viable academic community, and have acted as smugglers, fitting in comics where they could, a masquerade of secret identities and hidden treasures.’⁵ Yet within the last two decades the form has been approached with renewed academic

¹ A. D. Lewis, ‘The Shape of Comic Book Reading,’ *Studies in Comics* 1: 1, (2010), p. 71.

² John A. Lent, ‘The Winding, Pot-holed Road of Comic Art Scholarship,’ *Studies in Comics* 1: 1, (2010), p. 10.

³ Maurice Horn, *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*, (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), p. 62, quoted in Lent, ‘The winding, pot-holed road of comic art scholarship,’ p. 25.

⁴ ‘Reacting to the frequently asked question why, as an English professor, he reads and writes about comics, M. Thomas Inge said there is no easy answer to “those who automatically assume a cultural inferiority inherent in comic art.” (Inge 2003: 21).’ Lent (p. 11).

⁵ Chris Murray and Julia Round, ‘Editorial,’ *Studies in Comics*, 1: 1, p. 4.

zeal, and has received much appreciation for its inherent complexity in not only its visual form but also the cognitive processes that allow us to understand its specific language. This exploration of the medium has revealed a weakness in the framework of terminology available to academics. Murray and Round argue that comic scholars ‘lack the vocabulary to describe its specific workings, and have often fallen back on the language of other visual or literary arts. By encouraging interdisciplinary readings of comics from as wide a range of critical perspectives as possible we hope to expand the terminology and critical skills available to both the student and the casual reader of comics, and build upon scholarship from all disciplines in the hope that this debate might allow a more precise lexis to emerge.’⁶

This desire for a ‘precise lexis’ is an understandable and valid one, but the way in which Murray seeks to fulfil this desire is problematic. It seems somewhat bizarre to expect new terms specific to a given medium to emerge by borrowing extensively from the language used to discuss other media. Arguably the more fruitful approach evident here is the reference to interdisciplinary readings, because these will necessarily utilise interart analogies. Interart analogies are extremely useful for articulating specificity because they highlight the similarities *as well as* the differences between media, and by doing so often provide revealing insights into the mechanisms at play within the form. Whilst a reliance on the terminology used to discuss other media can be perceived as a weakness in comics scholarship, it acts as a symbolic reminder of the interesting tension that exists when the characteristics (and thus possibilities) of differing media overlap.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the way in which Kamilla Elliott’s work focuses on the processes that unravel the interplay between visual and verbal

⁶ Murray and Round, ‘Editorial,’ *Studies in Comics*, 1: 1, p. 4.

language systems. This chapter will explore this idea further by interrogating the ideas presented by Scott McCloud in his seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and arguing that the medium McCloud praises for its unique ‘hidden power’⁷ is indeed capable of communicating subjectivity in a way that will allow us to understand better the role of the visual in communicating the conceptual. I will analyse the form and illustrate key points with examples from comic books that engage with specific mental illnesses, focusing primarily on Nate Powell’s graphic novel *Swallow Me Whole*, which features schizophrenia and OCD.⁸

I will also undertake an analysis of selected images from Bobby Baker’s *Diary Drawings*, a series of works in which the artist attempts to communicate her experience of clinical depression, borderline personality disorder,⁹ and psychosis through a series of daily drawings. In order to investigate the interconnection of the possibilities of the medium with the capabilities of film, I will then undertake an in-depth analysis of the rotoscoped film *A Scanner Darkly*, based on the Philip K. Dick novel of the same name, which deals with fragmented identity and the hallucinations caused by drug addiction, and draws on the aesthetic devices of the comic book form to communicate disordered subjectivity.

⁷ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (USA: HarperPerennial edition, 1994), p. 3.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that these conditions were not the focus of the novel, instead they provided a framework for the events that take place. Nate Powell writes: ‘I never intended *Swallow Me Whole* to be centered around the characters’ mental disorders ... As certain plot elements emerged during the formal writing process, the stepsiblings’ specific conditions seemed to provide a fairly natural framework for such bizarre goings-on ... In my professional life, I had a lot of experience with observation, medication, behavioural supports, and treatment plans for a variety of disorders. This professional interest overlaps with my personal interest in the neuropathology and behavioural studies of disorders, so I’ve read up a good amount on the subject. Still, most knowledge comes from personal interaction. None of my readings were explicitly for *Swallow Me Whole*; I was very focused on not exploiting the character’s disorders as plot devices, and wanted to avoid such fine-toothed dissection of the manifestation of their disorders.’ From my interview with Nate Powell via email, 15th July 2010.

⁹ Borderline Personality Disorder is a disputed and controversial diagnosis, and many psychologists now deem it an unacceptable term. However, this is the diagnosis Bobby Baker attributes to herself, and this is thus the term I will use throughout this essay when referring to the syndromes she experiences.

It is important to note that what this chapter does *not* seek to do is present a new theory (or challenge existing ones) on how the comic book form works. Rather, it aims to use frameworks of understanding that are already in place to investigate how the medium functions when communicating subjectivity and dealing with disordered mental states. From Binky Brown's experience of obsessive compulsive disorder in Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) to Ruth's delusions in *Swallow Me Whole* (2008), the medium of comics has been used to communicate the most complex of subjectivities, those affected by mental illness, and this chapter seeks to understand how this challenge has been undertaken.

In Chapter Five of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud asks the question 'Can emotions be made visible?' and explores this possibility by illustrating the types of line pattern we associate with particular emotions (Figs. 1 and 2).

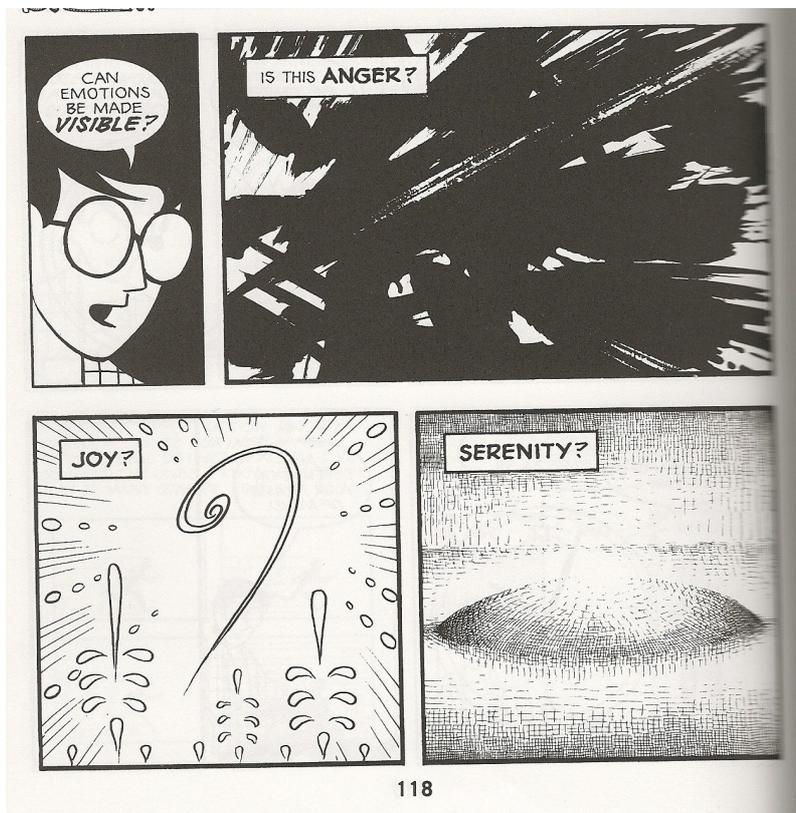


Figure 1. Extract from Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (USA: Harper Perennial edition, 1994), p. 118.

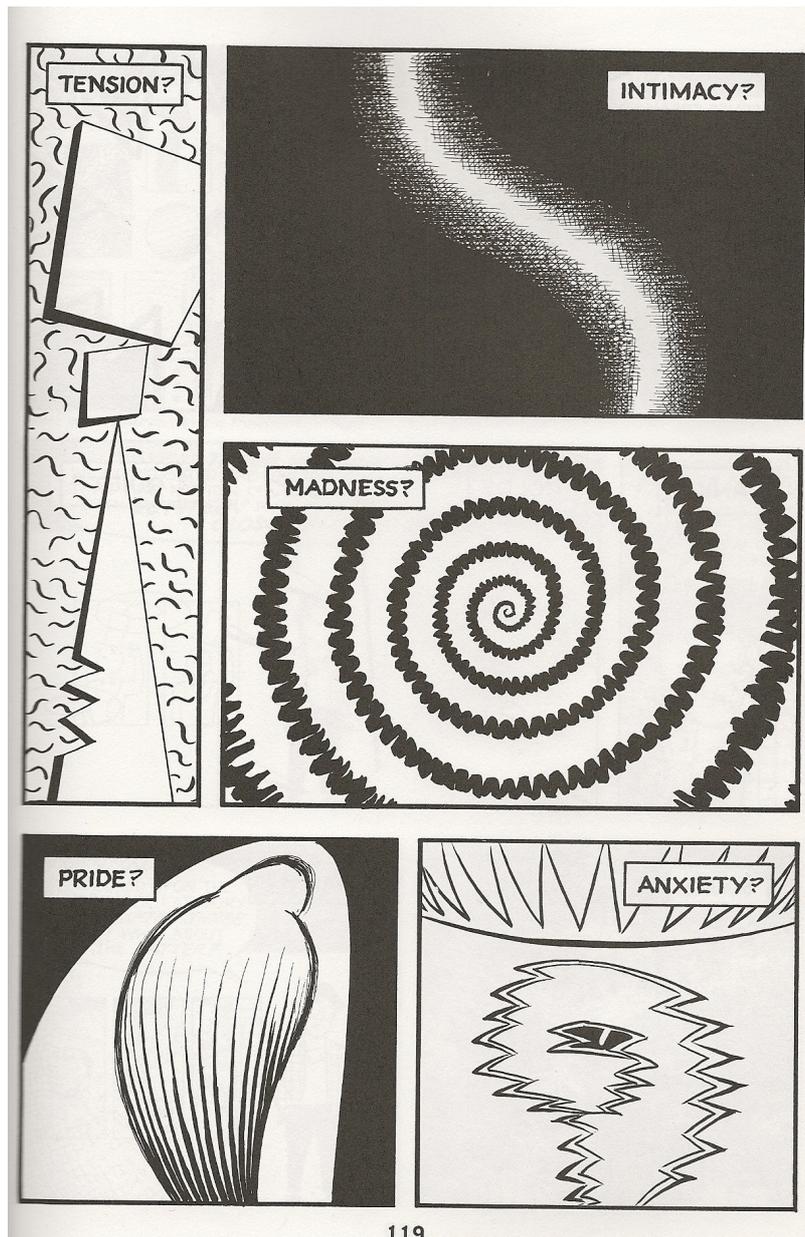


Figure 2. Extract from Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 119.

McCloud is persuasive in arguing that our conceptualisation of certain emotions does indeed tie them to specific visual patterns and colours. Although McCloud's representations of the selected emotions are apparently simplistic, this 'obviousness' is in itself suggestive of an established relationship between certain visual, external forms and abstract, immeasurable emotional states. It is no surprise, for instance, to find anxiety being represented by jagged lines and an imposing shape pressing down

on the object in the centre of the panel, or to find madness being represented by the unrelenting spiral we associate with hypnosis. Joy also features a spiral shape, and it is here we can appreciate the subtlety of the drawn line when communicating something so inherently abstract. Unlike the defined spiral that perfectly spins inwards when representing madness, the spiral configuration that we notice in joy is less precise and constricted in its expression. It is captured within the page as opposed to leading out of it, and is surrounded by blank white space, expressing freedom and lightness. The oval shapes and lines that blast out from the freewheeling twirl mimic a firework, as do the fountain like tear patterns rising from the bottom of the panel, which propel the spiral shape upwards, giving it a buoyant feeling. It is by articulating the process of reading this image that we can appreciate the work that goes into understanding it. Throughout the image a series of metaphors and wordplays operate to give the composition a decidedly anti-gravitational feel. The visual mimicking of a fountain brings connotations of exuberance and plenty, and the lines that shoot out of it represent not only visual light, with its associations of freedom, opportunity and revelation, but the word 'light' in itself brings a suggestion of weightlessness. An analysis of how we learn to decipher these deceptively complex forms reveals that there is a complex relationship between the form and the abstract concept it conveys.

In addition to the contents of the image, Will Eisner recognises what he calls 'the emotional function of the frame,'¹⁰ arguing that the frame can 'make an effort to generate the reader's own reaction to the action and thus heighten emotional involvement in the narrative.'¹¹ He gives one example in which 'the rippled edges of the panel and its oblong shape intends uncertainty and impending danger. It is

¹⁰ Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, (New York; London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008. Revised ed. of: *Comics and Sequential Art*, 1985), p. 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

directed at the reader's sense of "feel."¹² Eisner describes another example in which 'the rocking of the train is meant to be "felt" by the reader. Tilting of panels and lettering seeks to create a subliminal jarring effect.'¹³ It is the control of reader involvement in the narrative that holds interest for my project, particularly the utilisation of panel edges across the text as a way of embedding meaning or communicating something abstract. Eisner argues that 'the panel border itself can be used as part of the non-verbal "language" of sequential art,'¹⁴ and this potential is demonstrated throughout *Swallow Me Whole*. Within this work, borders form part of a signifying framework that communicates mental states that are constantly in flux.

These abstract visual motifs are evident throughout Nate Powell's *Swallow Me Whole*, particularly when Ruth, the novel's main character, is experiencing intense introspection. On one page, swirling, waving lines spiral in from the edge of the page like tentacles trying to envelop her (Fig. 3). At first we see the swirls of steam coming out of the soup in front of her, but they develop into something more abstract as they lose their context and then actually begin to enter from the edge of the page (on level with the line 'the beasts come to me, that is'). In this layout, they are not merely intruding on a panel but on the page itself, giving them a sinister quality whilst communicating Ruth's inability to control the intense mental intrusions she experiences. The swirls are not bound by the internal structure of the page, and seem to be sourced from something we cannot see, emerging from a darkness symbolic of Ruth's claustrophobic delusions and creating a drifting, ungrounded quality. The sketchy frames draw us into her introspection, creating an atmosphere of unease and creating a blur between reality and subjective experience. We are aware of the black that surrounds these panels, focusing us not only on the

¹² Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

swirls that Ruth sees but also on the encroaching nature of the dark thoughts that spiral in from the unknown and undrawn. The wider panel at the bottom of the page has the effect of dragging the eye down and ‘weighting’ the page, pulling Ruth and the reader back to earth and the reality of Ruth’s surroundings.

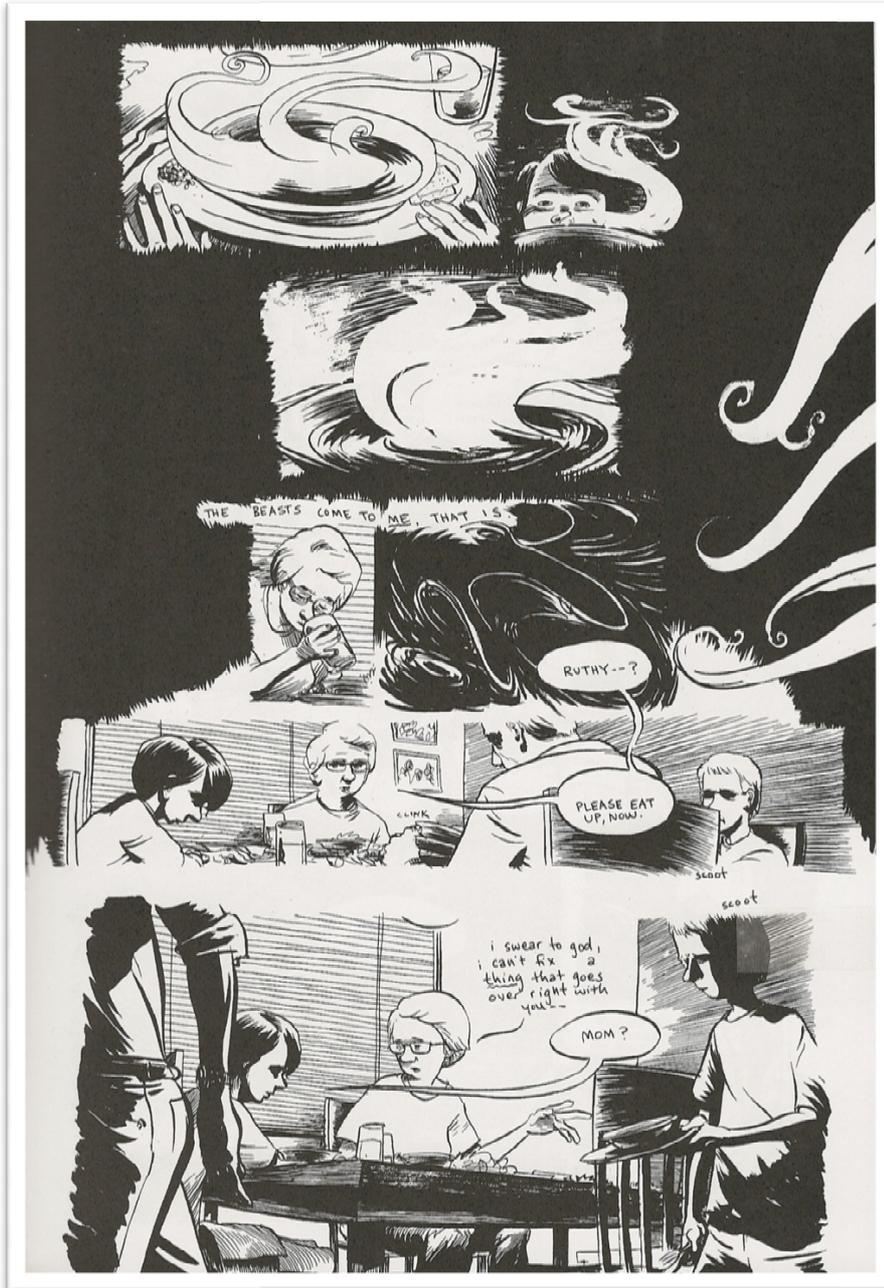


Figure 3. Extract from Nate Powell, *Swallow Me Whole*, (Top Shelf Productions, 2008).

When asked about this particular motif and the drift from the concrete to the abstract that the visual allows for, Nate Powell commented that:

The reader inherently trusts that expressionistic forms, if not part of the text/lettering or motion/sound effects, are more or less physically manifest in the panel. That these two realms seem to have no such clear distinction in *Swallow Me Whole* allows the reader (hopefully) to take all linework at face value, to see it simultaneously as formal application, expressionistic information, and representational form.¹⁵

It is clear here that the fluidity possible in the medium can result in a levelling effect and the creation of a new framework of meaning across the text, thus making it more difficult for the reader to discern subjective experience from reality. This imbeds an ambiguity in the text that allows for it to deal with the conceptual complexity of mental states. Throughout *Swallow Me Whole*, we struggle to distinguish between reality and Ruth's distorted perception, and are thus intimately engaged with her thought processes and her attempts to make sense of her experience.

McCloud comments on the 'unseen world' that makes itself visible in the work of Munch and Van Gogh, which he describes as 'frighteningly subjective,'¹⁶ and the way in which line, colour and shape were used by Kandinsky 'to suggest the inner state of the artist and to provoke the five senses.'¹⁷ He argues that in seeking to 'unite the senses' artists were in fact seeking to 'unite the different artforms which appealed to those different senses.'¹⁸ This 'synaesthesia,' which I referred to in the work of Plath, is something interesting in both comics and film because of the rupture that can be created when messages are conflicting or disordered. A synaesthetic fragmentation is difficult to create in the written word because, despite the fact that it engages the senses imaginatively, it cannot operate on conflicting channels simultaneously.

¹⁵ Interview with Nate Powell.

¹⁶ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

McCloud asks whether ‘all lines carry with them an expressive potential’¹⁹ and goes on to discuss the evolution of a pictorial language in comics.²⁰ Commenting on the use of lines to imply smell, for example, or the comic book depiction of flies which ‘have over the years been approaching the abstract status of linguistic symbols,’²¹ McCloud states that ‘whenever an artist invents a new way to represent the invisible, there is always a chance that it will be picked up by other artists.’²² The development of language in the medium of comics provides an excellent way to observe the fine line (both metaphorical and literal) between a depiction of some sort of observable reality and an expression of something more abstract. McCloud argues that ‘in dealing with the face itself, the line between the visible and invisible world becomes even less clear,’ using the example of sweat beads, which when on the face appear to be a reference to the character sweating, but when drawn around the face communicate an internal emotional state, such as extreme anxiety or exasperation.²³ McCloud observes that ‘when such images begin to drift out of their visual context, they drift into the invisible world of the symbol.’²⁴ It is interesting that he deems the symbol to be operating in the world of the invisible, necessarily making the symbolic invisible. This is a useful model for interrogating how the symbolic could potentially unlock the door to the invisible experience of interiority (as distinct from its expression). The comic book form offers the opportunity to observe the delicate relationship between the literal and the abstract. It could be that a utilisation of this ‘drift’ into the conceptual has the

¹⁹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 124.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

potential to provide insight into how abstract mind states could be communicated visually.

Appreciating that ‘this visual vocabulary has an unlimited potential for growth,’²⁵ McCloud goes on to address the role of background in communicating inner states. He argues that ‘even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our “reading” of characters’ inner states.’²⁶ This technique echoes the way in which Munch attempted to communicate his subjective view of reality in his *The Scream* painting. The distinction is, however, that in the context McCloud discusses it background is not so much being used to illustrate how the *character* sees the external reality, but is rather an *externalisation* of an *interior* mental landscape. This is perhaps more representative of a mood or atmosphere as opposed to a communication of a specific interiority or disordered thought processes. This technique is far from specific to visual media, as literature does very similar things with its use of pathetic fallacy.

There remains the fact that this communication needs to be interpreted and understood by the reader. Graphic novels like Powell’s *Swallow Me Whole* can often be intentionally complicated to navigate. McCloud discusses our engagement with this type of work in terms of the artist’s control of our participation:

Expressionism and synaesthetics are distortive by their nature. If strong enough, their effects can obscure their subjects. But a lack of clarity can also foster greater participation by the reader and a sense of involvement which many artists and writers prefer.²⁷

The page discussed previously in *Swallow Me Whole*, for instance, could be considered difficult to navigate, because at this point in the story the reader is

²⁵ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 132.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

unaware of the nature of Ruth's mental processes and may find the sudden meandering into her subjectivity confusing. Ruth's odd internal speech (unmarked by a speech bubble or enclosure) sits aside seemingly bizarre close-ups of swirls of steam coming out of soup, eventually becoming just a square of black punctuated by white swirling line gestures. The layout and style of the page force us to question whether these words belong in the realm of the real or the conceptual, and this question lingers throughout the book requiring us constantly to decipher the visual language that is constructed as the story develops. The ambiguity we encounter here, along with the confusing coupling of Ruth's words with the swirls and mundane image of her mum drinking water, is interrupted by a speech bubble calling her out of her daydreaming. These particular words are anchored to the next speech bubble which originates from an apparently objective image of the family. They function not to explain or clarify, but rather to bring an abrupt end to the intense interiority of Ruth. The design of this page also gives a sense of the bottom image dragging the page down, again visually representing that Ruth's delusions are ungrounded mental meanderings in contrast to the more solid reality we encounter in the final image. This page illustrates the tension that can be created between an observed external reality and an interior subjective mental state through visual structures.

Treatment of the time and the rhythm of the panels is also crucial. Eisner writes that 'Albert Einstein in his special theory of relativity states that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer. In essence the panel (or box) makes that postulate a reality for the comic book reader.'²⁸ He goes on to say that panelling 'effectively "tells" time ... The imposition of the imagery within the frame

²⁸ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 26.

of the panels acts as the catalyst.²⁹ Since the panel at the dinner table features speech, this establishes a time span for that panel and grounds the scene, completely jarring with the lingering ambiguity of the previous panels that offer few indications of the length of time passing. This shift between external ‘normality’ and Ruth’s intense introspection highlights the oddity of her thought life. Page structure and punctuation is utilised to guide us in and out of this subjectivity throughout the book. The malleability of time in the comic book medium is a huge asset when dealing with something as abstract as mental states, since it offers the opportunity to create unique engagement with subjective experience though the morphing of time and reality, also creating the opportunity for rupture and fragmentation.

Nate Powell comments on his use of negative space in *Swallow Me Whole* as a way to weave in and out of different spaces, times, and mental states throughout the novel:

There’s a structural (and thus narrative) value to exploiting all that negative space. My choice of white/black or line/vignette for each panel, gutter, margin, and background all changes according to the expository needs of the scene (is it past or present? day or night? internal or external narrative?). When done effectively, this system isn’t totally obvious, and it weaves right into the book as a whole, helping to round out the narrative and give a sense of environmental consistency. Nothing’s annoying like a book or movie that makes such environmental shifts so obvious (the worst of these transitions are for flashbacks and psychedelic/dream/delusional states) ... negative space is extremely important in the control of time for the reader. Focusing on the negative space as a positive entity allows one, to use musical terms, to carve out deliberate extra “beats” and syncopation.³⁰

It is clear that every element of the page features in the unique framework of the language of comics, and even words do not remain inactive in their engagement with the symbolic outside of their own language system. There are, of course, ‘variations in balloon shape,’ and as McCloud notes, ‘inside those balloons, symbols are

²⁹ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 26.

³⁰ Interview with Nate Powell via email (15th July 2010).

constantly being appropriated or even invented to cover the non-verbal.³¹ Not only this, but ‘variations of lettering styles ... speak of an ongoing struggle to capture the very essence of sound,’³² illustrating that words in the comics medium operate within different visual systems, and have access to these two visual sign systems simultaneously. Eisner argues that ‘the visual treatment of words as graphic art is part of the vocabulary ... In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge and the implication of sound.’³³ McCloud writes: ‘Now, if pictures can, through their rendering represent invisible concerns such as emotions and the other senses, then the distinction between pictures and other types of icons like language which *specialize* in the invisible may seem a bit blurry. In fact, what we're seeing in the living lines of these pictures is the primordial stuff from which a formalized language can evolve.’³⁴

Despite all of this emphasis on the power of the visual and the acknowledgement that words on the written page are also pictorial symbols, McCloud seems to create a clear distinction between the word and image. Note that he has argued that language ‘specialises’ in the invisible (which McCloud associates with the symbolic), which is a statement that implies some sort of hierarchy between word and image that designates each with certain strengths. It is here that McCloud seems to fall back into the same binary that we engaged with in the previous chapter.

He writes that:

Of course words themselves, more than all the other visual symbols, have the power to completely describe the invisible realm of the senses and emotions ... Pictures can induce strong feelings in the reader, but they can also lack the specificity of words. Words, on the other hand, offer that specificity, but can lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, relying instead on a gradual cumulative effect.³⁵

³¹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 134.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, p. 127.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Once again the image is being categorised as affecting the senses as opposed to the mind. Describing pictures as ‘lacking specificity’ grossly underestimates them, particularly when considering Munch's *The Scream* which seems very specific indeed. Of course, there is always space for interpretation, but this is also true of words. Arguing that words offer the specificity that pictures lack seems to embed them with an authoritative final say on meaning, implying that there is no room for interpretation or for the individual to respond with their own connotations. This stands in stark opposition to the ‘thousand meanings’ that Virginia Woolf describes in her defence of the nuance of the written word. Here, it is the picture that cannot be pinned down, as opposed to the word. And yet, what could be presented as complexity is undermined by McCloud’s insistence on ‘strong feelings’ and ‘emotional charge.’ He seems to recognise the capacity of the visual to communicate the conceptual, but then downgrades it in this last section by returning to the old characterisation of image as immediate, obvious, instantly accessible, and appealing to the senses over the intellect.

There is also a problem with McCloud’s model of the way in which images, when becoming symbols, move over into the world of the invisible, because he then compares this to written language. The implication that the word is the finished abstraction (that the written word is somehow ‘abstraction at its purest’) is hugely problematic for our discussion of the possibilities of the visual because it reinforces the hierarchy of the written word as uniquely positioned for dealing with the conceptual. However, the most positive aspect of McCloud’s depiction of this ‘drift’ into the symbolic is the *power* in that movement. That this drift can be depicted and that tension exists in that depiction implies a force to the visual that can be utilised in a specific way to communicate extremely complex abstract concepts.

Will Eisner also discusses the limitations of the medium, arguing that these limitations reside in the fact that images are *too* specific, placing his argument in opposition to McCloud's categorisation of the image as general and targeting the senses. Like Woolf, Eisner deems the image as specific and the most obvious manifestation of the conceptual. He writes:

In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination. In comics the imagination is done for the reader. An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are mixed, the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages.³⁶

Here we have an oversimplification of both word and image. The idea that the image 'brooks little or no further interpretation' clashes with an entire history of art criticism and theory, and arguably both image and word can be equally complex and demand an equal level of interpretation from the reader. The idea that words can become 'welded to the image' depicts the image as a ball and chain tied to the written word's ankle, shackling its unlimited imaginative potential with an insistence on concrete obviousness. Eisner reinforces this conceptualisation of the image:

Obviously sequential art is not without limitations. An image, wordlessly depicting a gesture or a scene, can, for example, convey depths and a certain amount of emotion. But as we observed earlier in the discussion on writing, images are specific, so they obviate interpretation. An assemblage of art that portrays life allows little input of an imaginative nature from the reader ... There is a kind of privacy that the reader of a traditional prose work enjoys in the process of translating a descriptive passage into a visual image in the mind. This is a very personal thing and permits an involvement far more participatory than the voyeurism of examining a picture.³⁷

It is perhaps particularly disappointing to find the same dichotomy I have addressed in previous chapters appearing in the theory of a world renowned graphic novelist, as well as the characterisation of the mode of comic book reading being voyeuristic as

³⁶ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 127.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

opposed to participatory engagement. When we interpret images we draw on an incomprehensively extensive knowledge of signs, symbols and language patterns, so that when we look at an image we bring everything we know to it to construct an interpretation. Seemingly shattered and unrelated associations become part of the shifting framework and toolbox that we use to understand and respond to what is before us. In the analysis of McCloud's depiction of 'joy,' for instance, we witnessed the myriad connotations and word/image interplays that actively shape the process of reading the image. Even proverbial sayings such as 'jumping for joy' impact our decoding of the image with great force, interacting with the notion of celebration, exuberance and buoyancy.

Despite their apparently completely opposing arguments, it seems that both Eisner and McCloud are actually trying to make the same point but are approaching the problem from different angles. It is clear that they both agree that the image can create an emotional response. Their seeming opposition could be in their understanding of the word 'specific,' or due to a focus on different capacities of each medium. For instance, *The Scream* painting communicates a specific emotion, but its interpretation is varied and nuanced. It is not 'general.' In fact, it is terrifyingly striking and seemingly communicative of something very precise and very real, and yet this specificity does not remove any imaginative or interpretative power from the viewer. It seems to be a given that specificity negates the need for engagement/involvement/interpretation of a text, and it is here that McCloud and Eisner both fail to grasp the nuance of both the word and the image. In addition to this, the focus on immediacy undermines the complexity of the processes that allow us to decipher and engage with the comic book form. McCloud fully appreciates this

complexity, which is why perhaps it is surprising to find the familiar dichotomy surfacing in his work.

The complexity of the form suggests why it is so well positioned to deal with disordered subjects. Despite being a purely visual medium, it is one that operates on two channels, the visual and the linguistic. As A. D. Lewis notes, there is the potential to ‘create an intentional schism between the two narratives; that is, the visual and verbal narratives may actually be spinning different yarns.’³⁸ Although technologically the medium is not multitrack in the same way that film is, the communication of disorder and conflict can be communicated in a specific way that defines it from the written word. This is because of the way in which panels are configured on a page, providing a unique way to navigate time and space, and the interaction between two sign systems (visual and linguistic) that allow for a disunity to be constructed in a way specific to the medium. Unlike film, in which the viewer can see only the current moment or frame and cannot access the past or future simultaneously, the way in which the eye scans the comic book page offers the opportunity to create unity or conflict in a way that the written word or the film cannot. What is interesting about the medium is the way in which it can carry information over from panel to panel, as McCloud illustrates in his analysis of ‘scene setting,’ in which fragments of a scene, including details about sound, are constructed on the page to give an overall impression.³⁹

Lefèvre argues that the intrinsic importance of panels in comic book reading designates it as ‘a more spatial medium than film,’ noting that ‘the drawing of the panels and the combination of the panels on a page cannot be that easily separated:

³⁸ Lewis, ‘The shape of comic book reading,’ p. 71.

³⁹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, pp. 77-81.

choices in one domain have consequences in the other domain.’⁴⁰ This interwoven quality is what makes the medium fascinating in terms of the representation of subjectivity. Lefèvre recognises the importance of the navigation of the page, and that the complexity of ‘the interplay of the various panels (their relative dimensions and their location) is a constitutive aspect of the comics medium.’⁴¹ He does refer to the possibility of split frames or ‘multiple-frame imagery’ in film, but argues that this ‘breaks the usual cinematographic illusion.’⁴² This, of course, can be a positive thing, as the reflexivity of the medium allows for a communication of something more complex. (It is a very limited conception of film that holds illusion as the medium’s primary aim.) He goes on to say that ‘by and large normal moving images will give a greater impression of realism. A viewer of a still image will always be reminded of the fragmented and frozen time.’⁴³ This could of course be true, but the effect of this can always be utilised or negotiated by the artist. Panels that encourage lingering can even seem to be very ‘full of time’ and encourage us to build mentally a sense of what is being communicated. It all depends on the conceptualisation of the medium, and whether images are considered concrete, finite and obvious, or capable of inherent complexity in the visual structure of the page and able to facilitate the construction of something more abstract through the reading they require to be understood.

Throughout his book, Eisner continually reinforces the crucial importance of successfully handling the communication of a narrative through panelling. Since rhythm is set by panels, here the medium has the opportunity to create fragmentation

⁴⁰ Lefèvre, ‘Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,’ p. 6. Paul Atkinson also explores the importance of the page structure, arguing that ‘the compositional whole of the page ... serves as a formal cause that coordinates all the utterances that are contained within it.’ Paul Atkinson, ‘The graphic novel as metafiction,’ *Studies in Comics* 1: 1, (2010), p. 112.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

if there is disunity or rupture. It is the space of the gutter which orchestrates this unique tension. Eisner writes extensively about how to set a ‘believable “time rhythm”’ by using key actions as a marker (such as ‘a dripping faucet, striking a match, brushing teeth and the time it takes to negotiate a staircase.’)⁴⁴ Here we can see the opportunity to disrupt continuity and communicate a disordered experience if these markers are manipulated. Eisner goes on to note that ‘the number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels.’⁴⁵ The shape of the panels are also explored (longer panels lengthening time, etc.), and the utilisation of the two frames: the page and the panels within it. As Eisner argues, ‘They are the controlling devices in sequential art.’⁴⁶

Paul Atkinson describes how the ability to navigate the page in this way means that that ‘there is a sense in which the past, present and future coexist.’⁴⁷ Rather than seeing this as an attribute, he compares this to the way in which the reader experiences the written word and says that: ‘In a novel, the text remains mute until it is read and this allows metafictional texts to continually dumbfound the reader with sudden shifts in mode or context – like following a meandering melody line in a jazz piece, where each note has the capacity to begin a new riff.’⁴⁸ This seems to undervalue the way in which the graphic novel *also* unravels and builds concepts for its reader, particularly throughout a text as complex as *Swallow Me Whole*, which definitely demonstrates ‘sudden shifts’ and has the ability to

⁴⁴ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁷ Paul Atkinson, ‘The graphic novel as metafiction,’ *Studies in Comics* 1: 1, (2010), p. 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

‘dumbfound.’⁴⁹ Douglas Wolk of the *New York Times* describes how ‘Powell’s flowing, impressionistic artwork, with its ravenous expanses of negative space, swirls the reader’s perspective through his characters’ perceptions and back out again.’⁵⁰

The complexity of the comic book medium rests in its dual channelling and also the way in which systems of meaning are built up across a text, and this interplay means that each graphic decision has the ability to strike a new ‘note’ in the riff Atkinson attributes only to the written word. The accumulative effect of panels can be appreciated in Bobby Baker’s *Diary Drawings*.

After engaging with the capabilities of the medium theoretically, I will now undertake specific textual analysis on a sequence in *Swallow Me Whole* which guides us through the subjectivity of Ruth's character (Figs. 4 and 5). Breaking down the image sequence provides greater insight into how the conceptual is communicated visually, and demonstrates how complex disordered mental experiences are capable of being translated and constructed on the page. The layout of the page is crucial to the communication of Ruth’s thought processes as she explains her experience to her step-brother Perry, offering a unique way to drift in and out of experiences of time, space, consciousness, reality, memory and delusion. Powell writes that:

One’s options are relatively limited with black-and-white line art, so the application of line and formal choices in each page’s structure and sequence were essential for establishing the story’s ambiguity. I wanted to focus heavily on the subjective validity of each character’s experiences, and was primarily interested in conveying sights and sounds as they experienced them, instead of conveying information to the reader.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Reviews of the book consistently praise the artistic rendering of complex abstract states and describe the immersive quality of the work and its disorientating effect.

⁵⁰ Douglas Wolk, *New York Times*, review of *Swallow me Whole*, December 5th, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/books/review/Wolk-t.html>, <accessed June 2010>

⁵¹ Interview with Nate Powell.

Rather than the secure lines of previous panels, which convey an objective sense of reality and secure the contents into a specific moment in time, the panel edges here are either jagged or non-existent, creating a sense of intensity and flow between panels because they are not divided from each other or decidedly demarcated from the page itself. In this sequence, Ruth contemplates the triviality of her possible relationship with one of the boys in the group, and muses on the consequences of this until she engages with a general worldview that is dominated by her compromised mental state. The panels flit between her subjectivity and the actuality of the boys' presence beside her in the park.

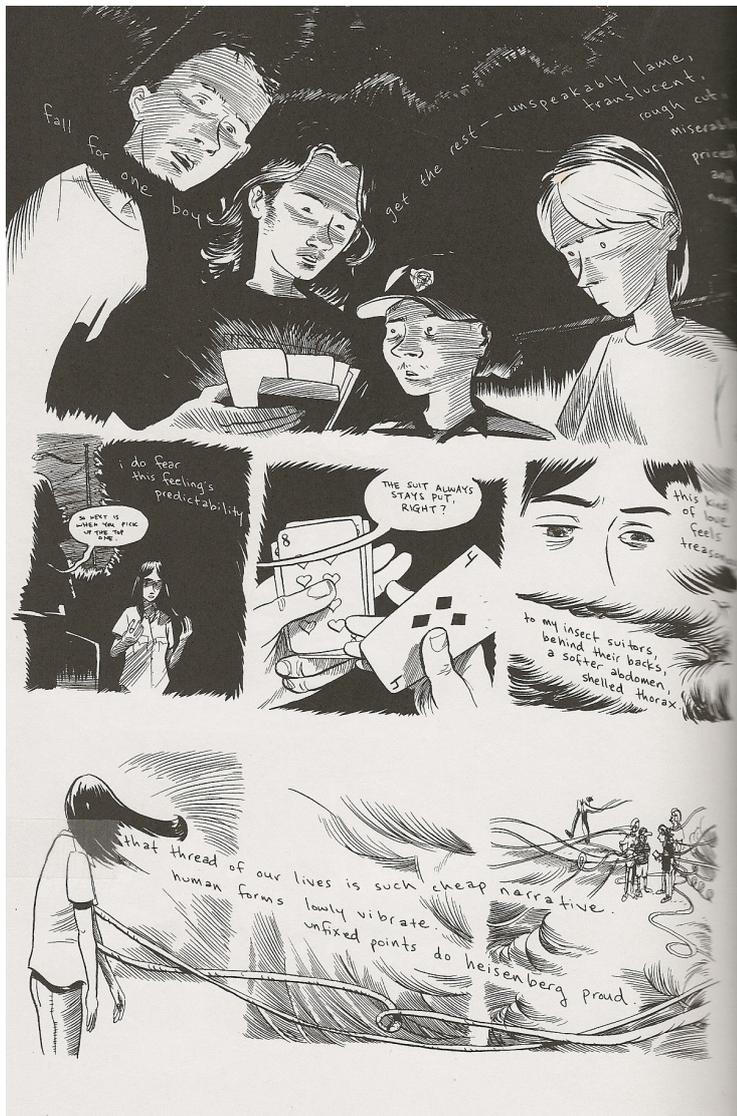


Figure 4. Extract from Nate Powell, *Swallow Me Whole*.

Looking at her hands, Ruth describes the way in which ‘I do fear this feeling's predictability,’ and the next panel moves to a close up of the cards that a friend is holding as he describes a trick to the group. This reminds us of the external reality of Ruth's physical situation, and yet we are unable to stay grounded in this as the next panel moves into Ruth's engrossing assessment of the world. The cards bring up associations with chance and trickery, and also the idea of boundaries and set values, as we are told that ‘the suit always stays put’ and the stable rectangle of the card presents us with what we would expect standard comic book panelling to look like. Here, however, the edges of the panels are frayed as opposed to being sharply delineated, as if Powell is drawing our attention to the fraying and unravelling nature of the image thus communicating Ruth's sense of the instability and the shifting nature of the world around her.

As Ruth describes how ‘this kind of love feels treasonous to my insect suitors,’ the panel shows her downward looking eyes destabilised by the lack of a surrounding outline of a face, moving towards a more abstract and dislocated sense of identity. Her words are not contained in speech bubbles but rather seem to float over the panel, symbolising their place in the realm of the conceptual and abstract and also creating a more ambiguous sense of time passing. In the wide panel that follows, two swirling tubes flow from Ruth's chest and abdomen, weaving across the page, as do the words that mimic their visual appearance, thus binding them with her delusions. Ruth describes how ‘That thread of our lives is such cheap narrative. Human forms lowly vibrate. Unfixed points do heisenberg proud,’ and her face (and thus identity) is obscured by her hair, which seems to swirl to the right, pulled by the force of her swirling delusions which weave in and out of the panels and interlink organically with the frayed edges of each panel. She is separated from her friends by

a centre panel that shows swirling lines, marking her mental division from her material surroundings and those that inhabit them.

The final panel shows these lines swirling from her friends also, illustrating how she views the whole world as operating under these forces and implying a forceful movement and flow between the external world and her subjective state. Her words are placed across the three panels, forcing us to appreciate her removal from her friends from the start, and constructing her worldview visually.

The top panel of the next page is a wide panel that powerfully represents the psychosis Ruth is experiencing.



Figure 5. Extract from Nate Powell, *Swallow Me Whole*.

Her inner monologue reads: 'I see greatest order for what it is - I submit, I stain, admit. Blood vessels anchor tree roots. Lungs fill with soil and fog,' and Powell renders this relationship to reality visually, exposing Ruth's insides as she acknowledges her decaying materiality. Her hands are large and morphed, and the perspective of herself is skewed, reinforcing the detached way in which she relates to herself and the complete dominance of her mental framework on her perspective. The roundabout in the background spins furiously, an instantly recognisable metaphor for an all encompassing and out of control interiority and an external manifestation of her absorbed mental state and its seemingly self-fuelling nature.

Her absorbing delusions are suddenly undercut by a shot of the legs and feet of those in the park, as she reports 'we all come constructed like so, loosely screwed.' Her friends are at the bottom of the next panel, apparently completely unaware of the seemingly mystical revelations she is experiencing. Above her head, swirling lines carry Ruth's sentences upwards to the sky in a gathering storm-like motif that succinctly captures their abstract and fleeting character whilst creating the apprehensive atmosphere before a storm breaks. Throughout this sequence there is often a lack of context to the images, implying a distorted relationship to reality and creating a disordered or confused navigation through her musings. The page structurally reflects the way in which Ruth pieces together information about her surroundings and herself. The swirling motif cloaks over the disjointed nature of the images and seems to hold them together, making the images seem shifting and yet intimately connected. Rather than the structure of the page being rigidly geometric, there is a flowing, organic feel to it that provides an alternative way of navigating the page and reflecting the way in which Ruth maps the world she encounters, in all its oddity.

When dealing with the communication of subjectivity, particularly disordered subjectivity like that found in *Swallow Me Whole*, the issue of the narrator comes to the fore. Atkinson writes that, in the novel, ‘there is no point at which the reader can stand outside this voice while reading the text. In the graphic novel, however, another container always frames the voice: that of the panel and page, which are visible borders limiting both the image and text.’⁵² These borders are described as limiting, but I would argue that instead they provide numerous possibilities for abstract communication. It is also somewhat simplistic to presume that a reader cannot stand outside the voice of the narrator when reading a novel, as I have argued in the previous chapter. The reader always maintains the independent ability to interpret and respond to what a text presents. I would argue that the possibility for collision regarding narration is actually greater in the comic book medium because there is the possibility for many voices to speak through different channels, as opposed to the single channel offered through the written word.

I will now look at a more specific example of the image being used to convey interiority in the work of performance artist Bobby Baker. Although her artworks in *Diary Drawings* can stand alone, there is good reason to analyse them within the context of comics. As Sarah Lightman writes, they can be placed in this realm ‘not solely through the technical process of drawing and inking, but also [because] Baker arguably shares the tradition (begun by Justin Green) of creating image after painful image that forms an extended autobiographical narrative.’⁵³ This accumulation of images suggests a comparison between Baker’s work and Munch’s *Frieze of Life*, as they are both artworks in which distinct images interact with other images in the sequence of which they are a part, generating new meanings and readings.

⁵² Atkinson, ‘The Graphic Novel as Metafiction,’ p. 117.

⁵³ Sarah Lightman, ‘Reviews: *Diary Drawings* by Bobby Baker,’ *Studies in Comics*, 1: 1, p. 160.

Lightman goes on to say that ‘Bobby Baker’s work engages within the tradition of comics both technically and conceptually.’⁵⁴ The exhibition of Baker’s *Diary Drawings* had photographs of the drawings behind glass in a brightly lit gallery space, with the original watercolour books placed in a pile in a glass cabinet. Lightman writes that ‘The metaphor of a closed book serves the exhibition well, reminding the viewer not only of their privileged intimate position – these are diary drawings after all – but also the chasm between inside and out. This suggests the discrepancies between how a person appears to others, how they see themselves, and how they feel about their life.’⁵⁵ This focus on identity is reflected in the viewing conditions of the works behind glass, because ‘in a show where pictures are covered in glass, there is always the slight possibility of seeing just a glimpse of oneself, transposed onto Baker’s face and body.’⁵⁶

In her drawing of ‘Day 8,’ Baker has indicated: ‘This was the start of the weeping’ (Fig. 6). The most striking thing about this image is the precision of the blue lines of tears that form an impenetrable force-field around her. There is something veil-like about the composition, communicating an intense isolation and an inability to break through the encircling stream of tears. The emotion is portrayed as incredibly powerful (the tears appear almost like a jet-stream), and Baker appears completely subject to it. The image of herself is obscured, portraying her loss of identity and connection to the extreme emotion to which she is bound. Her face is reminiscent of *The Scream*, and it is noticeable that the source of the torrent is not her eyes but her head, emphasising the acute mental anguish she is under and signalling her mind as the originator of this distressed state. The splashes that occur as the water hits the ground communicate not only the power of her emotion but also

⁵⁴ Lightman, ‘Reviews: *Diary Drawings* by Bobby Baker,’ p. 160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

create spike-like marks on the page, as if she is guarded and surrounded and cannot be rescued.



Figure 6. Bobby Baker, *Diary Drawings*, 'Day 8,' 1997 (watercolour on paper).

She is trapped in a prison of tears from which there appears to be no escape from the inside and no means of rescue from the outside. It is overwhelming and encompassing.

Marina Warner writes that ‘The drawings’ dramatic sense, their graphic eloquence are key to their powerful effect – and BB achieves this through her sheer proficiency as an artist.’⁵⁷ Like McCloud, Warner also refers to the work of Kandinsky and notes Baker’s symbolic use of colour: ‘Like the experiments of Wassily Kandinsky with the natural value of colours, BB’s palette gradually establishes an emotional grammar: ultramarine blues for melancholic and compulsive weeping, golden yellows and glowing oranges for good emanations ... and green for coping even from a seriously compromised position.’⁵⁸ Colours bring with them a cluster of associations that enable them to serve as visual shorthand for a variety of concepts. Warner refers to Baker’s use of green for ‘coping,’ for instance, and we can see how Baker has augmented the usual associations of green (safety, spring, renewal, growth, recovery) to arrive at this meaning across her work. The kind of interpretation that takes place when we encounter colour (and as we have seen earlier in McCloud’s illustrations, lines) means that this process of deciphering the visual is one that is always shifting and malleable. This instability generates an infinite series of interpretations as each viewer brings their own associations, memories and knowledge to the image in order to respond to it. It is this flexibility that makes the visual able to interact with something as abstract as mental states in a way that is nuanced and complex.

In other images Baker depicts herself as a blob-like form. In ‘Day 317’ (Fig. 7) we immediately notice the distinct contrast between the two figures of authority (the psychiatrist and psychologist) and Baker. They are depicted as having closed, defined edges, and their colour is contained within the neat ink lines. They appear two-dimensional and cold, which stands in stark contrast to the uncontained abstract

⁵⁷ Marina Warner, ‘Chronicle of a Life Repaired,’ in Bobby Baker, *Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me*, (Great Britain: Profile Books Limited, 2010), p. 13.

⁵⁸ Warner, ‘Chronicle of a Life Repaired,’ p. 14.

blob that Bobby depicts herself as. She is indistinct, illustrating her lack of identity when confronted with the specialists and positioned between them. They are depicted as stable, whilst she is shifting, unidentifiable, and incomplete, almost as if she is spilling across the floor.



DAY 317

Figure 7. Bobby Baker, *Diary Drawings*, 'Day 317,' 1999 (watercolour on paper).

'Day 532' (Fig. 8) exhibits a similar differentiation between herself and the professional case worker (who is again depicted as being two-dimensional and sideways on). Baker depicts herself without a mouth that is able to function, as it melts down her face in a blood red moustache that is certainly incapable of speech. The colours that she uses are muddied, dirty colours that leak into one another and even the ink, causing it to bleed into the image and contaminate the colours representing an undefined sense of self. The lines emanating from her head signal not only mental anguish but appear almost like smell lines, as if she is a pile of rubbish spilling out across the floor. The image is grotesque, with eyelashes trailing down the side of her face and her entire appearance being morphed and deformed. It is as if she is melting away or someone has poured water over her, communicating her mental anguish and destabilised self-image. Lightman notes the importance of the characteristics of the medium in communicating this mind state:

Watercolour, accompanied by the paper's absorbency, exploits this type of paint's potential to 'spill', and 'leak': it aptly and accurately portrays the tensions of a public and professional facade being maintained, throughout a time of private, intense, and emotional upset.⁵⁹

Baker's hands are prayer-like in silent appeal or acceptance. Her shocking appearance is magnified by the fact it is in complete contrast to her psychotherapist, whose outfit and hair is defined by neatly structured lines. She is entirely suited to her environment (even the chair mimics the parallel-lined professionalism), whereas Baker cannot even fit on the page. Warner writes that 'Diary Drawings like hers reach into the inside of her – and turn it out for others to see,'⁶⁰ and here the contents bleed across the page expressing an intensity of emotion and an inability to contain or understand it.

⁵⁹ Lightman, 'Reviews: *Diary Drawings* by Bobby Baker,' pp. 163-164.

⁶⁰ Warner, 'Chronicle of a Life Repaired,' p. 3.

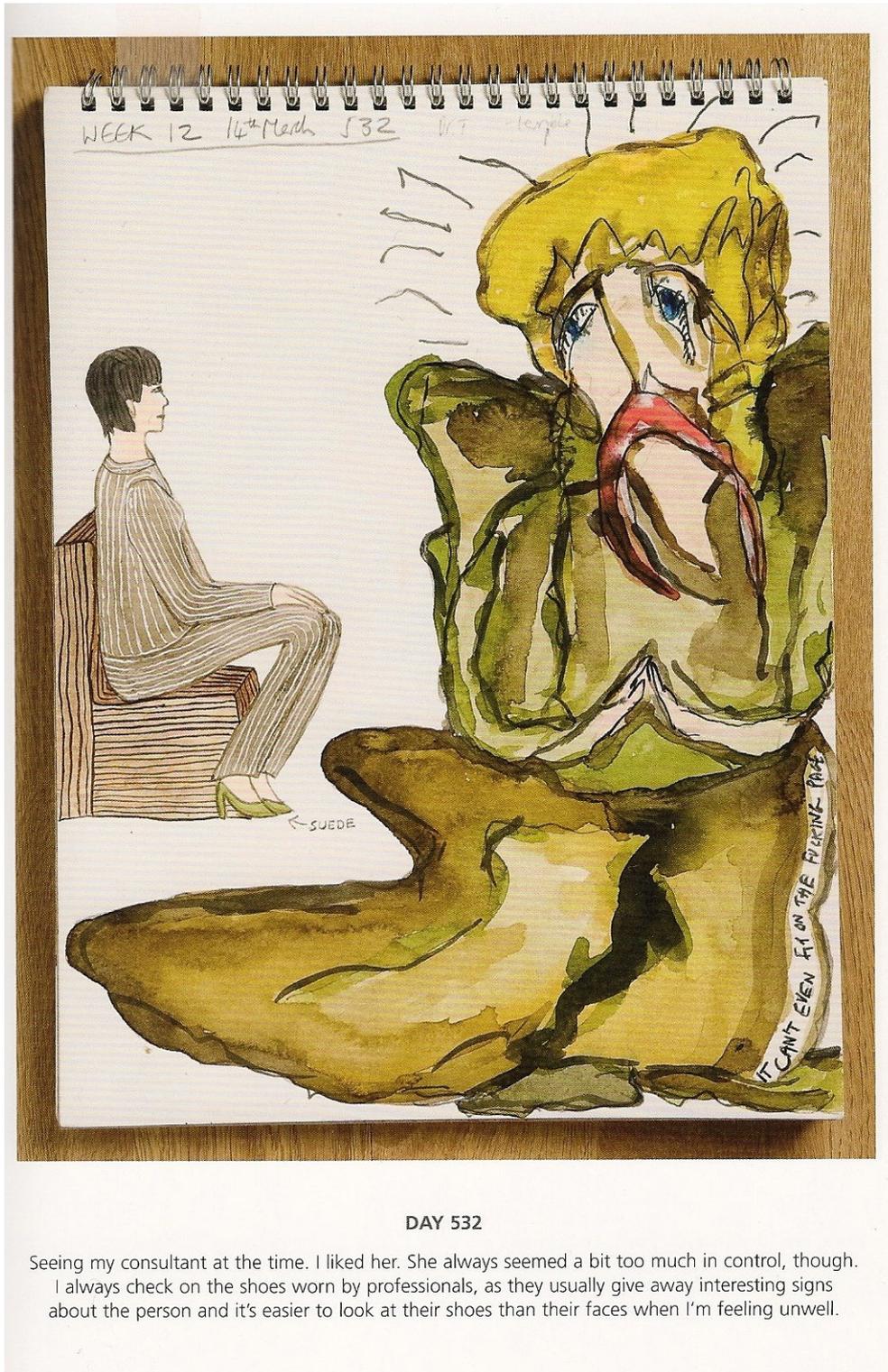


Figure 8. Bobby Baker, *Diary Drawings*, 'Day 532,' 2005 (watercolour on paper).

In other images, Baker utilises the precision of the line as opposed to the fluidity of the medium to communicate the abstract. In 'Day 480' (Fig. 9), for

example, Baker's anguished face is depicted as surrounded by blades as she is 'attacked by sharp thoughts.'

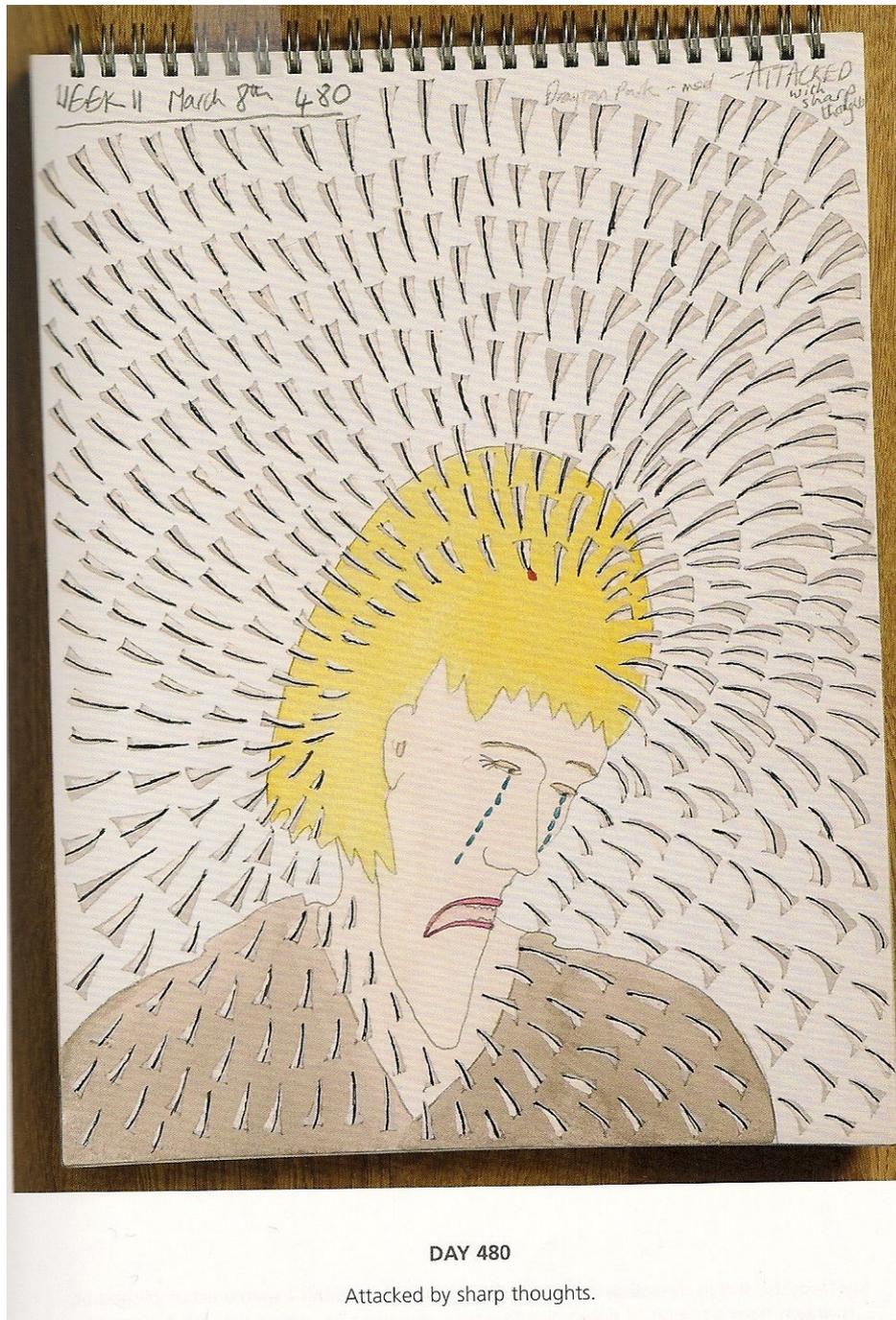


Figure 9. Bobby Baker, *Diary Drawings*, 'Day 480,' 2004 (watercolour on paper).

They appear almost like claws or even teeth tearing through the page, as if she is under siege, and the precision of their spacing makes them appear inescapable and designed to hurt her personally and specifically (as only the thoughts of one's own

mind can be engineered). Though the unrelenting swarm of blades surrounds her completely, there is only one speck of blood, as if the first one has just hit but there is much more pain to come. Whilst Warner celebrates Baker's use of colour,⁶¹ she also notes that 'BB makes metaphors visible and literal with hieroglyphic compression.'⁶² This 'compression' perhaps leads to the direct impact of the images, and what Warner describes as their 'immediacy.' Inherent in this idea of compression is that although the images are 'immediate,' this is because they are densely packed with meaning, *not* because they are obvious. This is an extremely useful notion because it offers new terms in which we can think through the quality of immediacy without degrading the visual to the straightforward or obvious. Far from being obvious, multiple meanings are compressed, imbedding a dimensional and layered character to the visual. Warner writes that this compression gives Baker's images 'the rush of sincerity: a howl, not a sermon, an exclamation not a speech, something blurted, something avowed, something admitted.'⁶³

Baker's drawings accumulate and build a shifting visual sign system for internal concepts that allow them to be expressed through line and colour. The relationship of the artworks to each other construct a glinting prism of her thought processes throughout her subjective experience of her disorder, allowing us to catch glimpses of certain states and emotions through striking visual representations.

The visual is capable of communicating the conceptual and abstract without relying on the augmentation of the written word, but when these two channels are combined the possibilities for constructing disordered mind states are evident. With

⁶¹ She places Baker in a lineage of artists' investigating the emotional properties of colour: 'In the attempt to find a non-figurative lexicon of stroke, colour and form, Kandinsky was influenced by Theosophist theories, and by Charles Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (1901) in which Leadbeater represented states of mind ... by painting aureoles of various colour combinations.' Warner, 'Chronicle of a Life Repaired,' p. 14.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 3.

regards to this dual channelling, Will Eisner writes that ‘In sequential art the two functions are irrevocably interwoven. Sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric.’⁶⁴ *Swallow Me Whole* is evidence of the complex construction of subjectivity through the utilisation of the visual and verbal channels, and illustrates that this combination can lead to the creation of the conceptual in a way that differs from the written word. The in-depth analysis of *A Scanner Darkly* (dir. Richard Linklater, 2006) that follows will serve to illustrate how the additional aural channel offered by film adds yet another layer of fabric to interweave with the visual and verbal channel to construct a subjective mental state. By interrogating the similarities as well as the differences in the way in which comic books and film deal with the problem of *visually* communicating the *invisible*, I will arrive at a better understanding of the distinct modalities of both media, thus providing a springboard into the discussion of the filmic construction of disordered subjectivity in my key case studies.

Specific Disorders in *A Scanner Darkly*

Based on the Philip K. Dick novel of the same name, *A Scanner Darkly* engages with abstract concepts of compromised mental states as well as communicating the experience of *specific* psychological disorders. The opening pages of the novel describe characters Jerry Fabin and Charles Freck suffering from Delusional Parasitosis, a condition which causes the sufferer to experience paranoid delusions about being infested with insects resulting in an obsessive attempt to capture the insects in jars as evidence to others who cannot see them. Vaughan Bell writes of Dick’s novel that: ‘To the envy of most academic textbooks, these pages contain a detailed account of delusional parasitosis, a form of psychosis often brought on by

⁶⁴Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 127.

stimulant drug abuse. In this condition (also known as Ekbom's syndrome) sufferers believe themselves to be infested with parasites and are often detected by the so-called 'matchbox sign', where sufferers present doctors with supposedly captured 'parasites' in a matchbox or similar container.'⁶⁵ It is unsurprising to find these detailed descriptions in Dick's work when one appreciates the depth of his understanding of the various psychoses induced by drug addiction. Bell goes on to say that: 'For its insight into altered states, Philip K. Dick's writing is especially noteworthy ... he was highly knowledgeable about mental illness, not only from his own experience – he regularly saw a psychiatrist for most of his life – but also through his acquaintance with key texts in psychology and psychiatry.'⁶⁶

The novel opens with the following text:

Once a guy stood all day shaking bugs from his hair. The doctor told him there were no bugs in his hair. After he had taken a shower for eight hours, standing under hot water hour after hour suffering the pain of the bugs, he got out and dried himself, and he still had bugs in his hair; in fact, he had bugs all over him. A month later he had bugs in his lungs.'⁶⁷

The book then describes Freck's process of finding out about the bugs and their lifecycles, and this is interspersed with what seem like pressing, factual updates, such as 'They now filled his house' and 'The Yard Guard seemed to work best.'⁶⁸

The pages that describe these psychoses in the novel are communicated in the opening scenes of the film, which show Charles Freck incessantly scratching and showering and spraying both himself and his dog in order to rid himself of the imaginary aphid infestation (Figs. 10 and 11). Rather than being offered two versions of reality as we are in the book, we are plunged straight into Freck's delusion and are offered no 'doctor' to serve as a voice of reason.

⁶⁵ Vaughan Bell, 'Through A Scanner Darkly: Neuropsychology and Psychosis in Philip K. Dick's novel "A Scanner Darkly,"' *The Psychologist*, 19: 8, (2006), pp. 488-489.

⁶⁶ Bell, 'Through A Scanner Darkly,' pp. 488-489.

⁶⁷ Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, (Great Britain: Millennium, 1999, First published 1977), p. 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Figure 10. *A Scanner Darkly*Figure 11. *A Scanner Darkly*

The film begins by tracking out from a close-up shot of Freck's hands on his head as he scratches, and we hear bizarre sound effects such as a rattling, cricket-like sound as well as spacey, futuristic zaps, with a heavy backbeat (Fig. 12). This immediately allows us to appreciate the closeness of the pain and anxiety from Freck's perspective, since we can see the detail of the bugs that scurry through his hair and the intensity with which his hands claw at his scalp. Opening with this shot is metaphorically powerful, because of course Freck's problem is entirely mental; his hands will never be able to alleviate the source of his anxiety and can only scratch at its surface.

Figure 12. *A Scanner Darkly*

Freck's movements appear unnatural and almost robotic (much like the techno music in the soundtrack), and his stilted actions serve to emphasise the disorientated and fragmented way in which he navigates the space of his apartment. He looks in a dirty mirror, conjuring the associations with imperfect seeing and compromised perception that the film's title suggests, as well as representing his search for identity and reality as he attempts to rid himself of the bugs (Fig. 13). The image also reflects faint drawings in the background, one being of a skull with bat wings. This disturbing skull motif can be seen in the wider shots of Freck's bedroom, acting as a reminder of the way in which he senses his surroundings to be threatening and unhinged. Freck's mental instability is encoded in the eccentric decor of his room, which features a strange spaceman bin, a spikey hanging lamp, eerie green/blue lighting, trippy posters, and a yellow toy digger mysteriously perched on his desk. Already we are given a visual representation of the confused, seemingly random web of associations that are at play in Freck's mind.



Figure 13. *A Scanner Darkly*

An overhead shot of Freck in the shower communicates the incessant nature of his obsession and his compulsion to wash, a device that makes him appear overwhelmed by his mental processes (Figs. 14 and 15). Showing Freck from multiple angles does

two things: It visually mimics the way in which he feels ‘surrounded’ by the aphids that crawl over him, whilst also allowing us to view the outward manifestation of his internal torment from different perspectives, highlighting the actor’s performance.



Figure 14. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 15. *A Scanner Darkly*

After several shots of this incessant, frantic washing, a close-up shows bugs going down the plug hole, representing Freck’s belief in the necessary nature of the task; the showering appears to be successfully washing the bugs away (albeit temporarily). The sound effects during this sequence have connotations with technology, as they sound highly digitised and alien. This not only suggests the surveillance culture, it also mimics the sound of a fly, or swarms of insects, as if the soundtrack itself is infested with the creatures. The heavy beat of the music kicks back in each time Freck discovers the crawling bugs, making the soundtrack and the visual manifestations of the insects seem intimately connected. The delusions thus take both visual and audio form.

As Freck approaches his pet dog (which we see from Freck’s point of view), the image shifts uneasily and then cuts to a close-up, then an extreme close-up of the dog’s fur as his fingers search it for aphids (which, of course, inevitably emerge). Both the short sentences in the book and the increasing use of close-ups of the insects and the reoccurring music in the film have the effect of communicating the accumulative effect of the anxious delusions. I must make it clear that I am not

arguing that, for instance, short close-ups are an equivalent to Dick's blunt sentences, but that both of these devices convey the accumulation and incessant nature of Freck's delusions.

The digital, almost spaceship-esque sounds add to the alien-ness of Freck's subjective reality (the book actually describes Jerry Fabin's belief that a giant aphid has come from outer-space). The animation technique allows this experience to be visually articulated without being constrained by the presumed objectivity of the film text. The text already presents the bugs as a possibility through the seamlessness of the rotoscoped transitions from drawn-over footage to fictive invention. The bugs are thus on a continuum, and there is no qualitative difference between them and their surroundings. This effect is later exaggerated in sequences showing Freck's hallucinations about what his friend is thinking (Fig. 16) and through Arctor's perspective in one scene in which we see a character morph into a giant aphid whilst sitting on the sofa (Figs. 17, 18 and 19).



Figure 16. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 17. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 18. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 19. *A Scanner Darkly*

The effectiveness of the medium is characterised by its ability to communicate the delusional subjectivity of the character in psychosis whilst fusing this with a sense of normality, thus increasing the disorienting effect of the hallucination. The producer of the film comments that: ‘The animation is very forgiving in a way that made it all seem part of a whole...you accept it visually as one.’ The use of rotoscoping ‘Turns everything into a borderline hallucination, so that when the fantastical elements intrude, they’re part of the world that you’re already comfortable with, they’re part of the language of the film.’⁶⁹

Rotoscoping Disorder

In sequences such as these we can appreciate how the plasticity of the visual – the way in which it can morph and shift into something new, and weave in and out of the concrete and abstract – is a property that can play an essential part in communicating subjective experiences and thought processes. In his review of *A Scanner Darkly*, Tim Robey writes that: ‘With its ability to render reality in a manner both heightened and removed from itself, as a series of floating, disarticulated images and sensations, rotoscoping is an ideal correlative for Dick's own shifting planes of perception, in which your footing as a reader gets pulled away just as you think you've found it.’⁷⁰ In his article ‘Shape-shifting realism’ Paul Ward also describes the importance of the medium in allowing for a visual complexity in the communication of abstract mental states, referring to the depiction of dreams in Linklater’s *Waking Life* as well as *A Scanner Darkly*:

All these films have at their core an interest in drawing out the dilemmas and downright oddness of human experience. In *Waking Life*, for instance, the protagonist spends the film

⁶⁹ Special Features commentary on *A Scanner Darkly* DVD, (Distributed by Warner Home Video, a division of Warner Bros Entertainment UK Ltd., 2006).

⁷⁰ Tim Robey, ‘A Scanner Darkly,’ *Sight & Sound*, Vol. XVI, issue 9, September 2006, pp. 66-68.

trying to work out if he is asleep-but-dreaming or whether his experiences are part of his waking life. The Rotoshop aesthetic - shimmering, mutable, shape-shifting - is the perfect way of rendering such a protean take on reality. By the same token, the use of the software in *A Scanner Darkly* fits perfectly with the protagonist's unstable, neurotic world. Sabastian has refined the software over the years so that it is an expressive vehicle for portraying the eerie and uncanny elements of what we take for reality. As he puts it: "The software has become a tool for blurring the lines between reality and the imagined."⁷¹

As well as the visual style of the film, other devices are used to navigate the thought processes of the characters, such as the thought bubble, something clearly imported from the graphic novel medium. In one scene, Freck drives along the road on the way to deliver his jar full of specimens to Barris and he spots a police car behind him. Since he is a drug user, he instantly becomes tense and suspects that the officer will pull him over. Next to his head appears a cartoon thought bubble (which fits in neatly with the rotoscoped aesthetic of the rest of the film) and the camera then moves into that bubble until its edges leave the frame (Figs. 20 and 21).



Figure 20. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 21. *A Scanner Darkly*

We have thus entered a new space, the space of Freck's paranoid daydream. In this delusion the police officer demands that Freck leaves the car after he fails to remember his name (which the officer states is 'probable cause'). The officer then attempts to recite Freck's rights upon arrest but fumbles over his words, and in a moment of frustration shoots Freck in the head. This violent action comes as an intense shock to the viewer, and the lack of a visible thought bubble frame has

⁷¹ Paul Ward, 'Shape-shifting realism' *Sight & Sound*, Vol. XVI, issue 8, August 2006, p. 42.

encouraged us to forget temporarily this scene's status as 'imagined' and accept it as something that is actually happening.

In an incredibly quick shot we see Freck's decapitated body as the bullet explodes his head, and blood and bugs seemingly hit the lens of the camera. We then cut back to the car to see a nervous Freck reacting to this startling occurrence in his daydream (which is described in the novel as his 'horror-fantasy number'⁷²). Not only does this adopted language of comics allow us to navigate in and out of his thought processes in this way, but it also has a levelling effect when we are shown bizarre delusions such as the aphids that hit the screen. The depiction of the contents of Freck's head serve as a metaphor for the confused and infected nature of his swarming thoughts as well as confirming that even in his mental meanderings Freck believes himself to be infested with bugs. Since everything is rotoscoped, everything appears equally trustworthy/untrustworthy. If the bugs had been animated against live footage, they would have been easily demarcated as a delusion. Linklater maintains the complexity of Dick's novel by making everything we see questionable and the subject of our attention and scrutiny.

This film provides a useful case study for discussion within the context of this chapter because its visual style so clearly references the graphic novel form whilst also directly engaging with the issue of disordered subjective states, and – as we have seen in the analysis of Freck's psychosis – specific mental disorders.⁷³

There is also the fact that the film is a literary adaptation, enabling me to compare

⁷² Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 5.

⁷³ Dick's daughter comments on the suitability of the animated style for an adaptation of the novel because of the current attitude towards animation, and this engages interestingly with the image/word hierarchy that was discussed in Chapter One. She says: 'The technique of using the animation I think is a great fit in terms of my father's material in general, which was, his ideas were expressed through this genre of science fiction [which] in his time was really despised and not taken seriously and considered for kids and so on and so forth...animation for adults is in that space right now.' Special Features commentary on *A Scanner Darkly* DVD, (Distributed by Warner Home Video, a division of Warner Bros Entertainment UK Ltd., 2006).

and contrast the novel and the film in so far as this informs my investigation of the capabilities of the medium when communicating subjectivity. My reading has focussed initially on the communication of a specific disordered mental state, but both book and film ultimately lead me to a discussion of the wider social and political themes with which they engage. I will unpick how the film utilises a distinct visual style to construct a paranoid world of shifting identities and layered realities, and will address the way in which subjective mind states (which are by their very nature invisible) are communicated visually.

Bob Arctor's Murky Descent into Disorder

In addition to dealing with the very specific disorder experienced by Freck, the film communicates the gradual disintegration of the thought processes of its main protagonist, Bob Arctor (Keanu Reeves), who by the end of the film is left with just 'Two brain cells that light up...the rest is just short circuits and sparks.' Arctor is an undercover cop investigating people taking (and dealing) Substance D, but as my analysis will argue, his character operates on a broader level as a metaphor for disorder on a society-wide scale. As the film progresses and we lose our sense of the real (an experience written into the film's rotoscoped production process), we enter a disordered mind state that gives us nothing to grab onto. It is not placed in opposition to an ordered, structured worldview, but rather is an ambiguous visual representation of social degeneration and decay. The film uses the subjectivity of an individual to comment on the state of the world as a whole, and the gradual disintegration of his mental state is representative of something much larger than his personal breakdown.

Rotoscoped animation is an essential part of the construction of this disorder. The plasticity of the visual and the possibilities for spatial relations it encompasses are characteristics utilised by the adaptation of the book, which uses the ‘comic book look’ of rotoscoped animation to create a ‘painterly version of reality.’⁷⁴ It is interesting that the word ‘painterly’ is used, not only because of its association with high art, but also when we consider the relationship expressive artwork such as *The Scream* has had with subjective mental states. The significance of the rotoscoping aesthetic for visually communicating the effects of Substance D is that a ‘shifting reality and perspective’ could be created that ‘changes everything into a borderline hallucination.’⁷⁵ An exploration of the technique used to construct this shifting perspective will highlight its significance in creating a blurred line between delusion and reality.

Paul Ward describes the mechanisms of the rotoscoping software which was innovated by Bob Sabastian as follows: ‘The software works on the basis of “interpolated rotoscoping”: live-action footage is converted to digital files and then “drawn over” using the software, echoing the earlier cel-animation rotoscoping seen in work by the Fleischers and Disney in the 1930s and Ralph Bakshi's version of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1970s.’⁷⁶ The distinctive visual style of rotoscoping is particularly interesting for the way in which it makes the ordinary appear uncanny and shifting, as if something is not quite right. As well as the image being an additional stage removed from reality by the very nature of the process of digitally drawing over frames of film, the animation gives the impression of there being a slight time delay, the shaky aesthetic of the image making it seem as if the moment

⁷⁴ Richard Linklater, Special Features Commentary on *A Scanner Darkly* DVD, Distributed by Warner Home Video, a division of Warner Bros Entertainment UK Ltd., 2006.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ward, ‘Shape-shifting realism,’ p. 42.

we are seeing is in fact the fading light of the actual moment. The fact that what we encounter is ‘recorded’ or ‘covered over’ undoubtedly references the ‘Through a glass darkly’ passage that the film’s title plays on. The time lag and the movement created by these layers of reality, each removed one further from each other, imbeds a complexity in the film that is inherent to the medium, as everything appears questionable and dreamlike. Linklater says that this result was the key reason for using rotoscoped animation:

It was always my conception to have the film in this style ... You’re looking at this going, “Is this real?” You’re questioning your reality, which I think was always a Philip K. Dick question.⁷⁷

Rotoscoping technology demonstrates one way in which the visual can be used not only to create complex relationships within the frame and across the text, but to create a visual complexity inherent to the medium. The question of disorder is inscribed in the text on the most fundamental level by its mode of presentation.

The visual ambiguity of this technique is so important because of the way it interacts with the narrative themes of the film. The overarching subject of the book is the psychological impact of drug use, as well as state control in a dystopian era of drug-abuse and paranoia, which thus entails the constant questioning of the tension between a genuine surveillance culture and the deluded paranoia of those within it. Both the book and the film play around with this boundary, allowing us to drift in and out of the drug-affected thought processes of several characters as we attempt to discern subjective mental processes from actual reality.

One of the apparent side-effects of long-term use of Substance D is the gradual impairment of neuro-functioning, which eventually results in ‘cross-chatter’ between the left and right hemispheres of the brain as they send conflicting messages

⁷⁷ *A Scanner Darkly* DVD commentary.

to each other and ultimately compete. Both the novel and the film interact with this notion of the ‘split mind’ and the idea that the left and right hemispheres can in fact operate independently, resulting in a dislocated sense of identity and consciousness. Dick’s novel refers directly to psychologist Roger Sperry’s work on the ‘split-brain,’⁷⁸ and the film communicates the disorientation caused by fragmented hemispheres by manipulating the line between the subjective states of several people and also constructing the fragmented experience of Arctor. The way the notion of the split mind is presented in the novel is actually very visual, since Dick literally splits up sentences to insert sections of scientific text, forcing the reader to scan visually past the text to complete the sentence that was cut off (Fig. 22).

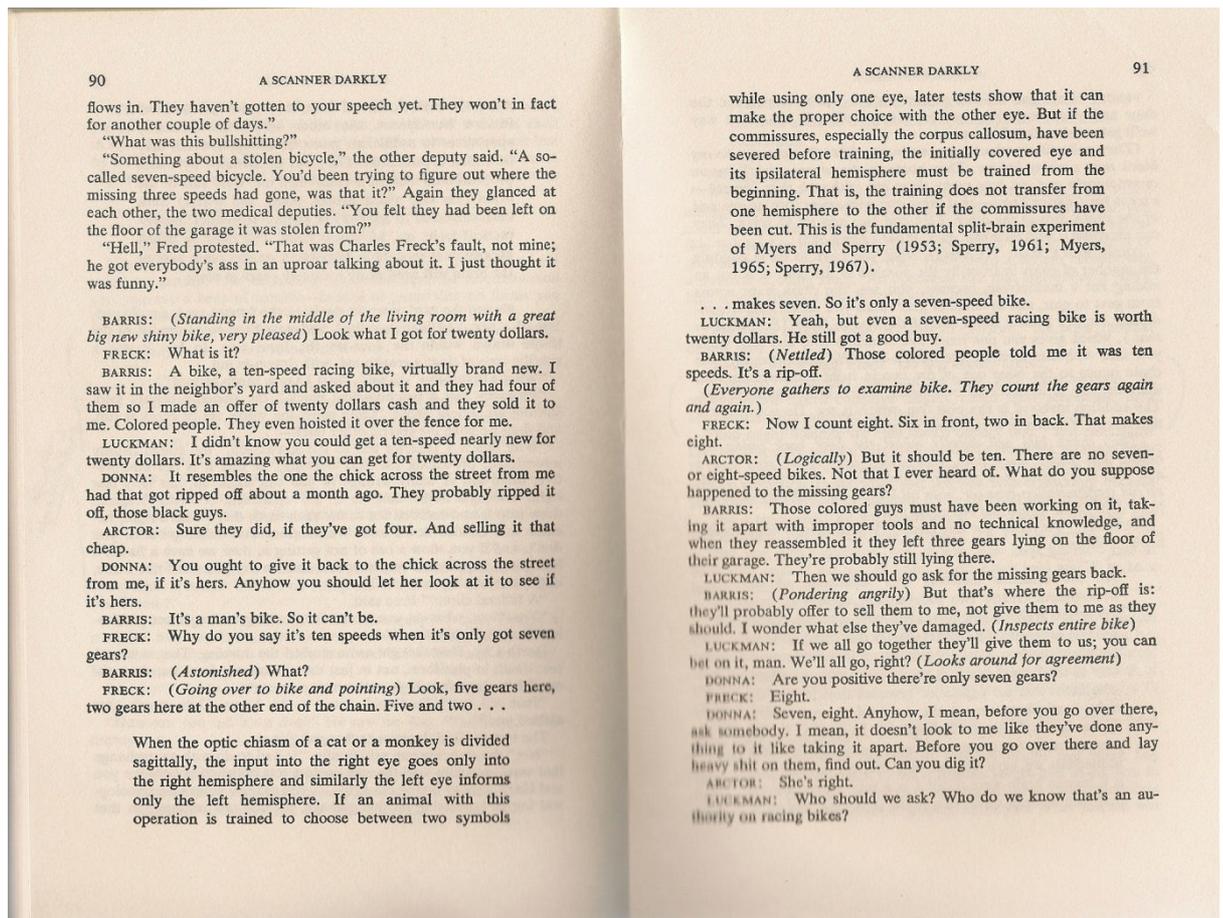


Figure 22. Extract from Philip K. Dick’s novel, *A Scanner Darkly*, (Great Britain: Millennium, 1999, First published 1977), pp. 90-91.

⁷⁸ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 91.

This interruption takes the reader to another flow of information as they read theories about the workings of the mind, and allows the text to assume another identity – that of scientific textbook. Dick also includes sections of German prose during Arctor's internal musings, again splitting sentences apart and creating dual channels of thought (Fig. 23).

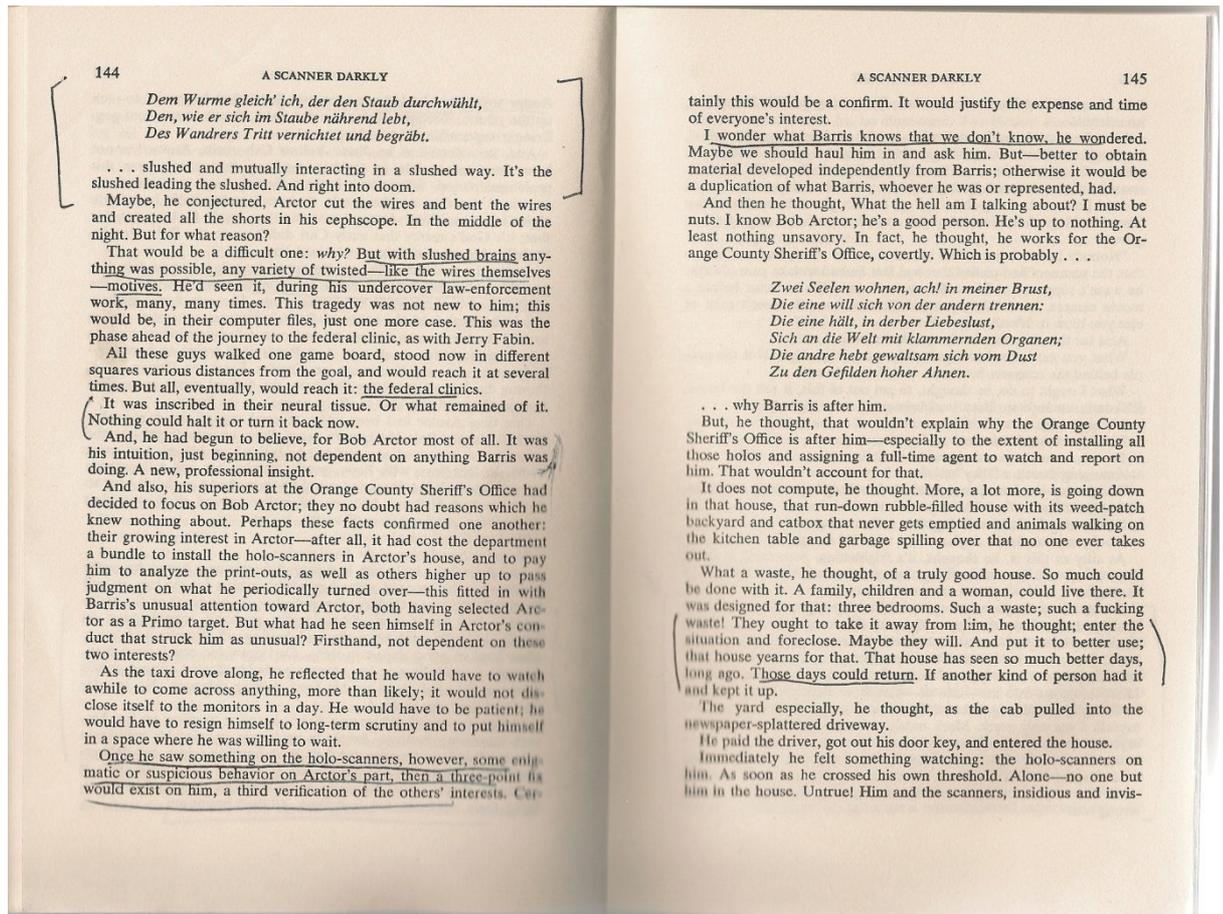


Figure 23. Extract from Philip K. Dick's novel, *A Scanner Darkly*, pp. 144-145.

This fragments the reader's experience of the narration and results in an attempt to relate the two independent streams of writing, mimicking the 'cross-chatter' theory that the book engages with. The film adapts this idea by having the two psychologists that interview Arctor talk over each other at times or finish each other's sentences, creating an unease about the relationship between the two of them that I will now discuss. The dreamlike quality of Arctor's psychological assessments suggests that they function as a metaphor for constant self-analysis and surveillance,

and that each psychologist could indeed represent the two conflicting hemispheres of the brain.

The fragmentation of Arctor's mind – specifically, as Dick suggests with the psychology he cites, the right hemisphere from the left hemisphere – is represented visually both by Dick and by Linklater. As we have seen, in the novel sentences are broken apart, and in the film we have the characters of the two psychologists. However, both also rely on language to convey the splitting of Arctor's mind. By inserting sections of disembodied text into the middle of contextualised internal or external dialogue, the book allows a new voice to enter the text. The two psychologists in the film can be differentiated by what they say.

The woman on the right of the screen is stricter, sharper, asks questions and interrupts the man on the left. This is significant when we consider the fact that it is the right hemisphere of the brain that is supposedly trying to take over the usually dominant left hemisphere. The man on the left has a notepad and is generally the one who explains. He has a softer tone and is less accusatory. When Arctor asks about his prognosis, the male psychologist replies: 'Who knows, only after the entire set has been run can we make a determination ...' but then he is interrupted by the harsher tone of the female psychologist, who says: '*WHY* this is superior to the Rorschach test is that it is not interpretation. There are many wrongs, but there is only *one right*. You either get it, or you don't, and if you show a run of not getting it, then we have a fix on a functional impairment and we dry you out for a while until you test better later on.' Reeves then asks: 'At New Path?' and the two reply in unison 'Undoubtedly.' They look at each other as if suspicious to find the other there, again hinting at separation as opposed to unity (as it is responding in unison

that is the oddity as opposed to the norm, communicating the fragmenting mental processes).

The film, as my brief analysis here indicates, has a wider variety of devices at its disposal when we consider the psychologists and the mental disorder they represent. As I have discussed, they are differentiated not only linguistically or visually, but also by tone, gesture, and even framing. During Arctor's first psychological assessment, the psychologists are either side of him presenting him in the middle and suggesting the beginning of the split happening in Arctor's mind (Fig. 24). However, in his final evaluation, when he is nothing but 'two charred brain cells,' the camera is positioned lower and the psychologists are seated. Even on a purely aesthetic level, Arctor's dark form right through the middle of the screen adds to the sense of fracture, but reading this composition symbolically suggests that Arctor's mind has now become totally dislocated as the right and left hemispheres of his brain are operating independently (Fig. 25).

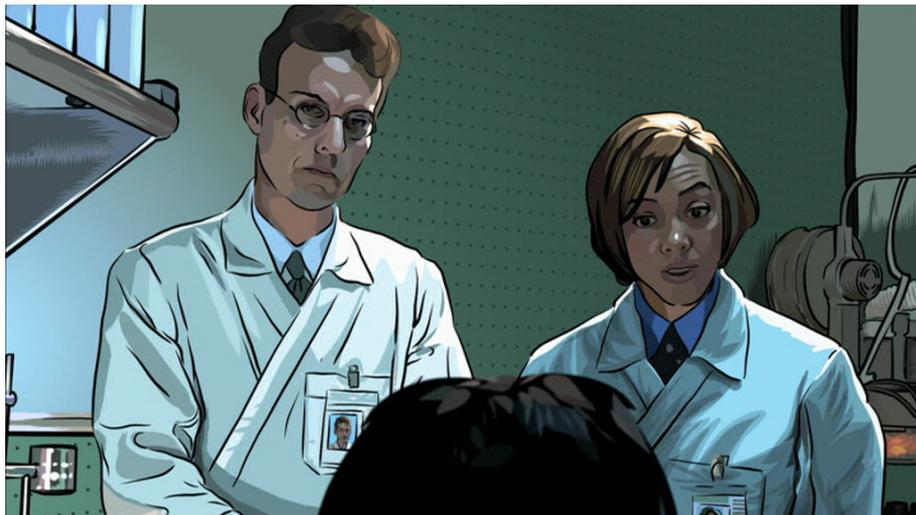


Figure 24. *A Scanner Darkly*

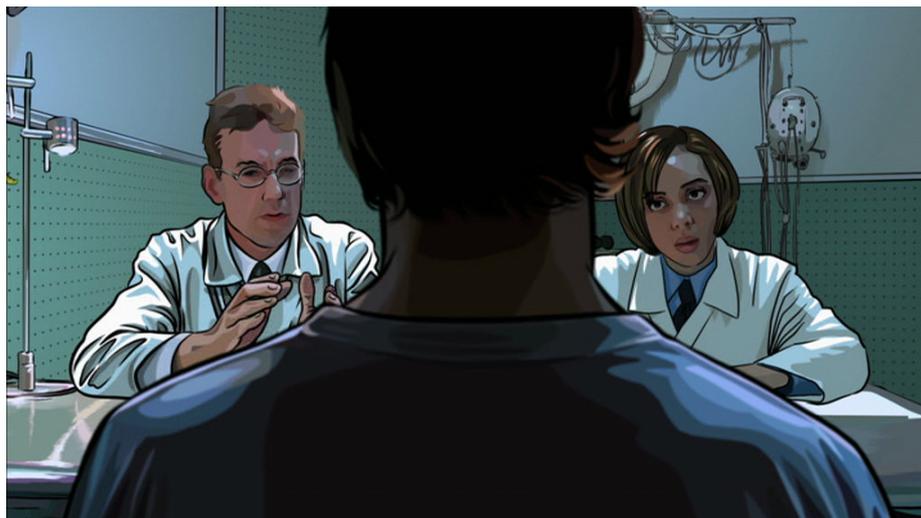


Figure 25. *A Scanner Darkly*

The film adapts Dick's presentation of the split mind in a way that utilises the many devices the medium of film affords, working on not only the visual channel but also the audio and verbal.

The Medium and Surveillance

In addition to the issue of disorder, there is also the fact that, as Linklater argues, 'the whole film's under surveillance,' and this is highlighted by the use of a fast-forward effect in one sequence and the constant reference to CCTV throughout the film. This is interestingly linked to the subject of mental fragmentation and plays a huge part in the communication of the central character's paranoia, confusion and isolation.

The issue of framing and manipulation of the image is always at the fore because of the question of surveillance. In the sequence in which Barris takes Freck to the convenience store to buy items to manufacture cocaine, the image seems to be being fast-forwarded as if on a cassette, triggering associations with CCTV as well as the malleability of time in the experience of the drug. The sequence contains near-subliminal flashes of close-ups of objects, conveying the blips in perception and

knowledge that the characters experience as they navigate the rundown suburb. The paranoia about surveillance that pervades the film extends to a paranoia about the nature of reality in general, as Jonathan Lincoln comments:

Their reality slippages are a paradigm that can apply to anything. I mean, they might suddenly be cooking and the recipe might turn out to be a conspiracy. There's a missing ingredient! It is sort of like the movie has now taken Substance D. You start to understand they're in a state of radical disjunction which is also, in a weird way ... a protest.⁷⁹

The idea that 'the movie has now taken Substance D' is an interesting one that merits further consideration. There is a sense in which the disorder is inscribed in the text not only on the level of its visual aesthetic but also in the way in which the text is fragmented and disordered and the visual morphs recognisable forms into delusions and hallucinations. If the movie itself has taken Substance D, then there is somehow the construction of mental disorder that does not belong to any particular character.

In one sequence Arctor sees the girl he has slept with morph between Connie and Donna. In the novel, Dick uses references to cinematic techniques to describe the appearance of this, and initially uses the possible manipulation of the medium as an explanation for the shifting image:

And then, as Fred watched, Connie's hard features melted and faded into softness, and into Donna Hawthorne's face.

He snapped off the tape again. Sat puzzled. I don't get it, he thought. It's – what they call that? Like a goddamn dissolve! A film technique. Fuck, what is this? Pre-editing for TV viewing? By a director, using special effects?⁸⁰

The reference to technology to explore the issue of unreliable perspective represents a world that has itself become like a film, as the film's title suggests. Issues of recording and mediation are always at the fore. The use of rotoscoping conveys this in the film, as the drawn-over animation uses a dissolve to make a whole image morph from one thing to another. What seems like a clunky description of a glitch in

⁷⁹ *A Scanner Darkly* DVD Commentary

⁸⁰ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 136.

visual perception in the novel is handled well with the new technology of rotoscoping, which seamlessly adapts Dick's concepts visually.

The implication in Dick's work that the medium of film is not reliable but can be manipulated is also a useful idea for how the text interacts with the disorder, as well as the implication of the filmed being a mirror of another reality. The novel uses the idea of mirror reflection to communicate the neurological impairment experienced by Arctor, saying that one side of his brain sees things as they really are, and the other sees a backwards reflection. Earlier in the book he uses this analogy to explain his loosening grip on reality, describing it as 'a nightmare, a weird other world beyond the mirror, a terror city reverse thing, with unrecognizable entities creeping about.'⁸¹ That the scanners pick up on this alternative behaviour creates a layer of doubt and confusion when Arctor tries to understand the relationship between his two identities. He says that: 'In the script being filmed, he would at all times have to be the star actor. Actor, Arctor, he thought. Bob the Actor who is being hunted; he who is the El Primo huntee.'⁸² The film communicates this fragmentation by cross-cutting between Fred and Arctor in his two roles, showing layers of separation as reality is filmed and then edited and then watched by Arctor as Fred.⁸³

In one sequence, for instance, Arctor watches himself on hidden CCTV footage as he chats with his friends at home. These surveillance images appear in a

⁸¹ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 105.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸³ In the novel Arctor realises that he is unable to recognise himself on the CCTV footage when out of his suit, and an understanding of this fact leads to a cognitive breakthrough: 'When you get down to it, I'm Arctor, he thought. I'm the man on the scanners, the suspect Barris was fucking over his weird phonecall with the locksmith, and I was asking, What's Arctor been up to to get Barris on him like that? I'm slushed; my brain is slushed. This is not real. I'm not believing this, watching what is me, is Fred – that was Fred down there without his scramble suit; that's how Fred appears without the suit!' Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 132.

grid and are framed by the edges of that grid, as if this recorded reality is already digitised, fragmented, and questionable (Fig. 26).



Figure 26. *A Scanner Darkly*

The group discuss imposters and then the idea of posing as an imposter, and then Arctor asks about how one would go about ‘posing as a nark.’⁸⁴ This paradoxical question (to pose as a nark, one would have to pose as someone in the group) communicates his confusion about his identity, as Bob Arctor and Fred (his undercover name) become increasingly unaware of each other and he struggles to relate the two roles he inhabits. His appearance on the surveillance screen is a less nuanced, flattened version of himself, visually replicating his inability to recognise his own image (Figure 27).

⁸⁴ This echoes the section in the book where he asks: ‘What is identity? he asked himself. Where does the act end? Nobody knows.’ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 21.



Figure 27. *A Scanner Darkly*

Throughout the novel Arctor repeatedly expresses how he feels that things are ‘murky’ and confused, as undercover cops become addicts and addicts end up becoming undercover cops. His inability to understand the reality of the situation is writ large when he tries to decide where his true identity lies:

To himself, Bob Arctor thought, *How many Bob Arctors are there?* A weird and fucked-up thought. Two that I can think of, he thought. The one called Fred, who will be watching the other one, called Bob. The same person. Or is it? Is Fred actually the same as Bob? Does anybody know? I would know, if anyone did, because I’m the only person in the world that knows that Fred is Bob Arctor. *But*, he thought, *who am I? Which of them is me?*⁸⁵

The use of recognisable stars in the film arguably plays around with this idea, since the rotoscoping animation results in uncanny, shifting performances that are clearly recognisable, but also, in a strange way, unrecognisable. Keanu Reeves’ distinctive chiselled cheek bones are destroyed by the scruffy beard he wears for the entirety of the film, rendering him visually more ordinary and thus representing the

⁸⁵ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, pp. 74-75.

disintegration of identity and persona. Linklater always had Reeves in mind for the part of Arctor, signalling the significance of his casting.

Keanu: Actor as Arctor

In his book *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves*, Michael DeAngelis focuses on the qualities of Reeves that generate what he describes as his distinctive ‘panaccessibility.’⁸⁶ DeAngelis describes Reeves’ lifestyle as ‘nomadic and dislocated’⁸⁷ and cites his ‘inbetweenness’ as a key factor for the creation of his ambiguous persona. As DeAngelis notes: ‘If he does not fit into a definable category on the basis of domestic ties and allegiances, he is also dislocated in terms of nation, race and ethnicity.’⁸⁸ He goes on to articulate the impossibility of pinning Reeves down in terms of both star and private persona, saying that ‘the progressive melodramatic narrative of Keanu Reeves ... develops a figure whose essence is described in terms of instability and incoherence of identity.’⁸⁹

DeAngelis observes that in most of his films ‘Reeves is consistently alienated and disconnected from his own peer group as well as his family,’⁹⁰ and this paranoid loneliness is something explored in *A Scanner Darkly*. In 1990, Dennis Cooper said of the characters Reeves plays that: ‘They’re often, if not perpetually, distressed, spooked, weirded-out by the world. They’re always fighting with their contexts.’⁹¹ Chris Nickson identifies that ‘There’s an innocence and openness about him, a

⁸⁶ Michael DeAngelis, ‘Keanu Reeves and the Fantasy of Pansexuality,’ in *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves*, (USA: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 181.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199. He goes on to say that ‘Reeves was born in Beirut, and raised in Australia and Canada; his father is half-Hawaiian and half-Chinese, and his mother is British.’

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196, quoting Dennis Cooper, “Keanu Reeves,” *Interview*, September 1990, p. 136.

vulnerability.’⁹² This view of Reeves as ‘puppy-eyed’ and in need of protection makes him the ideal person to play Arctor, a man who unknowingly ends up being exploited by those around him to infiltrate New Path, the facility harvesting Substance D. Reeves lends a sadness to the film because his exploitation seems so unjust and he appears so helpless against it.⁹³

But Linklater’s insistence on casting Reeves was based on much more than the star’s perceived vulnerability and innocence. In his exploration of Reeves’ persona, DeAngelis devotes time to investigating the strange nature of the star’s malleability:

Star texts and fan discourse often attribute the mystery and fascination of Reeves’s persona to its opacity, its propensity to change unexpectedly, and its ability to exceed any single image or description. “If any one male film actor sums up his generation, it is Keanu,” Nickson suggests. “He’s a chameleon, literally changing physically with each role.” His very malleability, the suggestion that he is always about to shift from one identity to the next, paradoxically indicates the presence of something constant and authentic.⁹⁴

Whilst I agree with the sentiment expressed here, I would contest the word ‘chameleon’ being used in relation to Reeves in this way unless we approach the term from a different angle. After all, Reeves is not a chameleon in the same way Johnny Depp is a chameleon. When people use the term ‘chameleon’ to describe an actor, they are usually referring to that actor’s adaptability. But we can approach the word from another angle and by doing so bridge the gap between Reeves’

⁹² DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, p. 188, quoting Chris Nickson, *Keanu Reeves*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

⁹³ Public attitude towards Keanu can be seen in the ‘Sad Keanu’ internet meme that swept the web, inundating the star with messages of concern – both ironic and serious – from fans. Ryan Gilbey of the Guardian writes: ‘It took an unexceptional paparazzi snap of the actor sitting on a park bench, staring disconsolately past the half-eaten sandwich in his hand, to ignite widespread concerns for his welfare and to act as the catalyst for the sort of celebrity deification that only usually comes with death. Outnumbering the hundreds of Photoshopped versions of the image that began circulating – Sad Keanu perched alongside Forrest Gump, or gazing at a miniature Sad Keanu on the ground, who in turn was peering at an even tinier Sad Keanu – were messages of support, and testimonies from those who had met Reeves, or simply been inspired by him.’ Published 13th January, 2011. Available online: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jan/13/keanu-reeves-henrys-crime>>

⁹⁴ DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, p. 192, quoting Nickson, *Keanu Reeves*, p. 2.

malleability and the ‘constant and authentic’ essence DeAngelis describes. The chameleon does indeed adapt, but what is distinctive about it is that it adapts to match its surroundings in an attempt to blend in with its environment. This is closer to the way I would conceptualise Reeves’ dislocated persona; lacking any real identity, he assumes that of the text itself. This makes him a blank slate and yet, at the same time, he is distinctive; the ‘constant’ is his sacrificial ‘taking on’ of any role and aesthetic ascribed. He is himself the scramble suit he dons in *A Scanner Darkly*, and there is a sense in which he is at the mercy of the rotoscoping that draws over his image, adding even more complexity and ambiguity to the actor’s already vague identity. This quality of Reeves is taken to the extreme by Carrie Rickey, who argues that ‘The actor’s enigmatic face suggests a computer-generated composite of every known race and gender.’⁹⁵ It seems Rickey would argue that, in Reeves’ case, there was no need for the suit at all; he is already ‘a vague blur.’

Taking into consideration the contemporary issues the film deals with, it is not surprising that Linklater would appeal to Reeves to engage his audience. DeAngelis presents evidence for Reeves as the accessible, disillusioned, isolated young ‘everyman’: ‘In 1990, he was purported “to embody the sensitive soul of all disenfranchised youth.” A nineteen-year-old fan explains that “I feel I could step into his soul, just slide in.”’⁹⁶ The fact that Reeves so often plays vulnerable characters undoubtedly helps to fuel this conception of him as representative of this section of society, but it is also an indefinable quality in his physical appearance, voice and mannerisms. DeAngelis discusses a ‘mystery’ behind Reeves’ eyes, suggesting that ‘The paradoxical nature of Reeves’s depth often centers on the eyes

⁹⁵ DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, p. 201, quoting Carrie Rickey, ‘The Importance of Being Keanu,’ *Chicago Tribune*, 26 June 1994, Arts Section, p. 16.

⁹⁶ DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, p. 196, quoting: Cooper, “Keanu Reeves,” p. 134, and Angela Holden, “Blissed Out, Switched On Perfect Body: What Makes Keanu Reeves Not Just a Movie Star but a Total Babe?” *The Independent*, 19 September 1994, Living Page, p. 22.

as a site of vulnerability, receptivity, and invitation.’⁹⁷ This is particularly interesting when we consider how many close-ups there are of Reeves’ face from within the scramble suit, isolated from context, his eyes staring out helplessly at the camera (Fig. 28).



Figure 28. *A Scanner Darkly*

DeAngelis notes the star’s oxymoronic ‘deep emptiness,’⁹⁸ arguing that ‘Reeves’s minimalism, understatement, and emotional inexpressibility become the very attributes required for the actor’s emergence as an ethereal and transcendent figure.’⁹⁹ There is a sense in which when watching his films we constantly try and grasp who Reeves is, but always fail to cling on to his characters. We can only watch on helplessly as they navigate an often dangerous and dystopian world.

Whilst it is true that *A Scanner Darkly* triggers associations with Reeves’ role as a Valley stoner in *Bill and Ted*¹⁰⁰ (particularly at the end of the film when Keanu has become a ‘burnt out husk’ and can only dimly repeat sentences spoken to him)

⁹⁷ DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom*, p. 194.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁰ DeAngelis points out that ‘the actor has struggled (and some would argue, continues to struggle) to dissociate himself from what several critics have described as the airhead image he captured so effectively in his first highly successful starring role of Ted in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989).’ p. 180.

there is clearly a more complex multiplicity to his identity, both on and off-screen, that embeds an authenticity in his role. In addition to this, his squeaky clean public image lends pathos to his still and understated portrayal of the placid Arctor, the unaware victim of a system that uses him most cruelly to achieve its own ends. Throughout the film, Reeves delivers voiceover musings in his recognisable drawling and gravelly – but also soft – tone, embedding a disillusioned and vulnerable quality to his internal thought processes. Taking everything into consideration, it becomes increasingly evident that the casting of Reeves is absolutely essential in ensuring that the question of *Which of them is me?* is always at the fore throughout the film, and particularly when we consider the character of Arctor.

Rotoscoped Performance

Performance is also a crucial aspect of the visual aesthetic of the film and adds to its disorientating appearance. Cinematographer Shane F. Kelly comments that ‘I’m definitely shooting and composing with a view to what the animators are going to do to that,’¹⁰¹ and Linklater argues that ‘I don’t feel there’s any limitation really to what we can do in post. You know, we’ve created a whole, another world, almost, altogether.’¹⁰² In this other world the appearance of the actors is heavily stylized and this process is partly what lends their performances an uncanny familiarity whilst being unfamiliar. Animators Christopher S. Jennings, Sterling Allen and Paul Beck all comment on this in the documentary feature ‘The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales,’ showing the intense focus on capturing performance: ‘We did develop a style guide early on...it’s just a book full of images of “Here’s how you draw this person”

¹⁰¹ ‘The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales’ Special Feature, *A Scanner Darkly* DVD

¹⁰² Ibid.

...What is really awesome is that we get Keanu's performance. We get Winona's performance. It's not Winona or Keanu doing the voice acting and then my interpretation of what it would look like. But it is actually their performance.¹⁰³

This approach is no doubt what allows the stars to maintain their distinctiveness whilst also becoming, in another way, new and strange. Commenting on Linklater's control of the animation, animators describe how 'He's come in to sign off on beard looks for Keanu, which has been a battle because he's got this patchy beard that they want to keep patchy, but they don't want it too patchy. They don't want it too full, don't want it too scraggly.'¹⁰⁴ The film has such a distinct aesthetic because of the strict instructions on the way to rotoscope each actor depending on the angle and distance of the face from the camera (Figs. 29 and 30).



Figure 29. *The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales*, Figure 30. *The Weight of the Line* Special Features, *A Scanner Darkly* DVD.

This amount of focus on specific elements and shooting with post-animation in mind was something taken into consideration by the film's stars. Rory Cochrane commented that 'I took some liberties that I normally wouldn't because I thought, you know, it's an animated film,' and Woody Harrelson said of his performance: 'In some ways I probably went a little more over the top than I normally would because I knew it was going to be animated ... It just seemed to give license to go a little

¹⁰³ 'The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales' Special Feature, *A Scanner Darkly* DVD

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

more nutty.’¹⁰⁵ The animators also describe Robert Downey Jr.’s face, saying that it ‘is really sculptural’ and he has ‘such an animated way of acting ... Especially in this, he’s just all over the place. And he’s rubbery and his face is just going crazy.’¹⁰⁶ There is the constant tension throughout the film of the star quality of the actors and the film’s non-starry use of them, and there is no doubt that the rotoscoping facilitates this tension, creating a world in which everyone is not quite themselves, but in another way is more themselves than ever as a workshop of animators have attempted to stylise their distinct features.

I have used the word ‘uncanny’ to describe the depiction of the actors, but this perhaps lacks precision; it would be more accurate to say that they *err* on being uncanny. Again, there is ambiguity here. We can explore the nature of this ambiguity by addressing what is meant by ‘uncanny’ in this context.

A Scanner Darkly and the Uncanny

Freud’s conception of the uncanny holds particular interest for this case study because of the manner in which he approaches the term. By carrying out a thorough investigation into the meaning of ‘uncanny’ in reference to *heimlich* (literally translated as ‘homely’) and *unheimlich* (‘unhomely’), we can appreciate the relevance of this study for *A Scanner Darkly*, a film which consistently brings to the fore questions of stable family and community, and the dystopian reality that underlies it:

There are thus two courses open to us: either we can investigate the semantic content that has accrued to the German word *unheimlich* [of which the nearest semantic equivalents in English are ‘uncanny’ and ‘eerie’, but which etymologically corresponds to ‘unhomely’] as the language has developed, or we can assemble whatever it is about persons and things, sense impressions, experiences and situations, that evokes in us a sense of the uncanny, and then go on to infer its hidden nature from what all these have in common. I can say in

¹⁰⁵ ‘The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales’ Special Feature, *A Scanner Darkly* DVD

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

advance that both these courses lead to the same conclusion – that the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar. But of course the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening.¹⁰⁷

Freud's lengthy etymological investigation reveals a complex interplay between the two different ways we can approach the uncanny in relation to *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. Freud argues that '*Unheimlich* is clearly the opposite of *Heimlich*, *heimisch*, *vertraut*, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar.'¹⁰⁸ However, he goes on to say that 'Starting from the homely and the domestic, there is a further development towards the notion of something removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret...Uncommon in modern usage is the combination of *Heimlich* with a verb denoting concealment'¹⁰⁹ By tracing through applications of the word and its connotations with hidden knowledge, the two meanings of the word, which were facing in opposite directions, have met each other on a circular path:

The notion of the hidden and the dangerous, which appears in the last section, undergoes a further development, so that *heimlich* acquires the sense that otherwise belongs to *unheimlich*...*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely').¹¹⁰

The interplay between these two understandings of the uncanny can be seen in *A Scanner Darkly*, which visually represents the concept of the 'cosy home' that has become unwelcoming and unfamiliar, and also addresses the issue of hidden knowledge and truth. Arctor muses at one point that 'a family could have lived here,' musings fuelled by atavism as he fails to connect this observation with his own memory of living at the house with his family:

¹⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' Translated by David McLintock, (Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 124. (*Das Unheimliche* first published in 1919 in *Imago* 5 (5-6))

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

This run down rubble filled house, with its weed yard and cat box that never gets emptied. What a waste of a truly good house, so much could be done with it. A family and children could live here. It was designed for that. It's such a waste. They ought to confiscate it and put it to better use.

As Arctor navigates the house, the mobile camera sways dizzily, emphasising the shifting planes of colour and the superficiality of the surface-driven world he inhabits. Once a clean, bright, organised home, we are confronted now with a dilapidated, claustrophobic and bleakly lit house; the once sunny windows are boarded up (Figs. 31 and 32).



Figure 31. *A Scanner Darkly*



Figure 32. *A Scanner Darkly*

The house also plays with the idea of *Heimlich* being secret knowledge, since it is a microcosm of a society which is infested with deception and underhand deals. The homes of Freck, Arctor and Donna all suggest that the paranoia and distrust experienced by the characters is partly fuelled by their own isolation from the outside world. In a way, they are the very secret they fear.

Freud also brings in the ‘idea of the Doppelgänger’¹¹¹ and the possibility that ‘the self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged.’¹¹² Arctor is representative of this divided self, particularly in the way in which the two roles he assumes – Fred and Arctor – become increasingly unaware of each other and thus each hold their own knowledge that was once known by both personas. Freud

¹¹¹ Freud, ‘The Uncanny,’ p. 144.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

discusses ‘the unintentional return’¹¹³ and explains that ‘for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed. The link with repression now illuminates Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as “something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open.”’¹¹⁴ Arctor is haunted by these glimpses of his resurfacing past-life as well as by thoughts that cross over from the different hemispheres of his brain. The film questions the notion of reality and the unsettling consequence of realising that there may be no reality at stake to grasp.

There is something to be said for the way in which Reeves’ star persona and the issue of the uncanny overlap. His indefinability and ambiguity, in combination with the layers of abstraction and uncertainty added by the rotoscoping, result in an exaggeration of the actor’s ‘deep emptiness.’ If he was robotic and yet ethereal before, rotoscoping pushes this unknowability even further. The uncanny is evident in the film not only thematically but also on a surface level in terms of the visual aesthetic, as the actors’ appearances err on the uncanny. This is particularly evident in their facial expressions, most noticeably because we are so acutely aware of what they *should* look like due to our familiarity with their appearance in movement. This ‘not quite right’ feeling that seeps into every aspect of the film visually mimics Arctor’s questioning sense that how he sees is only ‘darkly,’ through a scanner, a recording of recording, much like *Fight Club*’s ‘copy of a copy of a copy’.

¹¹³ Freud, ‘The Uncanny,’ p. 144.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Through a Scanner, Darkly

It is in this world of uncanny – or *near*-uncanny – characters that Arctor finds himself slipping between the two identities he holds and getting dragged into the paranoia of his housemates:

My God, Bob Arctor thought. I was into that trip as much as they were. We all got into it together that deep. He shook himself, shuddered, and blinked. Knowing what I know, I still stepped across into that freaked-out paranoid space with them, viewed it as they viewed it – muddled, he thought. Murky again; the same murk that covers them covers me; the murk of this dreary dream we float around in.¹¹⁵

Arctor's 'muddled' negotiation of space in the murky dream world he describes happens not only through language (in voice-over monologues he often talks about himself in the third person), but also through visual devices. As he discusses his past, for instance, the house morphs into how it used to be as he speaks, and planes of vision shift and shimmer independently of one another. Towards the end of the film Arctor directly discusses the search for order out of disorder, and as he does so the background seems to move in impossible angles creating a confusing space as the camera moves around him. Even staring at still images taken from this sequence we can appreciate the way in which the image is designed to encourage a shifting, unstable effect, as if everything is morphing. As Arctor lies back on the sofa it seems to move (Fig. 33), as if the very foundation he rests on is shifting beneath him:

¹¹⁵Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 79. The emphasis on layered realities and the murkiness between reality and delusion is prevalent throughout the novel: 'I say he's shucking us, Fred decided. Some people can tell when they're being watched. A sixth sense. Not paranoia, but a primitive instinct: what a mouse has, any hunted thing. Knows it's being stalked. Feels it. He's doing shit for our benefit, stringing us along. But – you can't be sure. There are shucks on top of shucks. Layers and layers.' p. 152. 'Only, his brain, too, is slushed. All their brains are ... slushed and mutually interacting in a slushed way. It's the slushed leading the slushed. And right into doom.' pp. 143-144.



Figure 33. *A Scanner Darkly*

I'm supposed to act like they aren't here. Assuming there's a 'they' at all. It may just be my imagination. Whatever 'it' is that's watching, it's not human...unlike little dark eyed Donna. It doesn't ever blink. What does a scanner see? Into the head? Down into the heart? Does it see into me? Into us? Clearly or darkly? I hope it sees clearly, because I can't any longer see into myself. I see only murk. I hope for everyone's sake the scanners do better. Because if the scanner sees only darkly, the way I do, then I'm cursed, and cursed again. And we'll only wind up dead this way. Knowing very little, and getting that little fragment wrong too.

Reeves delivers this passage in raspy, underplayed tones, aurally mimicking the listlessness the words themselves express. Here Reeves explores the implications of the novel's and the film's title, which is a reference to the biblical verse about seeing through a glass darkly (in the New International Version this verse (1 Corinthians 13:12) is written: 'For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'). Dick's novel engages with the idea of there being an underlying truth and discusses the difficulty of trying to discern what is real from only murky and incomplete knowledge. Arctor's fragmented identities all intersect with each other as he tries to make sense of shadows of memories and past lives that fill his environment. However, the film moves beyond the attempt to discover absolute

truth, (a theme the Biblical verse expresses), and goes on to question the existence of a stable reality at all. The scanner creates ever-evolving fragments and shows a continually shifting world in which there can be no stability, security, or truth. Rotoscoping involves serial duplications, so that eventually it becomes a record of record of a record. Instability and detachment from any identifiable ‘real’ is written into the text by the process of production, which places layer upon layer of subjective interpretations of reality.

As mentioned previously, the idea of mirrors, scanners and layers of reality permeate both novel and film with regards to disordered subjective states. In the novel, the psychologist uses this analogy to describe the way in which Arctor sees the world, and Arctor thinks about the implications of this:

A darkened mirror, he thought; a darkened scanner. And St. Paul meant, by a mirror, not a glass mirror – they didn’t have those then – but a reflection of himself when he looked at the polished bottom of a metal pan. Luckman, in his theological readings, had told him that. Not through a telescope or lens system, which does not reverse, not through anything but seeing his own face reflected back up at him, reversed – pulled through infinity. Like they’re telling me. It is not through a glass but as reflected back by a glass. And that reflection that returns to you: it is you, it is your face, but it isn’t. And they didn’t have cameras in those old days, and so that’s the only way a person saw himself: backward.’

I have seen myself backward.

I have in a sense begun to see the entire universe backward. With the other side of my brain!¹¹⁶

We can think about this with regards to Elliott’s mirror analogy in the preceding chapter and also in relation to the uncanny, particularly in terms of Freud’s split identities and the Doppelgänger. In the book Arctor questions the possibilities of this fragmented ‘seeing’ and the impossibility of ever knowing which interpretation of reality is the right one:

Maybe, he thought, since I see both ways at once, correctly and reversed, I’m the first person in human history to have it flipped and not-flipped simultaneously, and so get a glimpse of what it’ll be when it’s right. Although I’ve got the other as well, the regular. And which is which?

¹¹⁶ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 169.

Which is reversed and which is not?
When do I see a photograph, when a reflection?¹¹⁷

Much like Elliott's circular model of two mirrors facing one another, Arctor's schema provides no way in which to define original and copy, interpretation or adaptation, as the two sides of the brain – and thus two visual perceptions – are constantly in dialogue with one another. The film's aesthetic is the visual equivalent of not getting to see through the mirror to the reality that it reflects; Plato's veil is never lifted. The visual style of the rotoscoping expresses the impossibility of seeing beyond surface by visually constructing a world in which it is impossible to separate reality from delusion, objective sight from hallucination. The production processes of the film make this idea ever present in the film text, as the various layers of rotoscoping shift against one another until any idea of an 'original' or 'real' has been lost. Everything we see is equally as valid/ invalid.¹¹⁸

Conveying Arctor's Disintegration Visually

Towards the end of Dick's novel he describes the effect of Arctor's visual perception by writing that 'all the spatial relationships in the room shifted; the alteration affected even his awareness of time.'¹¹⁹ We can see how the film interprets and represents this disorientating symptom of Substance D abuse during the scene in which Arctor sits in Hank's office for a meeting after his psychological examination. As Hank describes the extent of Arctor's brain damage, the sound in the room augments, becoming muffled, and the image distorts to give the impression

¹¹⁷ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 171.

¹¹⁸ The end of the film perhaps offers a note of hope by suggesting that Arctor may eventually 'see the way [he] once saw,' and places value on the visual for carrying meaning and reflecting truth. When Arctor sees the little blue flowers that New Path are harvesting to make Substance D, he says 'I saw,' and this is significant in relation to the novel's idea that 'the whole process is hidden beneath the surface of reality, and will only be revealed later.'

¹¹⁹ Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, p. 179.

that the world around him is beginning to melt and morph eerily, signalling the breakdown of his perception. He is shown in a close-up surrounded by the black space and blue light that has communicated his intense isolation throughout the film. The focus here is on his response to the subjective shots we are shown as he peers out of his scramble suit, which has until now acted as a division between him and what he sees. Smoke drifts into the frame from Hank's cigarette, swirling beneath him in a way similar to the swirling forms we encountered in Powell's *Swallow Me Whole*. The film also features the same fraying edges of reality, replicated here as blur and distortion. Unlike the hard line of the graphic novel, though, the image here seems to shimmer. As we see Hank from Arctor's perspective, layers of colour shift on the back wall as if the building itself – something we associate with stability - is morphing behind him. Arctor mentions he has two girls, 'little ones,' to which Hank replies 'I don't think you do...you're not supposed to' and we see Arctor's smile of recognition fade to a confused expression. Here the music's steady, ominous tones shift to a series of sharp, warped high pitched sounds, almost like those we encounter in horror films, as he glances around himself in mounting anxious panic.

The camera then swoops across the desk in an uncontrolled way, mimicking the movement of a head dizzily gazing downwards accompanied by a throbbing wind sound. The image becomes out of focus and we cut back to a shot of Arctor squirming in his chair as smoke rises from the bottom of the screen in an eerie externalisation of the strange force of the delusions he sees on Hank's desk. As he looks down at the desk the marks on the wood flow across the image like streaming water, visually suggesting the flow of the thoughts and the force of their current, and an ornament of an Eagle comes alive and squawks, fully realising the shift from

inanimate object to living, breathing, moving thing and communicating Arctor's inability to define reality from hallucination as his thoughts can now, quite literally, take flight. The next shot shows Arctor covering his face with hands, no longer distanced from the external by the cocoon of his suit and attempting to shield himself from his hallucinations (Fig. 34).



Figure 34. *A Scanner Darkly*

A cut back to a shot of Hank shows Arctor's girls briefly fade in and out of the image beside him, visually moulding his memories into his present situation as Hank's desk tilts from side to side in a rocking motion, creating an unstable image in which everything seems to shift independently (Fig. 35).

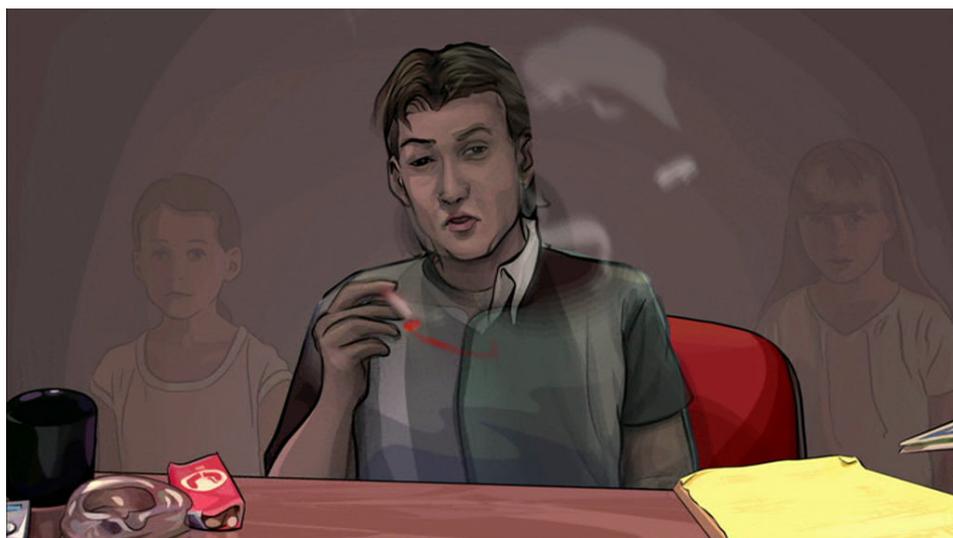


Figure 35. *A Scanner Darkly*

Their briefness on screen communicates his inability to fully grasp the memory; as soon as we realise they are there, they have faded away. One of girls flickers in and out on the left, and then one on the right, forcing the eyes to dart about the screen in a game of confused catch-up with the image. The shading of the back wall creates circles of colour around Hank, and as Arctor stares down at the desk objects in close-up blur and the desk itself tilts. Arctor's pained expressions, shown in close up, are crucial here; the rotoscoping aesthetic stylises his grimaces and makes every wince and nuance incredibly marked. The sequence communicates the intensity of Arctor's hallucinations by fully utilising the capability of the visual to construct an uncanny world in which things can shift and augment, creating Arctor's fragmented and disorientated subjective mind state whilst also allowing Reeves' performance to communicate the internal response to this warped perception.

In *A Scanner Darkly* Linklater has utilised the capabilities of the medium of film to offer a specific interpretation of the complex psychological breakdown we encounter in Dick's novel. Unlike the novel, the film has many visual and audio resources to draw upon to construct a disordered mind state – visual aesthetic, performance, star persona, vocal tone, framing, colour palette, music, dialogue, etc. –

and these many channels of meaning create a complex web of associations to convey disorder.

By undertaking a detailed analysis of the way in which *A Scanner Darkly* presents us with examples of warped mental and visual processes, I have provided a blueprint for the way in which I will approach the rest of my central texts. Most importantly, this case study has applied practically the theoretical interactions between word and image I investigated in the beginning of this chapter, and has adapted these to the multitrack medium of film, providing examples of the way in which invisible thought processes are translated to screen. I have presented an argument for the way in which the film adapts and communicates the ambiguity and complexity that we encounter in Dick's novel in a way that utilises the possibilities of its medium, and this will provide a framework for undertaking analyses of films that engage with specific mental disorders in the following chapters.

The Cinematic Construction of Schizophrenia
(Central Case Studies: Lodge Kerrigan's *Clean, Shaven* (1993) and Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001))

With *Clean, Shaven*, I really tried to examine the subjective reality of someone who suffered from schizophrenia, to try to put the audience in that position to experience how I imagined the symptoms to be: auditory hallucinations, heightened paranoia, disassociative feelings, anxiety. Hopefully the audience would feel at the end of it like how it must be to feel that way for a lifetime and not just eighty minutes – but I also wanted to attack the notion that people who suffer from mental illness are more violent than other people.¹

Lodge Kerrigan

This chapter examines the way in which the experience of schizophrenia is cinematically constructed in two central case studies: Lodge Kerrigan's *Clean, Shaven* and Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind*. I present the case studies within the context of current medical models of schizophrenia, a context which I have previously established as a key part of the selection criteria for my corpus. Before embarking on my detailed film analyses, I explore the imagery that is associated with the illness by examining the covers of psychology books and illustrate how key motifs also emerge in cinematic depictions of the illness. As the chapter develops, I will be bringing in references to other films, paintings and literary works that prove valuable for teasing out the key binaries, metaphors, words, and images that echo throughout portrayals of schizophrenia.

The chapter is focussed on analysing how the experience of schizophrenia is communicated *specifically* in the medium of film, assessing the way in which it is possible to portray abstract experiences using a combination of visual, aural, and verbal devices. I will draw out the particular way the medium utilises the relationship between the moving image and sound (incorporating the verbal) to create a representation of mental disorder, illustrating how film accesses a distinctive visual and aural vocabulary when dealing with interiority.

¹ Walter Chaw, 'Keen, Shaven,' <<http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/notes/lkerriganinterview.htm>> Accessed 20th July 2011.

My analysis will reveal the way in which both *A Beautiful Mind* and *Clean, Shaven* attempt to disassemble key binary oppositions to communicate the disordered mind states of their protagonists. Both films complicate our understanding of the dividing line between sanity and insanity, and present emerging oppositions (such as order/disorder, intimacy/detachment, inside/outside, genius/delusion, fragmented/whole, transparent/opaque) as existing within a delicate framework that can be explored and manipulated. Both films also respond to and challenge audience expectations regarding mental illness, and this social critique (explored through the binary of the threatened/threatening) will also be addressed. The final section of the chapter concludes with an analysis of *why* film as a specific medium may be particularly suitable for constructing the subjective experience of schizophrenia, and links these observations back to my work on the multitrack nature of the medium. The chapter is thus addressing, through an analysis of cinematic depictions of schizophrenia, the summative effect that these devices have when deployed simultaneously to construct subjective disorder using the multitrack medium of film. As I have suggested in the previous chapter, the opportunity for friction is more prevalent in a multitrack form, suggesting that film would lend itself well to the communication of disorder.

Understanding Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is arguably the most stigmatised of all mental health diagnoses. It is highly complex in terms of the symptoms associated with it, and the vast cinematic and literary characterisations of the disorder indicate the variety of ways it is understood by those treating it as well as by those experiencing it. Since one of my central case studies for this chapter is Lodge Kerrigan's *Clean, Shaven*, a film for which Kerrigan set up the one-time film production company 'DSM III,' referencing

the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Third edition), it is essential that I begin this chapter by familiarising the reader with how schizophrenia is categorised in the *DSM*. Though there are many sub-types and overlapping diagnoses that can be made under the umbrella of schizophrenia (such as paranoid and delusional), the *DSM* sets forth the following criteria for broad diagnosis (Fig. 1). If we examine this criteria – in particular section A, as my thesis is concerned with the cinematic communication of symptoms – my analysis will show that Kerrigan clearly had this set of criteria in mind when creating *Clean, Shaven*. The film thus presents an interesting translation of very abstract experiences (such as delusions and hallucinations) into the multiform medium of film.

Diagnostic criteria for Schizophrenia

A. *Characteristic symptoms:* Two (or more) of the following, each present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period (or less if successfully treated):

- (1) delusions
- (2) hallucinations
- (3) disorganized speech (e.g., frequent derailment or incoherence)
- (4) grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior
- (5) negative symptoms, i.e., affective flattening, alogia, or avolition

Note: Only one Criterion A symptom is required if delusions are bizarre or hallucinations consist of a voice keeping up a running commentary on the person's behavior or thoughts, or two or more voices conversing with each other.

B. *Social/occupational dysfunction:* For a significant portion of the time since the onset of the disturbance, one or more major areas of functioning such as work, interpersonal relations, or self-care are markedly below the level achieved prior to the onset (or when the onset is in childhood or adolescence, failure to achieve expected level of interpersonal, academic, or occupational achievement).

C. *Duration:* Continuous signs of the disturbance persist for at least 6 months. This 6-month period must include at least 1 month of symptoms (or less if successfully treated) that meet Criterion A (i.e., active-phase symptoms) and may include periods of prodromal or residual symptoms. During these prodromal or residual periods, the signs of the disturbance may be manifested by only negative symptoms or two or more symptoms listed in Criterion A present in an attenuated form (e.g., odd beliefs, unusual perceptual experiences).

D. *Schizoaffective and Mood Disorder exclusion:* Schizoaffective Disorder and Mood Disorder With Psychotic Features have been ruled out because either (1) no Major Depressive, Manic, or Mixed Episodes have occurred concurrently with the active-phase symptoms; or (2) if mood episodes have occurred during active-phase symptoms, their total duration has been brief relative to the duration of the active and residual periods.

E. *Substance/general medical condition exclusion:* The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition.

F. *Relationship to a Pervasive Developmental Disorder:* If there is a history of Autistic Disorder or another Pervasive Developmental Disorder, the additional diagnosis of Schizophrenia is made only if prominent delusions or hallucinations are also present for at least a month (or less if successfully treated).

Classification of longitudinal course (can be applied only after at least 1 year has elapsed since the initial onset of active-phase symptoms):

Episodic With Interepisode Residual Symptoms (episodes are defined by the reemergence of prominent psychotic symptoms); also specify if: **With Prominent Negative Symptoms**

Episodic With No Interepisode Residual Symptoms

Continuous (prominent psychotic symptoms are present throughout the period of observation); also specify if: **With Prominent Negative Symptoms**

Figure 1. Diagnostic criteria for Schizophrenia from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition, Text Revision, (DSM-IV-TR), (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), p. 312.

The nature of the *DSM* means that the approach we encounter here is very taxonomical and depersonalised. Considering the more humanist approach that both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* adopt, it is essential to consider alternative understandings of the disorder before approaching film analysis. These films clearly seek to enhance the viewer's understanding of the symptoms and experience of schizophrenia, an aim which echoes the sentiments of the work of psychiatrist R. D. Laing. In *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Laing addresses the basic problem of communication and comprehension between those experiencing mental disorder and those not, which holds interest for my project in that the visual is often used as a vehicle of this expression, or a bridge between one mind and another. He discusses the experience of schizophrenia in more philosophical terms, as opposed to medical language in the *DSM*:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself "together with" others or "at home in" the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on.²

Laing teases out key metaphors used in relation to the experience of schizophrenia. Applying these to *Clean, Shaven*, for example, we will see that Peter is not 'at home' in his mother's house, he is painfully isolated, and demonstrates a detachment from his body when he harms himself (which I discuss in detail later within this chapter). The idea of being 'a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body' is visually expressed in strikingly similar ways in *Swallow Me Whole* and *Donnie Darko* (Dir.

² Notes from R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, (Penguin Books, 1990, First published by Tavistock Publications (1959) Ltd., 1960), p. 17.

Richard Kelly, 2001), two works that both construct the symptoms of schizophrenia (Figs. 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Extract from Nate Powell's *Swallow Me Whole*. This image is discussed at length in Chapter Two.



Figure 3. Publicity still for *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, prod. Pandora Cinema, Flower Films, 2001).

The themes of *Donnie Darko* are intimately linked with questions of perceptions of reality, distortion, questions of the self (with Donnie writing ‘they made me do it’ on acts of vandalism). Laing comments that ‘What are to most people everyday happenings, which are hardly noticed because they have no special significance, may become deeply significant in so far as they either contribute to the sustenance of the

individual's being or threaten him with non-being.³ This is another way of interpreting the anxiety regarding stimuli; it is not so much an attempt to decode the stimuli as an attempt to preserve or understand the self. This echoes another key dichotomy that emerges in films dealing with schizophrenia between the whole self and the fragmented self, or as Laing conceptualises it, the being and the non-being. Laing continues: 'The individual feels that, like the vacuum, he is empty. But this emptiness *is* him. Although in other ways he longs for the emptiness to be filled, he dreads the possibility of this happening because he has come to feel that all he can be is the awful nothingness of just this very vacuum.'⁴ The skeleton suit worn by Donnie and the image of Ruth disengaging from her own body and seeing her 'lungs fill with soil and fog' in *Swallow Me Whole* both vividly represent the sense of self Laing describes:

The individual ... may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and anatomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable. And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body.⁵

This leads into existential concerns regarding one's place in the universe. Bentall writes that: 'Worldwide, by far the most common type of delusion is paranoid or persecutory, in which the patient believes that he or she is the focus of some kind of malevolent plot or conspiracy... the fact that the most frequently observed delusional beliefs reflect almost universal worries about our position in the social universe suggests that they must be closely related to commonplace existential concerns.'⁶

This common theme provides a route through which empathy can be formed, as it

³ Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, (Penguin Books, 1990, First published by Tavistock Publications (1959) Ltd., 1960), p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶ Richard P. Bentall, *Doctoring the Mind: Why Psychiatric Treatments Fail*, (First published by Allen Lane, 2009, Published in Penguin Books, 2010), p. 167.

allows members of the audience to align themselves with the character through the shared experience of isolation and alienation.⁷ It is essential to bear this more personal account of schizophrenia in mind when analysing both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind*, as they both heavily rely on this construction of their protagonists as threatened and isolated, a construct which is no doubt intended to respond to stereotypes of those with mental illness as threatening.

Constructing abstract symptoms visually

Artistic renderings of schizophrenia are extremely helpful because they are not confined by the constraints of diagnostic concerns – often they are expression for expression’s sake. My research into how the disorder is understood by psychologists resulted in an interesting tangent in my investigation. It emerged that there is value in analysing the images on the *covers* of the books that examine the various psychological understandings of schizophrenia, and that in many cases the covers of these books merit as much consideration as their contents, as a distinct visual grammar is observable. Since the symptoms of mental illness are experienced internally, and are by their very nature invisible, designing a visual expression of psychological mechanisms is a process that reveals interesting conceptions about how the disorder impacts the individual. A detailed analysis of the cover designs of three books (Richard Bentall’s *Madness Explained* and *Reconstructing Schizophrenia*, and Anthony S. David and John C. Cutting’s *The Neurology of Schizophrenia*) provides us with some hints about the way schizophrenia as a disorder can be constructed visually, suggesting the emerging oppositions and images – along with their associations – that are typically linked with it.

⁷ Sylvia Nasar comments that Nash was always concerned about his intellectual ability and importance in the world, and that he was very isolated throughout his childhood, growing up ‘without ever making a close friend.’ p. 37.

The front cover of *Madness Explained*, for example, features a self-portrait of Vincent van Gogh, an artist whose work is intricately bound with knowledge of his troubled life, which was beset by mental instability and a tendency towards emotional extremes (Fig. 4). Melissa McQuillan comments on the relationship between van Gogh and psychological studies:

Van Gogh's moments of extreme behaviour and his voluntary entry into the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole at Saint-Rémy also gave rise to a body of psychological literature. At the asylum, doctors diagnosed his illness as epilepsy. Karl Jaspers in a study of 1922 on van Gogh and Strindberg suggested schizophrenia, while others have speculated about the degenerative effects of syphilis and absinthe. Although epilepsy ... remains the currently favoured clinical specification, the less precise notion of madness has dominated the popular representation of the van Gogh persona; the incident of 'cutting off his ear' eclipses even his manner of death.⁸

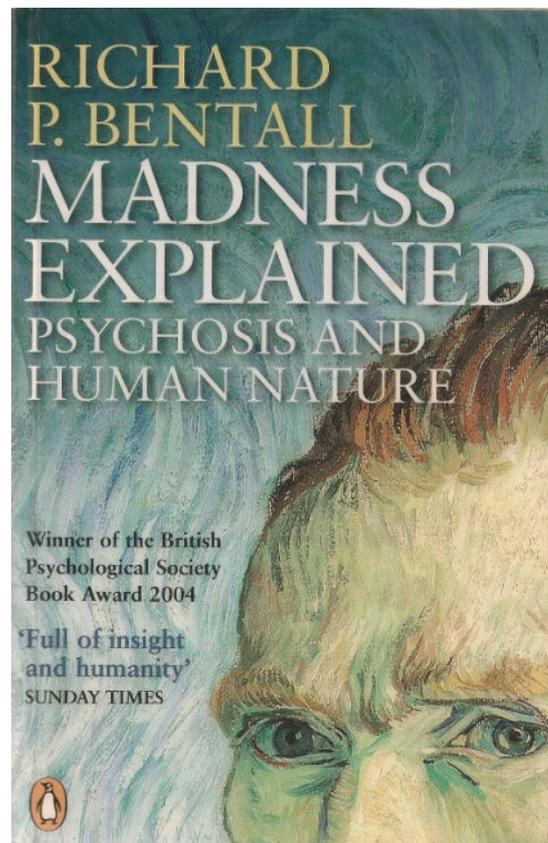


Figure 4. Cover of Richard P. Bentall's *Madness Explained: Psychosis and Human Nature* (Penguin Books Ltd, 2004, published by Allen Lane, 2003).

There are two things that we notice instantly about the book cover design: firstly, the image is recognisably a section of a van Gogh self-portrait; secondly, the face has

⁸ Melissa McQuillan, *Van Gogh*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 1989, Reprinted 2005), p. 9.

been harshly divided, drawing our focus to the forehead and the eyes. Isolating the top of the head in this way points towards the anatomical and physiological placement of the illness and firmly ties ‘madness’ to its origins within the brain/mind. The eyes, however, facilitate a more personal engagement with the viewer, communicating a despairing angst that seems to surpass any limiting medical notions of mental illness. In this way, we understand the illness as both biological/neurological but also read it in a more existential context, appreciating the unique nature of the symptoms as experienced by each individual. Interestingly, the image of a cropped or divided face is utilised repeatedly in *Clean, Shaven*, as I will discuss later in my film analysis, and it is here we can appreciate the dichotomy between the inside and the outside, and the fragmented and the whole, emerging when dealing with mental disorder. In the portrait, the eyes appeal outwards, suggesting the prison within, and thereby communicating a barrier. This barrier suggests that due to the limits of both the word *and* the image, the true, unmediated nature of the experience will always remain elusive and to some extent incommunicable.

The composition of the image means that there is very literally a sense of not seeing the whole picture, of being cut off from the whole; we encounter an incomplete or fractured person. The free, wavy lines of the brushstrokes suggest a spiralling sense of unreality (much the same as we encounter in *Swallow Me Whole* and *Donnie Darko*). The red tones of the eyebrows and hair give an intensity against the blue background, which seems to engulf van Gogh like a swirling sea around him. The fact that these lines, swirling patterns, and even the blue hue are replicated in his face further suggests his eventual submersion. The image also works on another level when we consider McQuillan’s comment that: ‘Van Gogh’s pictorial

self-portraits also advance an elusive and sometimes contradictory self-image. Between 1885 and 1889 he painted some forty-three self-portraits, vying with his Dutch predecessor Rembrandt in the multiplication of his depicted visage. The diversity of physiognomic representation is astonishing; the entire facial structure seems to belong to different men.⁹ This adds a complexity to the way the image works in terms of our understanding of schizophrenia, which involves an insecurity regarding identity and one's place in the world.

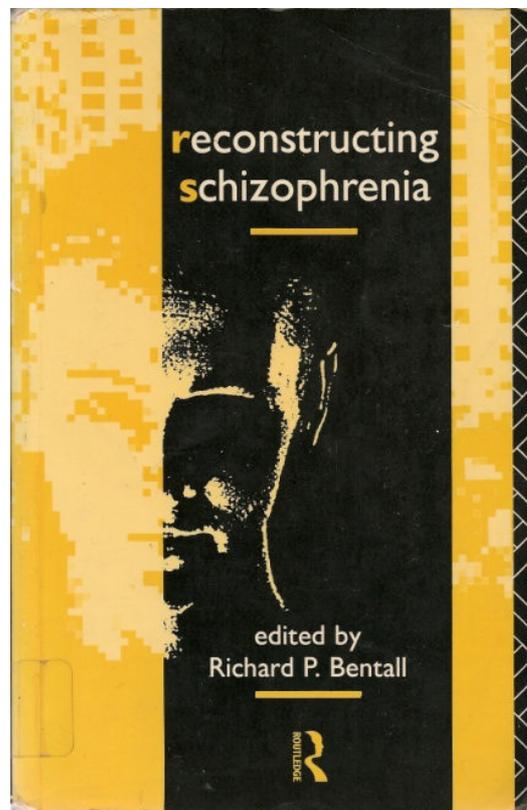


Figure 5. Cover of Richard, P. Bentall's *Reconstructing Schizophrenia* (London; New York: Routledge, First published 1990, paperback ed. 1992).

The cover of Bentall's *Reconstructing Schizophrenia* (Fig. 5) also communicates a disruption and fragmentation that cuts right through the centre of the person depicted. The visual language on each side of the split is markedly different.

⁹ McQuillan, *Van Gogh*, p. 15.

One side is crudely pixelated, triggering connotations with the technological arrangement and decoding of data, thus equating the human brain with the computer, and the other side more photographic, though the image is mottled and dark, blocking out the eyes and denying us access to the individual's emotion. The person thus becomes unreadable, unreachable, and threatening. The extreme side-lighting suggests a lurking darker side and divided personality, strongly echoing the visual language of *Psycho* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), a film that depicts an understanding of mental illness to which the book no doubt wishes to respond. It is worth noting that neither *A Beautiful Mind* nor *Clean, Shaven* adopt this disturbing iconography in relation to their protagonist, representing a move away from misinformed conceptions of mental illness towards a more nuanced – and empathetic – approach to understanding mental disorders such as schizophrenia (the films do this by exploring the complex opposition between the threatening and the threatened). The image could also be the communication of the two very different approaches adopted by the psychiatrist and psychologist (one reads the person as computer and statistics, and the other as a more personal, dark mystery). Another interpretation would be that the darkened side represents the current lack of understanding or empathy, and the pixilation represents this conceptualisation being reconstructed – after all, it is the reconstructed, pixelated face that has the agency of a stare.

David and Cutting's *The Neuropsychology of Schizophrenia* (Fig. 6) presents us with an image of random, messy lines that resemble a Pollock drip painting, visually mimicking the neurological pattern of brain cell connections. A grid is imposed on these organic connections and disconnections, dividing them up with rigid thick black lines and two tones of yellow. This could be an attempt to represent

the fragmentation and division experienced in schizophrenia (the hazy yellow signifying the blocking out of light and the thick black lines communicating the inability for connections to reach across the barriers inflicted by the disorder), or it could be a visual expression of the framework within which authors have tried to understand the symptoms.

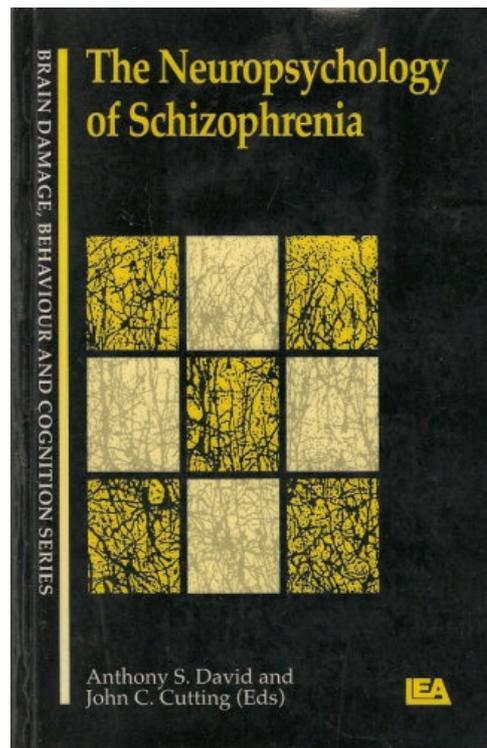


Figure 6. Cover of Anthony David and John C. Cutting's *The Neuropsychology of Schizophrenia* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associated, Publishers, 1994).

Interestingly, we encounter this grid-like image in *Clean, Shaven* (Fig. 7), *Donnie Darko* (Fig. 8), and *A Beautiful Mind* (Fig. 9) suggesting that it has powerful connotations with the fragmented thought processes and inability to decode stimuli experienced by people diagnosed with schizophrenia. It also introduces a spreadsheet type feel, as if things are mathematical and straightforward, an idea David and Cutting's book clearly contradicts by juxtaposing the grid with the organic, messy lines of the Pollock-esque image (positioning order in opposition to

disorder). *A Beautiful Mind* also utilises this symbolism via Nash's equations, developing a visual grammar I go on to explore in the next section.

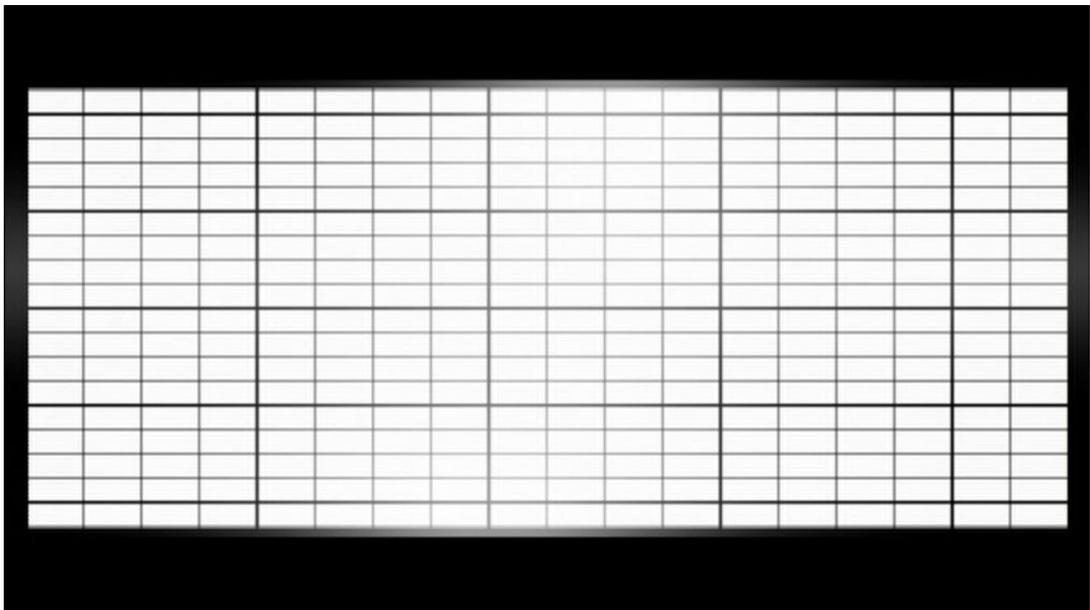


Figure 7. *Donnie Darko*



Figure 8. *Clean, Shaven* (dir. Lodge Kerrigan, Prod. DSM III, 1993).



Figure 9. *A Beautiful Mind* (dir. Ron Howard, Prod. Universal Pictures, Dreamworks SKG, Imagine, 2001).

The image of grid-like bars is loaded with the symbolism of entrapment, claustrophobia, and being out of control. It also speaks of boundaries between the self and the world, or even more significantly, the self and others. In the *Clean, Shaven* image, there are several layers of different patterning (grid bars, metal mesh, horizontal bars behind the mesh), visually representing abstract layers of code, meaning, and interpretation. In *A Beautiful Mind*, the emphasis with this motif is on the way Nash sees the world through code, or as a mathematical problem to be solved (Fig. 9 shows the patterns of light from a crystal glass that Nash observes, which he then superimposes onto the design of a classmate's tie). At the end of the film, Nash sees his illness as 'a problem with no solution' and argues that he might be able to solve the illness if he could just 'apply [his] mind.' His psychiatrist refutes this idea, arguing that 'this isn't math ... there's no theorem, no proof, you can't reason your way out of this ... because your mind is where the problem is in the first place.' The complexity of mental illness is communicated by the fact it cannot be visualised as a mathematical equation, and thus cannot be decoded and unravelled in a straightforward way.

There is merit in devoting a great deal of time to image analysis when we are aware that a film is trying to visually communicate the invisible. Schizophrenia interacts interestingly with my investigation into the word/image divide, as films such as *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* fully utilise the possibility for cross-channels of communication between the word and image, and use relationships within the frame, across the film, and between the sound and the image to explore several binary oppositions that emerge throughout the film. In the film analyses that follow, I hope to assess how the multitrack character of film is particularly suitable for communicating the symptoms experienced by those diagnosed as having schizophrenia, and for capturing the complexity of mental disorder by unravelling several recurring oppositions.

Kerrigan and Howard's approach to Schizophrenia

Before embarking on an analysis of *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind*, it is crucial that we appreciate the directors' connection to and understanding of schizophrenia. In an interview with Steven Soderbergh about the making of *Clean, Shaven*, Kerrigan says that he was motivated by an 'interest in people on the margins of society' and the fact that he had 'a close friend who suffered from schizophrenia.'¹⁰ Within this interview he also demonstrates an in depth understanding of the symptoms of the illness, saying that 'auditory hallucinations are a primary symptom of the illness, so I knew that it was really important to write those in at the start, for the audience to get a sense and a feel for what it might be like to suffer from schizophrenia.'¹¹ Kerrigan's film is one to be endured rather than enjoyed, and in

¹⁰ *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary: 'In this commentary, recorded in New York City, in 2006, Steven Soderbergh interviews Lodge Kerrigan about the process of writing and making *Clean, Shaven*.'

¹¹ Ibid.

many ways this speaks volumes for its success in creating a truly disturbing and intensely challenging depiction of subjectivity.¹² Kerrigan also sets up the question of Peter's potential for violence, making the audience challenge the assumptions they make as the film progresses and forcing them to evaluate their attitudes towards those with mental illness.

Due to the disorientating nature of the film, when analysing the devices used by Kerrigan to create this sensory experience in which the audience will really 'feel what it might be like' to have these symptoms, it is essential we appreciate the way in which the multitrack form of film is utilised. This is a film whose power rests in the friction, collision, fragmentation, unity, and the rupture of sound and image, not only within their own channels but also when they are combined with each other. The film is unrelentingly kinetic and has a tactile quality that renders the self-mutilation scenes intensely disturbing and intrusive; both the audio and visual senses are challenged throughout, and it is through this challenge that key thematic oppositions are conflicted and dismantled.

Like *Clean, Shaven*, *A Beautiful Mind* attempts to render cinematically the experience of schizophrenia. More specifically, it translates to cinema the story of Professor John Nash, the Nobel Prize winning mathematician, inventor of game theory, and subject of Sylvia Nasar's bestselling biography of the same name. *A Beautiful Mind* was criticized by David Bordwell for being 'pure Oscar bait', but it is nonetheless very interesting in the way it constructs disorder – or, more specifically,

¹² In the *Clean, Shaven* DVD commentary and Atkinson's video essay, certain films are referred to as key examples of constructing with mental disorder: 'There are plenty of precedents, all of them risky, for daring to guess at the interior experience of psychological states ... *Caligari*, Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *Vertigo*, Polanski's *Repulsion*, Bergman's *Persona* (largely plays out in a person's head), *My Own Private Idaho*, Kronenberg's *Spider*, which certainly seems to have the DNA of *Clean, Shaven* lurking around in it.' Kerrigan comments that he was 'Watching a lot of Polanski and a lot of documentaries on mental illness and people suffering from them.' DVD commentary, Kerrigan. (Other films named include: *A Woman under the influence*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Persona*.)

the mental disorder of a mathematical genius.¹³ Though Howard takes a lot of liberties with the film (such as representing audio hallucinations visually), the symbolism at work is worthy of serious interrogation and there are recognisable themes that emerge in the way the experience of schizophrenia is portrayed.

Howard undertook detailed research when designing how Nash's breakdown would be translated to the medium of film, and this is one of the key ways *A Beautiful Mind* differs from *Clean, Shaven*.¹⁴ Rather than presenting a few days in the life of a protagonist, *A Beautiful Mind* communicates mental processes moving from genius to delusion and through to recovery, and explores the blurred boundaries between these states. To ensure accuracy in the representation of the treatment of Nash's illness, throughout the film Howard had researchers consulting on key scenes, such as Nash's insulin treatments. Mannerisms were incredibly important to both the filmmakers and Russell Crowe, who met Nash in order to replicate his physicality and gain personal insight into his condition. Performance, a crucial element in both films, will be discussed later in this chapter. As with *Clean, Shaven*, the film has the clear intention of trying to cinematically construct complex abstract subjectivity, with the goal being to 'illustrate the experience...not the disease as observed, the disease as experienced.'¹⁵ Though both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* set themselves the same aim of aligning the audience with the person experiencing schizophrenia, the films set about doing this in different ways. Both of the films experiment with the inside/outside dichotomy and spectator alignment, but in *A Beautiful Mind* this alignment is integral to the film's narrative, whereas *Clean,*

¹³ Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, (University of California, 2006), p. 86.

¹⁴ Ron Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary. Howard discusses the fact he did 'lots of research' and studied 'mannerisms,' watching 'hours of documentary footage' and 'list of affects.'

¹⁵ Ibid.

Shaven creates a more sensory experience in which we grasp to find meaning and are assaulted by unsettling stimuli almost relentlessly, just like the protagonist.

The key thing we must remember about Howard's film is that it begins its exploration of subjectivity by communicating moments of cognitive genius, not symptoms of schizophrenia. This challenge of the distinction between genius and delusion is explored by navigating Nash's shifting mental states, and this is part of the way in which the film lulls us into a false sense of security. As Bordwell notes, 'the narration deceives us from the start by making us think that he's merely eccentric.'¹⁶ So, before communicating schizophrenia, Howard is challenged with the task of communicating mathematical genius.

The main device Howard uses to do this is the special effect of a glowing light on patterns or objects to signify revelatory cognition. In this opening sequence, we see Nash view the spatial relationships between the fragmented sunlight shining through a crystal glass and the patterns in citrus fruit, and these shapes are then superimposed onto his classmate's tie, leading Nash to announce sheepishly to his friend that 'there could be a mathematical explanation for how bad your tie is.' Here, the image is of fundamental importance in communicating how Nash sees the world as a complex web of mathematical relationships. Here, seeing *is* thinking. The fact that Nash chooses to share this observation with a classmate he has just met signals immediately to the audience that he is interacting with the world and those around him in a way reflective of his unusual mental processes. The warm glow of light as the patterns slot into place signals Nash's understanding of code or numbers, linking into the long heritage that light has in language as being symbolic of knowledge, revelation, and understanding.

¹⁶ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, (University of California, 2006), p. 88.

Howard comments that this device was ‘inspired by something I read about the inventor Tesla, that he used to close his eyes and literally see inventions coming together.’¹⁷ The difficulty the project presented was the problem of visually communicating ‘the moment of epiphany,’ but Howard reports that after speaking to mathematicians and great thinkers ‘everybody used the same terms: “there’s a flash of light, the clouds lift, the fog goes away, suddenly it all becomes clear, comes into focus.”’¹⁸ There is a key metaphor here that links into my graphic novel work on the interaction between words and images and the way in which the abstract can be visually expressed through association and the process of decoding an image. *A Beautiful Mind* draws extensively on the symbolism of light as knowledge, understanding, and revelation, and thus ‘introduces into the movie ... a visual grammar of special effects’¹⁹ that lets us know that this film is dealing within a framework of expressive metaphors and symbolism. We understand immediately that the light that flashes during one of John’s cognitions is not literal light but a marker of recognition. The problem occurs when we cannot visually distinguish between real breakthroughs and ones based on delusional thinking; the fact they are not coded differently means we can appreciate Nash’s inability to differentiate delusion from reality.

In the scenes at the Pentagon, several edits take us through different points on the lit up board of code (from John’s perspective) as numbers flash in different combinations – we can see that there is logic to his process, as geometric patterns are highlighted and augmented until a pattern emerges that he interprets as coordinates (Fig. 10). This visual representation is coupled by intense music and the whisperings of John’s internal dialogue to himself – language becomes code as word and image

¹⁷ Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Akiva Goldsman, Ibid.

both melt into the abstract framework of Nash's mind. The motif of the steady cam that swirls around him signifies his intense concentration and awe at the place when he arrives. This same motif is used in his delusional experience with Parcher, thus 'tricking' the audience into believing that this setting is just as real as the Pentagon. There is thus a sense of continuity with Nash's mental states, as no clear line is drawn between sanity and delusion; Nash's genius and his mental disorder are represented as on the same continuum, a continuum to which the medium lends a fluidity.

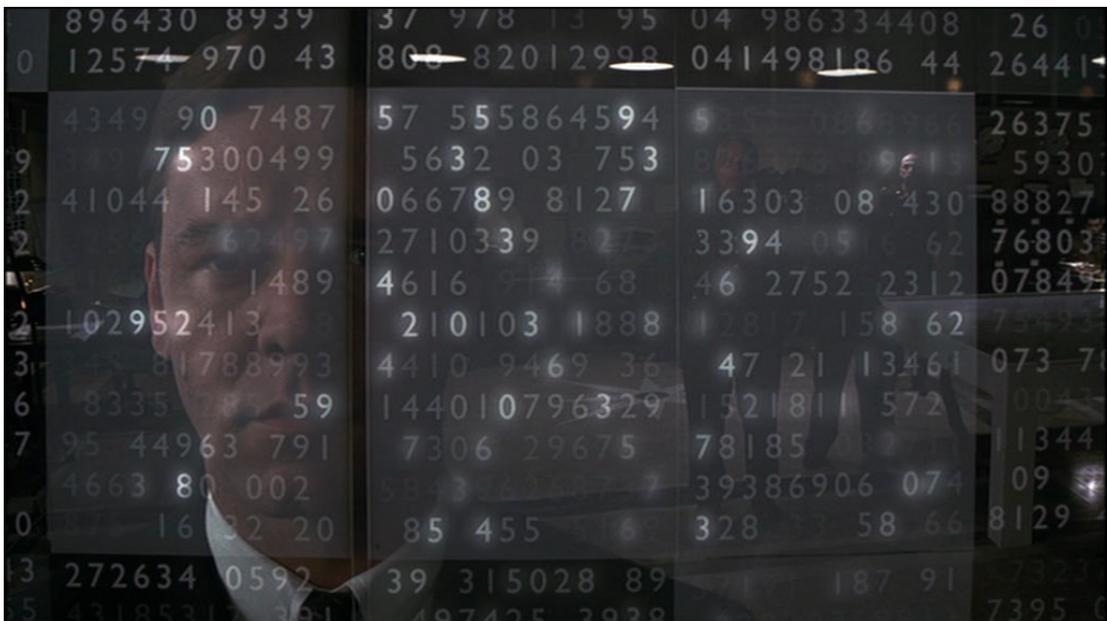


Figure 10. *A Beautiful Mind*



Figure 11. *A Beautiful Mind*

As Nash decodes the numbers (Fig. 11), we see the same incomplete face that we encountered on the cover of *Madness Explained*, which featured a cropped portrait of Van Gogh. The dominance of the mind over his surroundings is visually represented, and his complete mental focus is communicated through his stillness in juxtaposition with the background, which is in a different plane of time as people fade in and out behind him. These moments communicate Nash's mathematical breakthroughs before the symptoms of schizophrenia properly manifest themselves and he starts to see code everywhere.

When Nash's symptoms become more extreme, he starts living in a reality in which he has been asked by Parcher to search out secret messages encoded by Russian spies. As he looks at newspaper clippings, certain letters and words seem to light up and float off the page, as if freeing themselves from hiding (Fig. 12). As Nash places papers around himself, an overhead shot shows pages and sections flashing up as he spins on the spot to try and understand the signs he is finding (Fig. 13). The idea of viewing 'from above' has connotations with an objective, 'God's eye' view, suggesting a moment at which everything should fall into place and reveal

some sort of universal law that links all of the information together. It represents not just another perspective, but *the* perspective. These shots suggest that Nash believes that the patterns he sees are intimately linked, and to decipher them would reveal an ultimate truth.

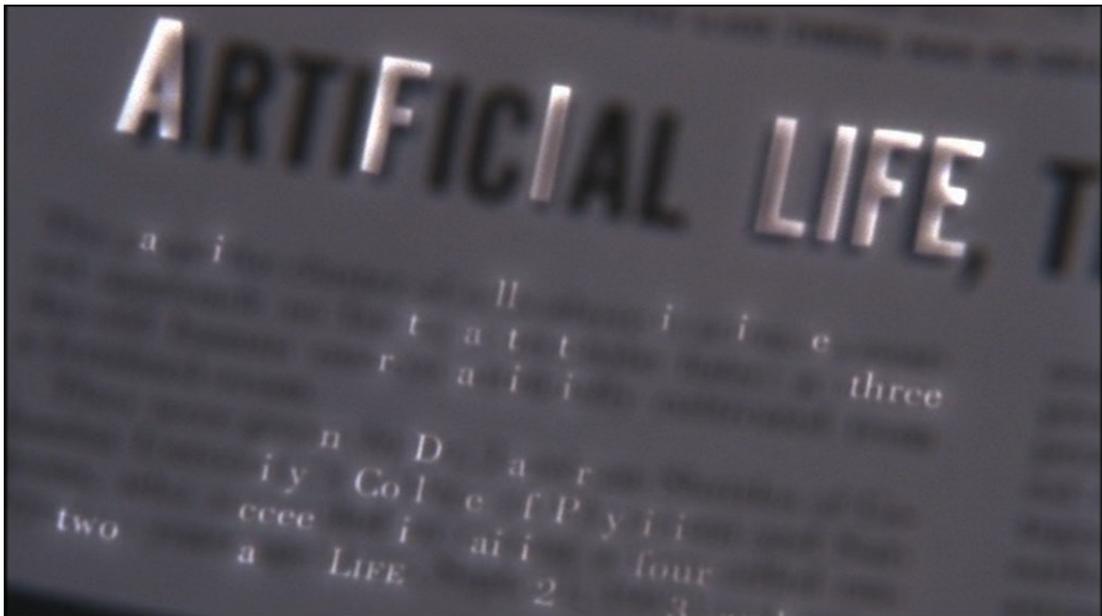


Figure 12. *A Beautiful Mind*



Figure 13. *A Beautiful Mind*. The appearance of this composition echoes the shot in *Clean, Shaven* in which Peter sits at his desk trying to make sense of the stimuli that bombards him.

Nash plots his discoveries onto a map, literally imprinting his code onto the world (Fig. 14). As his delusions become fully blown, Alicia discovers Nash's study to be an incomprehensible collage of articles, maps, patterns and code (Fig. 15). Nash sees the world as a web of association, visualised here by string that he has pinned over his findings (a motif used also in *Spider*, though in that instance it has a much more sinister tie to the narrative).

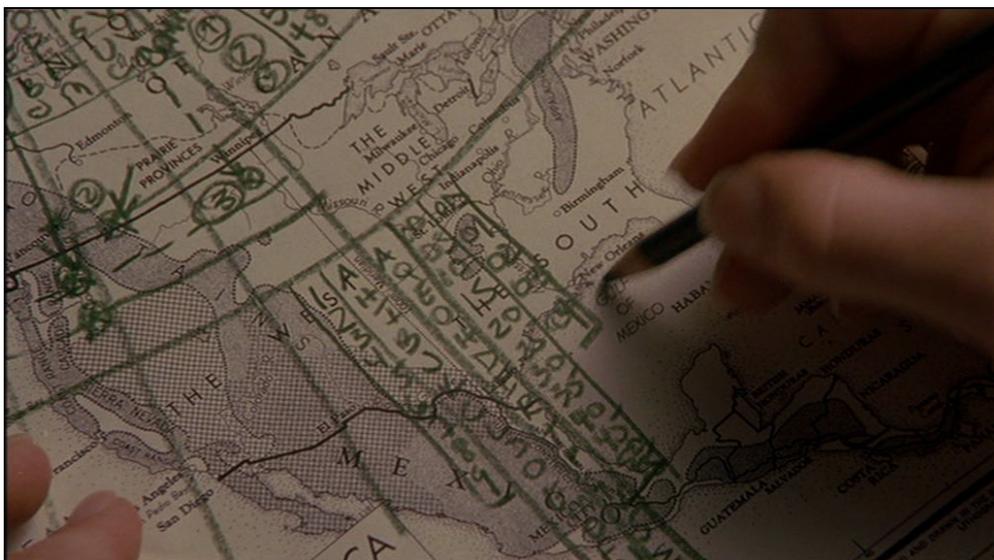


Figure 14. *A Beautiful Mind*



Figure 15. *A Beautiful Mind*

As I argued before regarding the ‘flash of light’ device, there is a point at which the code motif signals creativity and genius as opposed to delusion. Even before his symptoms become apparent, the primary way in which Nash’s worldview is visually represented is by the equations that he writes on the windows of his dorm and the library, thus imprinting his mathematical way of reading the world onto its image. As light streams through the window from the outside, it does so through the mathematical code Nash is working on. It seems as if this way of seeing forms part of the barrier that separates him from other students and the outside world (Figs. 16-19). When Nash’s thinking is more confused, Howard signals this using multi-coloured pens, and when he recovers at the end of the film and his thinking is more level, the colour returns to white – stable, clear, uncluttered.

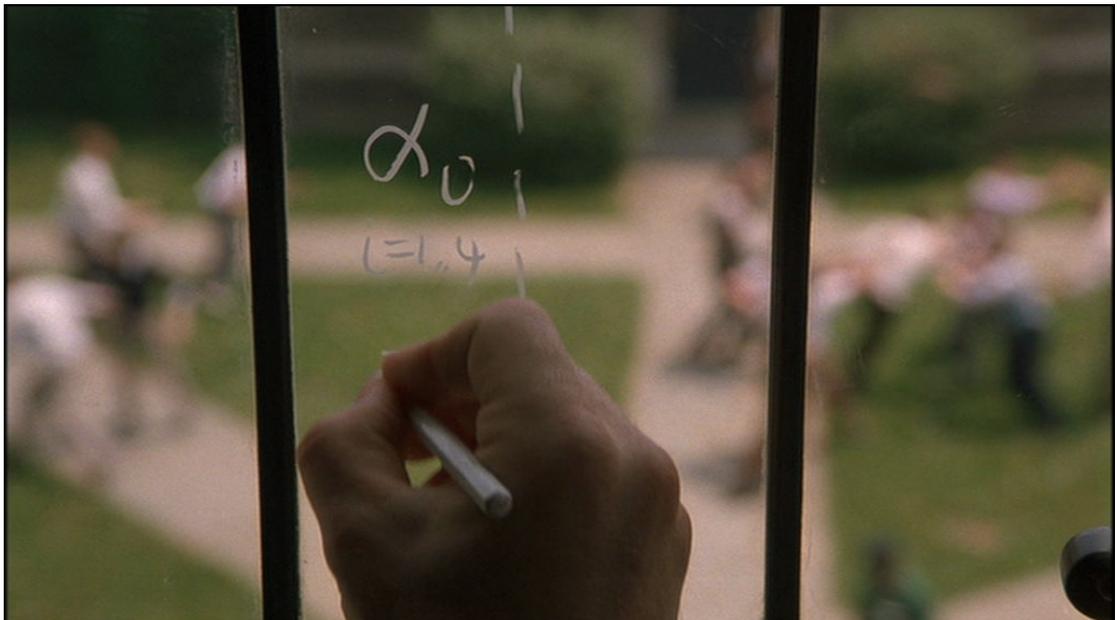


Figure 16. *A Beautiful Mind*

Nash is so at ease with high level mathematics that he speaks to students as he writes incredibly complex equations on the board, communicating through two channels of code simultaneously and indicating the creativity and plasticity of Nash’s mind. The patterns of the bars within the window frame add another layer of complexity to the

mathematics on the glass, and also demonstrate how Nash works with naturally occurring patterns (Fig. 17).



Figure 17. *A Beautiful Mind*

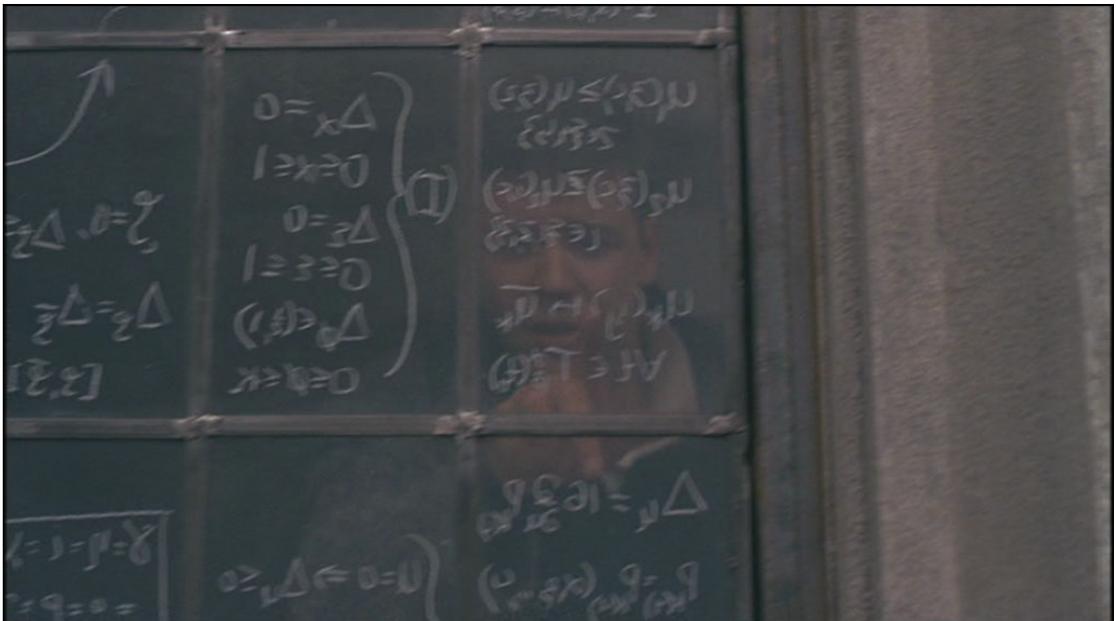


Figure 18. *A Beautiful Mind*

In the first section of the film, Nash is unable to find the mathematical breakthrough he is looking for and is tormented by a fear of failure (Fig. 18). By placing the

camera outside of the window, Nash is visually trapped by his work and the way he reads the world – the window to the outdoors becomes prison bars.

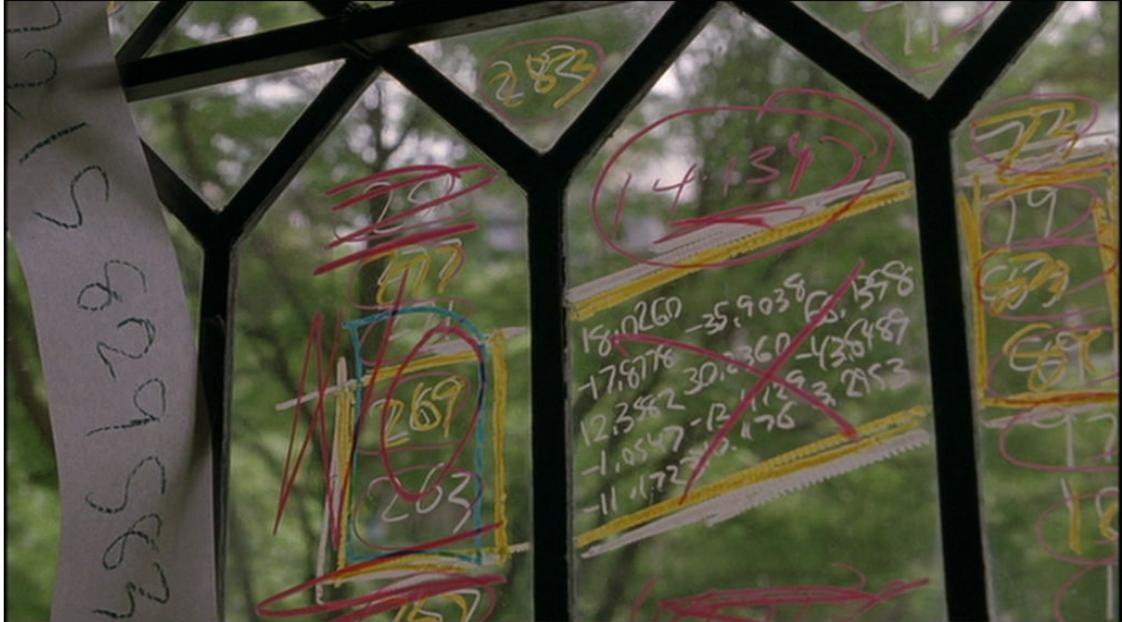


Figure 19. *A Beautiful Mind*

Working in colour signifies disordered and frenzied thinking, as does the frantic and scruffy aesthetic of mathematics when compared to his more ordered and logical work (Fig. 19). Howard comments that when there is a ‘return to clarity in his own thinking and work ... he’d go back to white’²⁰ Not only is the writing messy, but the angle of the window is skewed and the composition is unbalanced (compared with Figs. 16 and 17), adding to the visual disorder. A piece of paper with a stream of numbers scrawled across it hangs messily over the window, detached and unconnected from the other numbers both in terms of medium, writing size, and the vertical direction of the writing. Everything about this image suggests disorder.

This introductory analysis has aimed to indicate just one aspect of the visual vocabulary *A Beautiful Mind* uses to suggest the continuum between genius and

²⁰ Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

delusion, and illustrates the approach to textual analysis I will adopt for my film analyses throughout this chapter.

Aural Symbolism

Sound and Silence

When analysing how film can construct disorder it is crucial to appreciate how vital the audio track is, as it provides a channel through which rupture, fragmentation, and emotional/mental states can be communicated. One of the most jarring aspects of *Clean, Shaven*, for example, is the incessant sound of radio static and broken snatches of sentences that permeate the film. The sound undulates from white noise to unrelenting rants and screeches; sometimes we hear the sound of children screaming, laughing, or crying, often coupled with disturbing decontextualized pictures of them. Michael Atkinson describes how ‘innocent voices take on a menacing aura because they are decontextualized, because they are unnaturally heightened, because they’re not tied to a visual. Just like the distant sounds we all hear every day that snare our conscious attention for a split second because we’re not sure how or why they were made.’²¹ The use of sound in this way has an effect not only because of its fragmented nature, but because of the rupture caused when the sound is abruptly cut. Frantic and disorganised audio collides with still silence, and provides a channel through which we move in and out of Peter’s subjectivity.

In the scene in which Peter is in the library, for example, the radio static that has been dominating the audio track abruptly stops. It is at these moments that we are often placed ‘outside’ Peter’s subjectivity and are given the opportunity to re-evaluate his behaviour from the perspective of those around him. Actions that

²¹ Michael Atkinson, ‘A Subjective Assault: Lodge Kerrigan’s *Clean, Shaven*, “Subjectivity and Sound”’ (video essay). Available on *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special features.

seemed reasonable before (for instance, Peter banging his head in frustration at the sounds that bombard him – and us – relentlessly), suddenly seem intimidating, unreasonable, and potentially violent. Quietness is presented as calm and order in opposition to the chaos of sound. The camera tracks backwards and we are placed with the other occupants in the library, reinforcing our position *outside* of Peter's mind and negotiating the barrier between the internal and the external (Fig. 20). This sudden switch in alignment compounds our understanding of the horror Peter goes through, as it cinematically communicates the complete isolation he feels due to the fact no one else has access to his mental experience. He is entirely alone in his distress.



Figure 20. *Clean, Shaven*

It is easy to understand why Kerrigan decided on the radio as both metaphor and audio effect when we look at the literature on symptoms of the illness, which often cite this as part of paranoid delusion and also as the situation in which voices are most likely to be heard. Psychologist Richard Bentall notes that: ‘Sometimes patients’ voices appear to be external to themselves, but for many patients they appear to be coming from somewhere inside their own heads, although they

nonetheless seem alien. (Not surprisingly, it is fairly common for patients to reach the conclusion that they have been implanted with some kind of radio receiver.)²² Not only does Kerrigan's radio motif serve to characterise Peter's main delusion – that he has been implanted with a radio receiver and transmitter – but it also provides the trigger and context for the voices he hears. We know that Kerrigan researched the illness,²³ and thus he would know that, as Bentall writes, 'Patients are most likely to hear voices during periods of relative silence, or when exposed to unpatterned stimulation, for example when there is a washing machine or poorly tuned radio in the background.'²⁴

In his interview with Kerrigan, Steven Soderbergh points out that it is a very 'sound driven film,' and Kerrigan agrees with this, arguing that sound has 'equal power to communicate...but, really specifically this is for *Clean, Shaven*, simply because auditory hallucinations are a primary symptom of the illness, so I knew that it was really important to write those in at the start, for the audience to get a sense and a feel for what it might be like to suffer from schizophrenia.'²⁵ It is difficult in writing to articulate convincingly the claustrophobic effect that the clashing sounds and images have on the viewer, especially when the sound is so distorted. We are distressed by this effect in a similar manner to Peter (Fig. 21), and it feels

²² Bentall, *Doctoring the Mind*, p. 177.

²³ Kerrigan describes his research when making *Clean, Shaven*: 'So I knew then that to convey these hallucinations and convey the symptoms was really important. So I did a lot of research, I went to Bellevue Hospital, I had a friend who worked on the psych ward, spoke to doctors, people in the street' *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

²⁴ Bentall, *Doctoring the Mind*, p. 180. Bentall connects the 'ceaseless chatter' we all experience when we close our eyes and listen to our thoughts with the experiences of schizophrenia. The issue, he says, is not a case of perceptual difficulties but of discerning the source of those perceptions: 'In an important series of electrophysical investigations conducted by Judith Ford at the University of San Diego, it was found that, when ordinary people talk or think in words, the auditory perception areas in the temporal lobes of the brain become less sensitive to sounds because they are "switched off" by messages from the speech generation areas in the left frontal cortex. This mechanism apparently reduces the risk that self-generated speech will be mistaken for an external voice. It is as if the brain is saying to itself: "Don't listen, that's you doing the talking." Ford found that this mechanism was absent in hallucinating patients.' p. 180.

²⁵ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

disconcertingly disenfranchising to be denied context for either of the media tracks we are being subjected to – the aural or the visual.

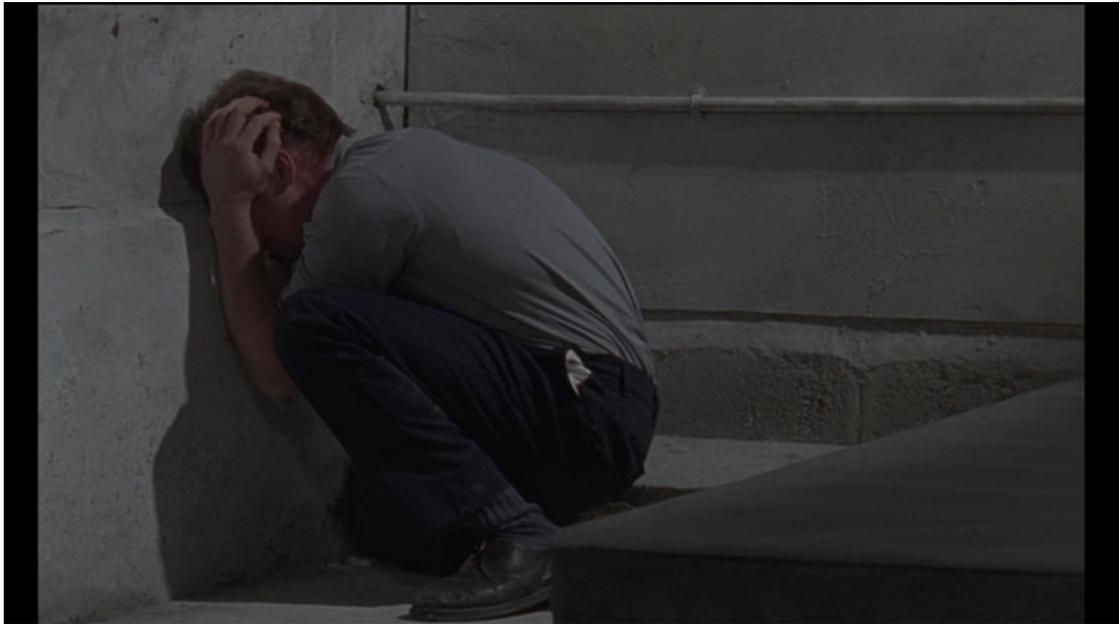


Figure 21. *Clean, Shaven* Peter tries to block out the sounds and thoughts that torment him.



Figure 22. *Clean, Shaven*

As Peter attempts to tune the radio in his battered car (Fig. 22), we read this as a metaphor for his efforts to decode and filter the frantic thoughts and sounds he experiences. The metaphor works on several levels: radio waves, like thought

patterns, are invisible. They can be clear, distinct, vague, raw, or manipulated; they can carry messages, or they can be distorted, meaningless static, ‘unmoored and floating in the ether.’²⁶ Most importantly, radio waves are everywhere, flooding the air we breathe, and it is our ability to narrow these waves down to a single channel that allows us to make sense of them. Peter’s inability to tune his radio properly is symbolic of his inability to organise his thought processes or respond appropriately to the varied stimuli that comprise everyday life. The images and sounds all hit him with equal impact, and he is completely at the mercy of what he encounters, for everything is a code to be understood and nothing can be discounted. Michael Atkinson comments on the poeticism of this metaphor, arguing that the sounds are ‘once purposeful communications never received, voices not understood, lost intentions in space.’²⁷

One particularly poignant sentence can be easily discerned from the constant chatter of the radio static: ‘For you it’s paranoia. For me it’s a reality.’ This single line sums up what the film is trying to communicate to the audience. By taking us into the subjectivity of Peter, we are given the chance to understand and empathise with his behaviour. *A Beautiful Mind* aims to provide the same opportunity, with director Ron Howard keen to demonstrate that ‘someone with schizophrenia’s reality is as real for them as for any of us ... as an individual they may be engaged in something that is terrifying.’²⁸ Dennis Lim focuses on how important the sound is in reconstructing the mental terror of the symptoms, and how these are responded to by the viewer:

Kerrigan's approach to his subject might be termed phenomenological – a film of minimal dialogue and fastidious textures, *Clean, Shaven* mostly resists explanations and backstory,

²⁶ Atkinson, ‘A Subjective Assault: Lodge Kerrigan’s *Clean, Shaven*,’ (video essay).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ron Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

restricting itself instead to transcribing and replicating the manifestations of schizophrenia ... We experience this film as Peter experiences his life, painfully alert to stimuli. Auditory hallucinations, a primary symptom of schizophrenia, are brilliantly conveyed. The first thing you notice about the sound design is its exaggerated, alarming closeness – everything seems to be crowding in on your brain. Hahn Rowe's soundtrack, a blanket of electronic pulses and staticky white noise, is mixed in with a chorus of muffled voices (one poignant snatch: 'For you it's paranoia. For me it's a reality'). Even when the volume is turned down, the abrupt silences are fraught and agonizing.²⁹

Lim identifies the friction not only between the different sounds that overlap and clash, but also between sound and non-sound. In addition to being 'painfully alert to stimuli' as Peter is, just as Peter attempts to piece things together and determine the significant from the insignificant, so the viewer attempts to make sense of the images and sounds they are confronted with. The film becomes a puzzle to be solved, but even at its end we are not granted the solution.

A Beautiful Mind also uses sound as a channel through which to construct disorder, though its mechanism is arguably more narrative driven. Howard uses sound to construct a rule by which characters are introduced: 'At every opportunity the delusional characters are introduced first with sound, because delusions are primarily auditory. I also wanted to establish the delusional characters from Nash's point of view.'³⁰ We always hear the character before we see them, even if only for a split second – a footstep, a cough, the creaking of a door. As the camera reveals the source of the sound, we are carried into Nash's subjective perspective – sound (or the illusion of sound) serves as a bridge to the imagined.³¹

The soundtrack also provides an interesting hint towards the delusional space of Nash's thought processes, both when he is in his creative state and when he is

²⁹ Dennis Lim, 'Clean, Shaven: Inside Man.'

<<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/453-clean-shaven-inside-man>>, accessed 1st August 2011.

³⁰ Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

³¹ Visual hallucinations are very rarely a symptom of schizophrenia, and thus Howard's representation of delusions visually can be understood as a way of cinematically translating symptoms of the disorder. Howard comments that: 'It was always our goal to try to present schizophrenia in a very personal way, so the delusional characters are symbols...allegorical, not clinical presentations', through which the filmmakers could 'illustrate the experience...not the disease as observed, the disease as experienced.' Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD commentary.

experiencing an intense paranoid delusion. Goldsman argues that ‘James Horner’s music is really serving to help us understand that this is an intense cognitive process,’³² as it is intricate and haunting in its atmosphere, as well as featuring the ethereal soprano voice of a young Charlotte Church.

In the final montage scene in which Nash tries to make sense of his delusions, the patterned sounds of the piano keys mimic the mathematical logic of Nash’s code-breaking. Though more sinister, similarly atmospheric music plays during the car chase scene in which Nash believes he is being chased by agents who wish to kill him. After dropping off classified documents, Parcher swerves outside what Nash believes to be the ‘secret government office’ and tells Nash to get into the car. A car chase ensues, and suddenly Nash’s life is threatened as he is shot at. Of course, none of this is really happening (screenwriter Akiva Goldsman comments that in the car chase scene he thinks that ‘John is probably sitting under a mailbox, hugging his arms, and rocking – but not in his mind. In his mind all this is happening, and so in our minds, it’s happening as well.’)³³ Howard notes that the ‘music, interestingly, is more psychological than it is genre driven ... It’s not scoring it as an action sequence, it’s dealing with Nash’s emotion.’³⁴ We would expect to hear loud drums, electric guitars, and a full sound with a fast paced rhythm when confronted with a car chase scene, but in *A Beautiful Mind* this ‘action’ sequence is accompanied by quiet, understated string instrumentation and sparse single piano notes. We generally associate this subtle music more with internal emotion than with external action, and this apparent anomaly serves as a hint that all is not quite as it seems. Sound is a marker and reflection of interiority, impressed on the scene as a

³² Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

whole to encourage us to question the relationship between Nash's mind and the events going on around him.

Visual Symbolism

Both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* use visual symbolism to address and challenge binary oppositions such as intimacy and detachment, inside and outside, and transparency and opacity. They each represent the terrifying experience of paranoid delusions, anxiety and distrust in very different ways. Whilst *Clean, Shaven* constructs paranoia primarily through the context of Peter Winter's car and a gradual development of the radio receiver motif, *A Beautiful Mind*'s representation is far more grandiose narratively, involving secret missions from the government and Russian spies. (Though this seems far-fetched, there is understandable grounding for Nash's paranoia when we consider the Cold War context in which his symptoms developed and the fact he did actually work for the government at one point during his career.)

The paranoia communicated in *Clean, Shaven* is chilling in its subtlety, and relies on utilising the isolated landscape and the space of Peter's car to explore the apparent division between the inside and outside (also symbolically suggesting the divide between the external world and internal experience).



Figure 23. *Clean, Shaven*

The landscape in *Clean, Shaven* is incredibly barren and lonely, and the sky is often shown as claustrophobic or swirling, the same forms we discover in other depictions of schizophrenia (namely *Donnie Darko* and *Swallow Me Whole*). The telephone wires that continually cross the screen, even in long shots, speak of a web of entrapment and code and are completely out of reach (Fig. 23). Peter will never have full access to them and thus cannot even attempt to understand or disentangle them. They hang over his physical and mental landscape intact.

The fact that Peter is on an island (another powerful metaphor) makes the landscape in *Clean, Shaven* seem especially alienating. Kerrigan describes the location (an isolated island in Canada) as a ‘really stark, lonely, evocative setting.’³⁵ The setting plays into more general themes about how we relate to one another as human beings, using schizophrenia as a metaphor for the difficulties of relating to those outside of our own framework of meaning.³⁶ As Peter navigates this isolated

³⁵ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

³⁶ Lim comments on this ‘unmissable’ political dimension of Kerrigan’s films, saying Kerrigan: ‘insists on showing people we’d rather not think about, in places we’d rather not see, the forgotten backwaters and industrialized gray zones of present-day, minimum-wage America. His films withhold information about their characters only to draw us closer to them; what we’re not told is a cue to fill in

landscape in his battered car, we are repeatedly shown shots of people peering through his window. The faces are almost always menacing or accusatory (Figs. 24-26). The suspicion with which Peter surveys the outside world echoes the atmosphere we encounter in *Taxi Driver*, which sets up a similar dichotomy between the safe space *inside* the car and the threatening space of the outside world.



Figure 24. *Clean, Shaven*

The first face we see peering into Peter's car is that of a young girl (Fig. 24), and this sets up a question that haunts the film from thereon in. A ball bounces on the windscreen of Peter's car and startles him, and then we see this shot of a girl looking through his windscreen. Peter, visibly unsettled, stops his car and steps out of it, but the camera stays stationary and does not follow him. Off-screen we hear screaming and a thudding sound, and then we see Peter return to his car seat. We

what we think we know, which, as often as not, exists to be overturned. The upshot is that there's less distance between us and these life-bruised individuals than we'd first assumed. Kerrigan is above all a humanist, and if his films are about any one thing, it's not so much mental instability as the precariousness of sanity in the pitiless, brutalizing modern world.' Dennis Lim, 'Clean, Shaven: Inside Man,' <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/453-clean-shaven-inside-man>, accessed 1st August 2011.

have no idea if the screaming is a reality or an auditory hallucination, but the question is certainly one Kerrigan wants us to feel uncomfortable with. Later on a girl's body is found (though it does not appear to be the girl pictured here), setting up the detective story in which Peter, trying to find his biological daughter, is pursued around the island town. This narrative propels the story forward and gives a troubling framework to the kinetic images and sounds, making otherwise innocent images seem sinister and unsettling. The question of Peter's violence hangs over the film (the audience are not given any evidence that he is violent, and yet we are culturally conditioned to view him as such), creating a social critique that takes place in the dismantling of the dichotomy between the threatening and threatened.

In another instance, Peter drives along with his door open as a van drives by with two men staring at him (Fig. 25). The intimidation he feels is conveyed not only by the thuggish appearances of the men and their confrontational expressions, but by the fact that the van is higher than Peter's car and seems to give its inhabitants a significant platform from which to scrutinise Peter.



Figure 25. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 26. *Clean, Shaven*

It is the gradual accumulation of these uninvited, threatening gazes that contributes to our sense of his paranoia, and the feeling that those looking at him are somehow connected and conspiring against him. This careful construction of Peter as *threatened*, as opposed to *threatening*, is crucial to our empathy with him, and challenges our notion of mental illness.³⁷



Figure 27. *Clean, Shaven*

³⁷ Greene's appearance and performance is also pivotal to our perception of Peter as threatened, as I discuss later within this chapter.

Peter is characterised as threatened even by his own reflection (Fig. 27), and eventually he smashes out the windows of his car and replaces them with newspaper. This offers only a false security, since the barrier between him and the world is now much more fragile, and the images on the newspaper scream even louder than the threats that could be perceived through the glass.

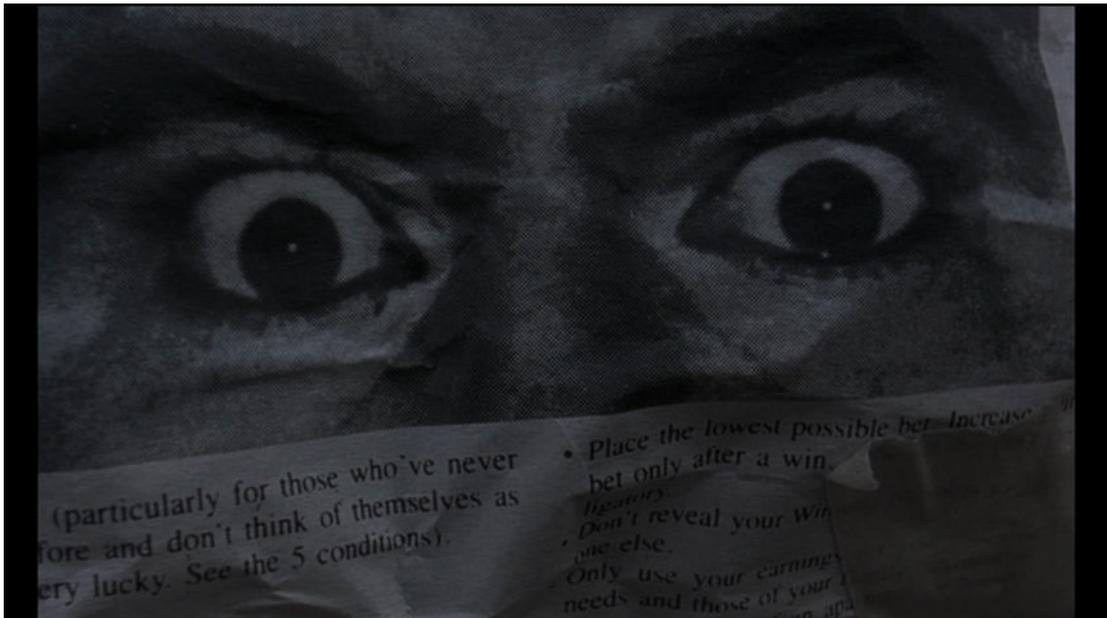


Figure 28. *Clean, Shaven*

By covering his car in newspaper in a desire for opacity and a need to retreat from exposure or scrutiny, Peter exposes himself to alarming decontextualized images that attack the viewer and infringe on private space. The inside space of the car is suddenly filled with news, words, and images of the outside world, breaking down the barrier between internal and external space. If eyes are the window to the soul, then Peter's selection of these eyes to pin on his car (Fig. 28) becomes terrifyingly significant. Without context, all of the images we are shown appear significant and personal; news stories are literally pulled apart and fragmented, creating a disordered world that visually mimics the experience of schizophrenia. Peter's actions indicate his absolute paranoia and his inability to trust even himself, fearing himself to be

bugged with some sort of radio receiver. He is portrayed as deeply threatened not only by the external world around him, but also the unknown internal space of his body and mind.

This sense of paranoia is fuelled by the construction of Peter's delusion that he has been chipped with some sort of radio receiver and transmitter, leading him to physically harm himself to cut it out (Figs. 29 and 30), again breaking down the barrier between internal and external space. Defending the infamous gore of this scene, Kerrigan argues for the way in which it demonstrates 'emotional blunting,' a symptom of schizophrenia, as we can see the pain Peter is inflicting on himself but his face shows no reaction other than a focused intent on removing the offending transmitter: 'The fingernail scene does illustrate yet another symptom of schizophrenia, which is blunting ... some people who are in the midst of a crisis don't feel pain in quite the same way. I wanted to show that even though he was cutting out his fingernail, there are these series of extreme close-ups on his face where he's not quite reacting.'³⁸



Figure 29. *Clean, Shaven*

³⁸ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.



Figure 30. *Clean, Shaven*, showing the moment just before the finger nail is removed (selected to spare the more squeamish reader the trauma of the shots that follow!)



Figure 31. *Clean, Shaven*

Using this point of view/reaction shot structure (Figs. 30 and 31) serves a particular aim, and it is one that is counter to what we would expect. This structure often aligns us with the protagonist, as their reaction is our reaction, but in this instance it actually *distances* us from Peter because our reaction differs so greatly from his own, creating an inverted relationship between intimacy and detachment (something I will

explore in depth later). The audience reacts strongly and instinctively to the body horror of the removal of the fingernail, and yet Peter does not react at all, and thus we feel far removed from him. However, this apparent distancing creates a moment of understanding, as we begin to grasp just how convinced Peter is of the radio transmitter delusion and appreciate the severity of his detachment from reality.

Atkinson comments on how sound is also significant in communicating the delusion: ‘The aural blitz becomes intense, but, suggestive that his efforts succeed, the voices fade, and static and feedback dominate. A wire has been snapped.’³⁹ Here, sound is not only a marker of emotional state, but it works within a framework of meaning to code disorder. In this plane of reality, the sound has stopped, because Peter has reason to believe it would. Within his reality, Peter’s actions are totally sane. This is his truth. This audio marker, along with the use of close-ups of both Peter’s eyes and his fingernail, ensures that the intensity of the delusion is achingly apparent, particularly as we are forced to contrast Peter’s unflinching response with our own squeamish reaction.

The reaction shots we see here illustrate Peter’s intense concentration and complete detachment from the harm he is inflicting on himself, and within the structure I have just examined they facilitate a moment of understanding on behalf of the audience. Character interiority is often communicated through the use of the close-up, as this allows us to read subtle nuances in facial expression and spend time studying the emotion in the character’s eyes. It fosters more of a personal engagement and minimises visual distractions. All of my central case studies use this device extensively to communicate extreme emotional angst or intense mental focus. In the finger nail scene in *Clean, Shaven*, for example, each time we cut to

³⁹ Atkinson, ‘A Subjective Assault’ (video essay).

the fingernail when we then cut back to Peter's face the shot has moved in closer, symbolically detaching him from the act of self-harm and the reality of his situation and positioning him in a contextless space of steely focus. *A Beautiful Mind* does the same thing when Nash is studying codes at the Pentagon – the close-ups fade in and out, growing increasingly closer, as the movement of people in the background blurs around him indicating the passing of time. This shows how film utilises the properties of the medium to communicate concentration in a particular way, whereby certain planes of the moving image are moved in and out of focus whilst others progress to more intense close-ups, simultaneously playing with temporality and conveying mental focus.

A Beautiful Mind presents the paranoia and delusions of Nash by systematically challenging our notions of objective reality within the diegetic world. The film utilises our trust in the objectivity of the camera to position us in the place of the person diagnosed with schizophrenia. We are introduced to characters and, since they are not obviously differentiated, we presume them to be real when they are in fact the imaginative delusions of Nash and a symptom of his schizophrenia. Our assumption that the camera is a reliable and objective source of information means that we never question their existence in the diegetic world of the film, but what we are in fact presented with is a world constructed from a compromised perspective.

We believe we are in this 'real world' because the film uses the language of traditional Hollywood cinema (shot/reverse shot, establishing shots, classical continuity editing) so that we have no hint that anything we are seeing is untrustworthy. It intentionally avoids drawing on the tradition of images, metaphors and devices we would associate with mental disorder, and instead draws on

images/metaphors associated with genius (namely the ‘bright light’ moment of discovery). Characters that are in fact delusions are given plausible motivations as to why they do not interact with ‘real’ characters (Charles is a flighty humanities student and thus unlikely to be friends with Nash’s maths associates, and Parcher is part of a special ops team that must remain top secret). As Bordwell writes, ‘Hollywood’s traditional storytelling structure meets the challenge [of moving in and out of Nash’s mind] by imagining for us what its maladjusted hero sees with firm, vivid, and redundant clarity.’⁴⁰ He also notes how ‘Ron Howard lures us into Nash’s fantasy world through some devious means ... Having been given fleeting access to Nash’s mind, we’re likely to take as objective the more radical hallucinations that aren’t so evidently marked off.’⁴¹

Thus, based on the evidence we have – which is the evidence *Nash* has – we take it for granted that his delusions are ‘real.’ From the beginning of the film, we treat the camera as reliable in the same way that we trust our senses, and like those experiencing the symptoms of schizophrenia we are unable to discern reality from illusion. There is a wonderful irony in one scene in which Marcy is depicted running through a field full of pigeons. None of them fly away or scatter as she runs amongst them, hinting at the fact that she is a merely a figment of John’s imagination. Of course, pigeons cannot be trained to not react to a running child, so they had to be computer generated, creating an inverse relationship between the world of the film and the actual relationship the film had to the reality of production; the computer generated represented the real and the real represented the imagined. This one example of the way the film challenges the boundaries between truth and untruth, sanity and insanity, genius and delusion.

⁴⁰ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, (University of California, 2006), p. 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Nash's paranoia is communicated using similar devices to *Clean, Shaven* (and most films in which the central protagonist is being pursued). Nash looks outside of windows through blinds, and is suspicious of men in black coats emerging from cars or glancing at him across the street. One particularly revealing moment shows him nervously staring through blinds out of his window at men emerging from a car (Fig. 32), who are then revealed to be family men as their wives and children follow them. We presume Nash to be alone at this point, but then the camera swoops round and we cut to a shot of a whole class of students observing his behaviour, which seems inappropriate and strange when positioned outside of his subjective experience. We, of course, understand Nash's fear, but this shift in positioning allows us to appreciate the oddity of his behaviour in a way that reinforces the boundary between external world and internal experience.



Figure 32. *A Beautiful Mind*

After constructing a reality in which Charles is Nash's flighty roommate, Marcy is Charles's sweet niece who calls him 'Uncle John,' and Nash works for a secret ops

agent called Parcher, the film dismantles it. Nash's erratic behaviour, anxiety, and dishevelled appearance motivate Alicia (Jennifer Connelly) to call a psychiatrist, and a pursuit in which the doctor is made to appear as a government agent results in Nash being institutionalised. Howard jokes about the effectiveness of Roger Deakins' lighting, asking 'would you trust someone who was lit that way?!', and here we can appreciate the way in which cinematic devices manipulate us into regarding the world – or here, the psychiatrist – as sinister and untrustworthy (Figs. 33 and 34).



Figure 33. *A Beautiful Mind*



Figure 34. *A Beautiful Mind*

In Figure 33, bright daylight silhouettes the psychiatrist and his colleague so that they appear as dark, imposing figures against the background, mimicking a visual device common in horror films and communicating Nash's terror. The camera angle is from Nash's perspective at the bottom of the stairs, suggesting their dominance over him and reinforcing the dichotomy of the threatening/threatened. In Figure 34, harsh side-lighting evokes the same sinister connotations as I discussed earlier when referencing *Psycho*, drawing on this visual symbolism to communicate the psychiatrist as menacing and untrustworthy. It is ironic that it is the psychiatrist, and *not* the patient, who is portrayed using the same iconography we would usually associate with the mentally ill in cinema, inverting the perceived divide between the sane and insane. The light also produces a blue/grey tinge on the set and actor, draining the colour out of the image and making the environment cold and hostile. The angles of the room all point diagonally inwards to Dr Rosen, making the image disorientating and emphasising his centrality in Nash's mind.

Rather than assessing the subjectivity of Nash, we assess what he encounters, as we are aligned with him and what appears to be his rational perspective. Just as the accosting faces in *Clean, Shaven* seem threatening, so here does Nash's experience of the world and those in it. Rather than faces through windscreens, Nash is surrounded by sinister men in black suits. The point of view then switches to that of Alicia as we are confronted with the logical evidence presented by Dr Rosen and Alicia's discovery of Nash's letters unopened in the 'secret' mail box, and we are asked to re-evaluate totally the version of reality we have been confronted with thus far (which is made difficult for us for reasons I will discuss later).⁴²

⁴² As Goldsman notes, 'the audience think they were in one type of picture, when in fact they were in an entirely different one.' *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

Nash's delusions are not only evident in his creation of Charles, Marcy and Parcher, but also in the government plot of which he believes himself to be a part. Convinced that he is implanted with some sort of secret code generator, Nash harms himself in much the same way we encounter in *Clean, Shaven* (Fig. 35), and the film uses a similar structure to communicate Nash's complete absorption in his delusion. We are given a point of view shot of the shocking harm Nash is inflicting on himself, as blood covers his arm, sleeve, and trickles into his hand, and yet we see that Nash's reaction is blunted as he absentmindedly scratches deeper in search of a device that was never there.



Figure 35. *A Beautiful Mind*

Nash is understandably reluctant to believe that his experiences and friends have been a creation of his mind, which is why Parcher draws on this weakness and tries to provide explanations when Nash confronts him. Faced with Nash's statement that there is no record of William Parcher, Parcher angrily responds: 'Do you think we list our personnel?!' The delusions, in effect, protect themselves. Kerrigan also comments on this aspect of the illness, saying that 'people who suffer from mental illness try to justify their symptoms on some level, because it is the brain that is

being affected, but it is also the brain that determines our own health.’⁴³ As Goldsman observes:

There’s a desire to return to the world before we knew about the delusion – the threat of actual death seems preferable to the threat of madness ... John would prefer that he live in this torturous and threatening world as opposed to the tortuous and threatening world of insanity ... this is the insidious nature of paranoid delusion – paranoid delusion creates in the mind of the person who suffers, rational, reasonable explanations for why nobody else can see what the sufferer sees, they present themselves as real, and so remain entirely convincing.⁴⁴

After brutal shock treatment and heavy medication, Nash returns home, but his life appears mundane and grey without his delusions and code-breaking. This switch in experience is indicated not only by the sapped colour palette but also the awkward and cramped house he inhabits. Frustrated with his inability to work, he stops taking his medication. We see him hide the pills Alicia has given him in a drawer and just sip the water she has placed on his desk. As he does so, we see the familiar flashing lights on the page he is looking at that were used at the beginning of the film to signify a mental breakthrough. A direct consequential link is made between the stopping of his medication and his tendency to see codes and patterns. As Goldsman notes, ‘what starts as letters on a page become full blown characters,’ and as John wanders out to the shed at the bottom of his garden he is confronted again by Parcher and other soldiers, and led into a secret control centre. Thoughts and ideas evolve into a separate plane of reality; they have manifested from the abstract to the physical, though these two things exist on the same plane in Nash’s world. Nash leaves the ‘safe’ space of the house, which he views as entrapping and claustrophobic, and wanders outdoors where he quite literally has the space to let his mind and imagination roam free.

⁴³ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁴⁴ Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

The fact that we cannot choose to escape Nash's delusions even though we understand them to be such, demonstrates the capacity of the medium to construct the disorder. Even after the reveal, when we understand that we have been drawn into Nash's delusional subjective version of reality, we are still positioned to some extent within his schizophrenic experience, because despite our knowledge that these characters are not real we cannot choose to stop seeing them on the screen – they appear just as real as before and are on the same plane of reality *visually*, although we now read them as operating inside a new framework of meaning within the text. We thus know that we are in a world filled with delusion, yet we are denied access to the objective world – we cannot choose to see differently, just as Nash cannot.

The importance of the multitrack nature of the filmic medium in constructing this framework of mental disorder is evident during the scene in which Nash attempts to overcome his delusions with logical reasoning. Characters navigate space in a seemingly impossible way, with jump cuts communicating the speed with which the characters approach Nash mentally and, in his perception, physically. Their sudden appearance within the frame as well as apparently 'objective' shots from Alicia's point of view reinforce that his view of reality is compromised. Slow motion shots single out the physical immediacy and intimate nature of the delusional characters' presence, such as when Marcy holds Nash's hand, along with flashbacks, fast editing, and a dizzying swirling shot around Nash in a fast paced assault of images and memories as he tries to piece together information. As Goldsman notes, 'this is where we return to the motif of John's intense cognitive activity, Ron using the same grammar he used visually to show John decoding things now shows John working through the images of his mind attempting to reconcile their existence with

the life he is told he lives in.⁴⁵ Frantic piano music plays as we hear John's racing thoughts, which are interrupted and muddled by the constant whispering and muttering of the voices of his pleading delusions. Within this sequence, we can appreciate the complexity of the figurative relationships that are set up between several conceptual planes of mental and physical realities, and their importance in communicating Nash's experience of schizophrenia. For instance, when we are shown Marcy at the end of the sequence, she is no longer represented as inhabiting Nash's memories or present reality, but rather stands alone in darkness, conceptually isolated from the diegetic world we have experienced thus far and shown as a single component that Nash now appreciates for what it really is (Fig. 36). The fact that she is expressionless and is apparently in a place of no particular destination, standing against a black background like an empty stage, presents her almost as an actress in a play, and as the spotlight goes out on her we know her time on stage is over, as the illusion of her character has been broken.



Figure 36. *A Beautiful Mind*

⁴⁵ Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

Marcy is no longer the sunnily lit welcoming child. In the collage of Nash's memories that we see when he is trying to make sense of his delusions, the colour palette is grey and subdued, making the images seem like cold evidence to be reviewed as opposed to memories of warm friendships. They are also placed in the context of memories of his insulin treatments, and by bracketing them this way they are shifted into a framework of meaning that takes into consideration the awareness he has of his troubled mental health. Nash's ability to have a cognitive breakthrough regarding his delusions is linked heavily to his mathematical genius, and it is a breakthrough denied Peter in *Clean, Shaven*, as I will now demonstrate.

Understanding disorder through an exploration of fragmentation

One of the key symptoms of schizophrenia is a sensitivity to stimuli and an inability to filter information or understand context. In *Clean, Shaven*, the bombardment of decontextualized images is suffocating. Soderbergh comments on how the film 'isolates specific images and behaviour,' thus making the images more emotionally and symbolically loaded.⁴⁶ In the scene in which Peter goes home and sees his mother, for example, Kerrigan comments that this is where 'his anxiety is the highest' because he is 'connected on an emotional level.'⁴⁷ He goes on to describe the significance of this encounter in terms of Peter's illness:

'[The encounter] leads to him having a crisis and exacerbated hallucinations, and so I just tried to interpret that visually, and see that there are many different kinds of hallucinations. It doesn't have to be extreme, it can be subtle, it can be a point of view ... schizophrenia is really an inability to synthesise and give a hold to all these different stimuli. And it's really just to point out one or two, and fracture his point of view along the way.'⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Soderbergh, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁴⁷ Kerrigan, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In his video essay ‘A Subjective Assault,’ Atkinson argues that although ‘*Clean, Shaven* seems narratively conventional,’ it communicates a ‘subjective seizure [of] fractured memories, hallucinations, ostensible reality, or a chaotic mix therein.’⁴⁹ After commenting on the use of fragmented sound, he refers to the images used to construct disorder:

‘The film plays with visuals in the same fashion. Montages of abstracted phone wires and roadside life, the uneasy close-up attention to the textures of food, skin, enamel, newspaper, weathered wood, the free standing oddness of tabloid headlines, random advertising surrealism, and decontextualized photos of children.’⁵⁰

Soderbergh comments that one of the main symptoms of schizophrenia is ‘the inability to make a recognizable pattern, to order stimuli,’ and in the following section I undertake a detailed analysis of a series of shots and break down the way in which we read these isolated images and their network of associations.



Figure 37. *Clean, Shaven*

The motion shots of overhead phone and electricity wires (Fig. 37) physically wrap the screen in symbolic messages and signals, as well as visually acting like a net

⁴⁹ Atkinson, ‘A Subjective Assault’ (video essay).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

across the sky and fragmenting the screen. Peter is thus trapped under this net and unable to reach out of it into freedom – the radio signals/voices he hears visually fill the air here, but rather than being invisible they are solidified into an object of unflinching and foreboding appearance.



Figure 38. *Clean, Shaven*

In this shot (Fig. 38) Peter stares at what we presume to be a torn photo of his daughter as a baby, linking to his past (it is also possible that the photo could be himself as a baby). The photo is clearly held by his hands, suggesting the split and fragmentation he is dealing with as well as being a physical manifestation of his psychological attempt to ‘fix’ and make sense of what he is experiencing internally. The fact that the tear goes through the centre of baby’s face is visually disturbing, and the smile is fractured and broken, symbolising the ‘split mind’ definition associated with schizophrenia and juxtaposing the concept of the whole person with the fragmented one. The photograph itself is scratched and muddied, literally showing the condition of Peter’s messy life (this photo is not in a frame on a mantelpiece, it is scrunched up, dirty and torn), but also the tainted and disintegrating

remnants of what used to be simple and in his control. Baby photos are amongst the most sentimental and valuable of possessions, and to see Peter attempting to restore the image to some sort of momentary stability is moving and metaphorically charged.



Figure 39. *Clean, Shaven*

As Peter lies in bed after taking a shower (in which he mutilates himself to search for the transmitters he believes he is bugged with), the camera moves sideways across his face, showing him contemplating his next step (Fig. 39). Much like the cropped van Gogh portrait I discussed earlier, this image works by suggesting a fractured person, and focusing our attention on the mind and eyes (the gateway to that mind). The composition itself is awkward and ungrounded, and we feel uneasy as we are not given full insight into Peter's state due to being momentarily denied access to his whole face.

One of the most disturbing montages in *Clean, Shaven* occurs when Peter searches through books for images that might help him find his daughter. Atkinson describes the pictures as follows:

Harmless images that could be perceived by children or psychotics as filled with menace and an inexplicable emotion. Again, it is the lack of context that is terrifying, and it is the absence of a focus of context that is what seems to make mental illness itself so painful, and life as a schizophrenic a litany of unreadable codes.⁵¹

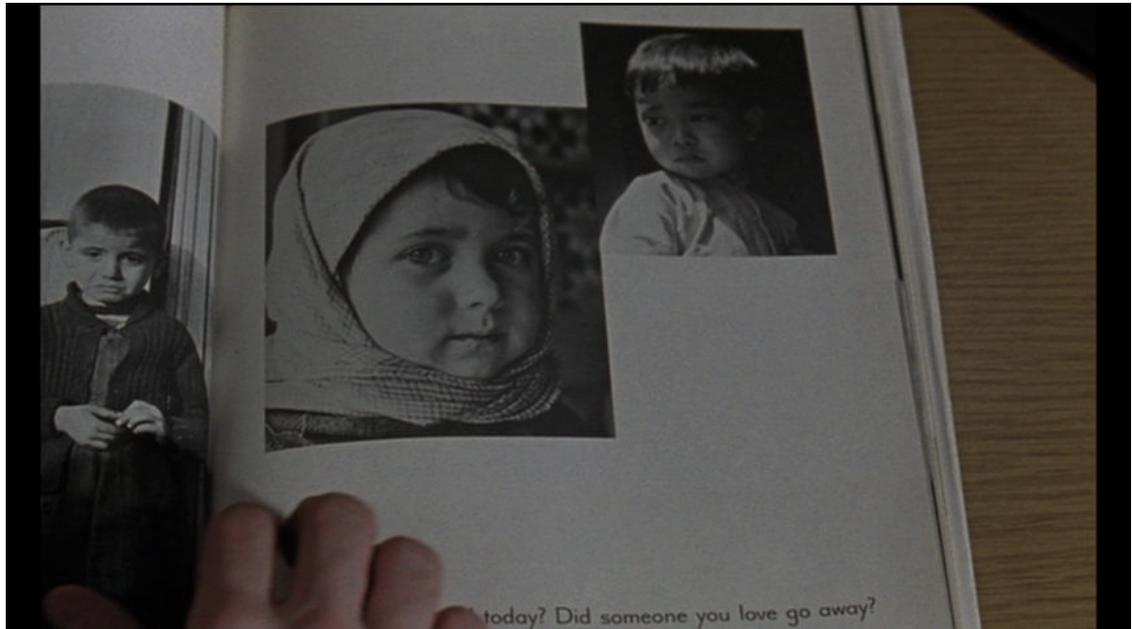


Figure 40. *Clean, Shaven*

The images at the beginning of the sequence show upset children in demarcated boxes, suggesting isolation and detachment (Figs. 40 and 41). Like Peter, they are trapped in an unreality from which they cannot escape or communicate. The line at the bottom of the page reads: ‘Did someone you love go away?’, articulating the sense of loss that permeates the film.

⁵¹ Atkinson, ‘A Subjective Assault,’ (video essay).

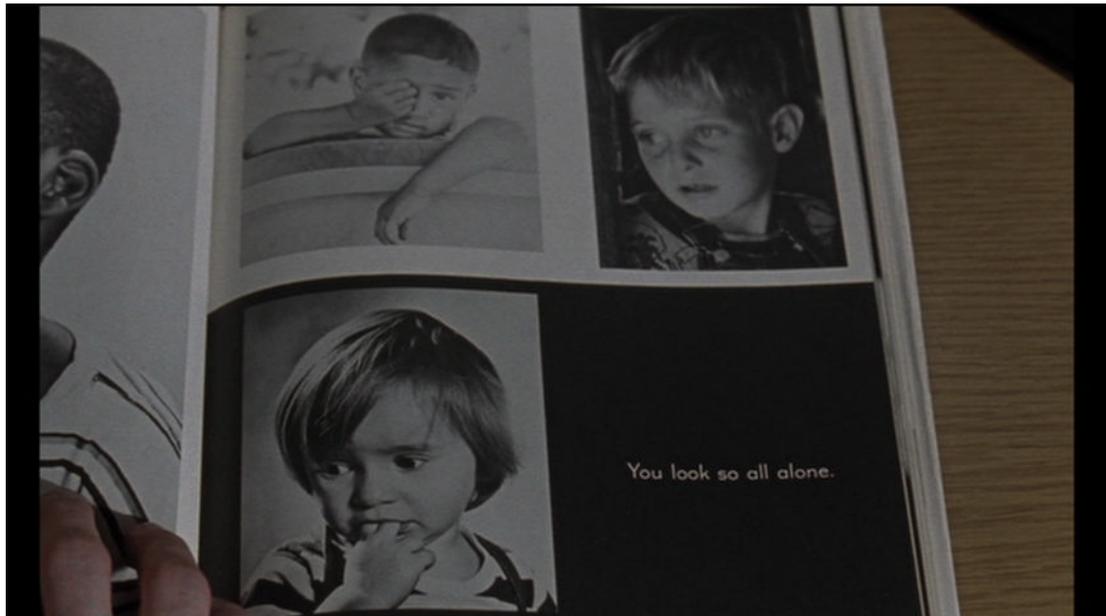


Figure 41. *Clean, Shaven*

The images become increasingly upsetting (Fig. 42), and the audio track plays snatches of children crying and whispering, building up a choking, traumatic orchestra of tears. It is the context, both aural and visual, that embed such a sinister quality to these pictures, as isolated they could seem quite innocent (especially the ones that depict children laughing and whispering). The images and sound accumulate, floating in a timeless space – we do not know the source of these children’s pain, and the montage draws intensity from this (if we do not understand the problem, a solution becomes impossible – R. D. Laing argued that ‘Schizophrenia cannot be understood without understanding despair.’⁵²) The experience is contained and isolated, and the page cannot be pierced; it is as if these children are trapped in the book with their emotional and mental pain, just as Peter is trapped inside his own mind (indeed, many of the images show the children touching their heads in some way, as in Figure 42).

⁵² Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 38.

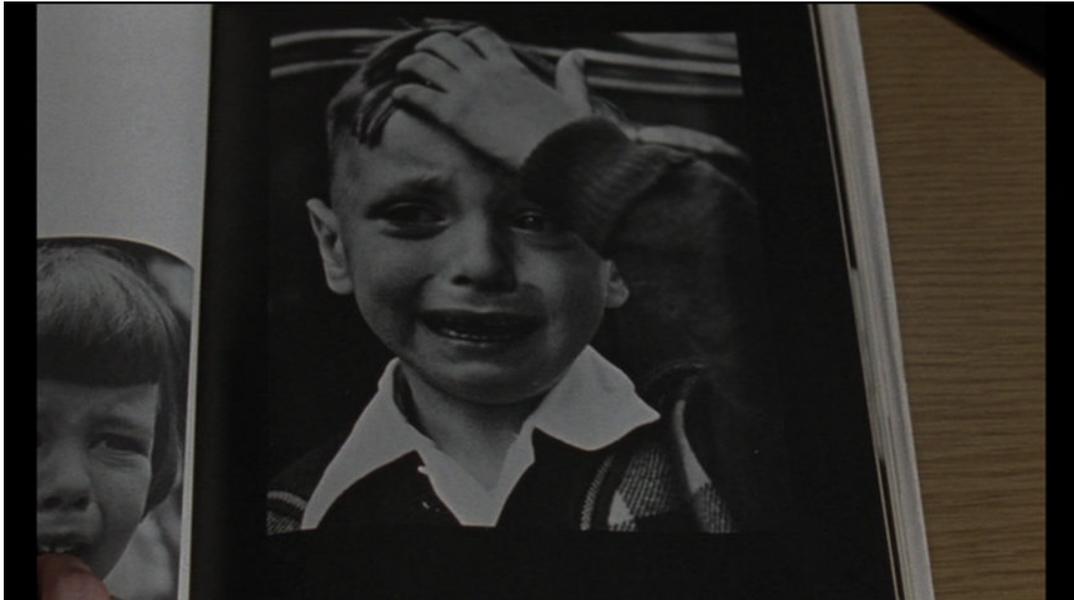


Figure 42. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 43. *Clean, Shaven*

The images become more paranoid and disturbing as laughing and whispering is introduced into the soundtrack, communicating Peter's intense paranoia and distrust of others (Fig. 43). Just as he cannot understand the stares of those outside of his car, he cannot decode the significance of the expressions of the children laughing and whispering in the book.



Figure 44. *Clean, Shaven*

Despite the sound being in his mind, Peter covers his ears in an attempt to physically block out the audio delusions that unsettle him (Fig. 44). His action is a reminder to the audience of the futility of any attempt to protect himself, reinforcing the horror of his predicament.



Figure 45. *Clean, Shaven*

The muffled sounds of children's voices whispering, laughing, screaming, and crying continue over the impactful images. Here we see a boy done up in mock war point (Fig. 45), gritting his teeth and snarling, which in the context of the disturbing soundtrack communicates how Peter feels attacked by the world.



Figure 46. *Clean, Shaven*

This image (Fig. 46) is unsettling for many reasons: The possibility of deception, the denying of sight and understanding of context to the child whose eyes are being held shut, and the roughness of the gesture with which they are closed. The sinister quality of the image is created by the whispering and chuckling soundtrack; these sounds are like disembodied emotions and responses that float eerily over the pictures and embed them with the uncanny quality of nightmares.



Figure 47. *Clean, Shaven*

The camera shows us Peter's response to these images, his hands clenching at his head (Fig. 47). We see bloody scabs on his hands that are positioned where his eyes would be, suggesting the wounds that these images – and perhaps even what Peter has seen and experienced of the world – have inflicted on his mind; the eyes, after all, are described as the windows to the soul. He is shown to be wounded, injured, and powerless, suffering immensely due to his mental distress. We cut to long shots of the library and see him from behind sitting at the table, giving us a brief break before submerging us back into the montage. The images this time become less unsettling in themselves (though the audio still embeds a nightmarish quality to them), showing children as well as parents and children smiling at each other, suggesting the relationship Peter has lost and also his detachment from the intimacy and love experienced by others (Figs. 48 - 51).



Figure 48. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 49. *Clean, Shaven*

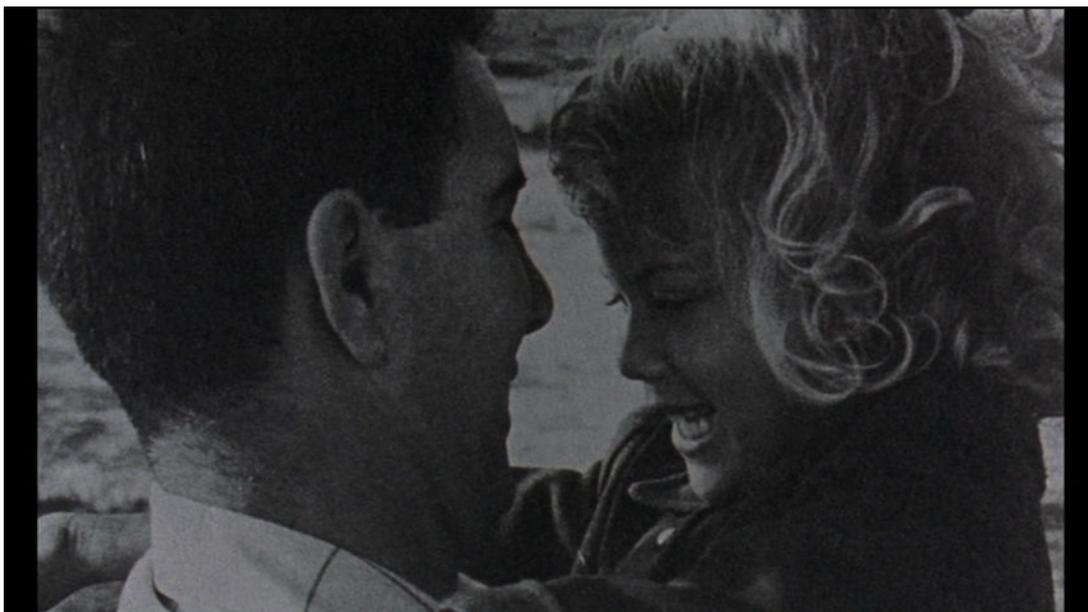


Figure 50. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 51. *Clean, Shaven*

The final shot of the little girl is a gesture towards Peter's desire to reconnect with his daughter (Fig. 51). The composition is less cluttered and intense than others we have encountered, and the expression sweeter; her blonde hair also suggests innocence and youth. The gaze is up and out of the shot, up to a parent or possibly the father figure that Peter could become, and it is significant that Peter relates to that

one (especially after we see the very positive encounter Peter has with his daughter). After this intense montage we cut to an image of a clock at five o'clock, and a woman tries to pull Peter out of his intense mental meanderings with the words 'you'll have to leave.'



Figure 52. *Clean, Shaven*

An aesthetic of fragmented thought processes seems to emerge when we compare shots like this above (Fig. 52) to those we encounter in *A Beautiful Mind* (Fig. 53). The faces Peter looks at, much like the mathematical codes and image clippings that Nash pins up around his office, invite us to decode them.



Figure 53. *A Beautiful Mind*

Intimacy and Detachment

Both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* communicate the isolation of their protagonist by creating detachment where we would expect intimacy, or in the case of *A Beautiful Mind*, revealing intimacies to be completely delusional. In an effort to try and find his daughter, Peter goes to his mother's house and has lunch with her (Figs. 54-56). On the first viewing of the film, the audience may be unsure of the woman's relationship to Peter, since she shows a chilling coldness towards him. The atmosphere in this scene is unnerving, and sounds (made by chairs on the floor, the clinking of cups, and the boiling kettle) are heightened and intimidating. As Peter cuts a tomato, it is shown in extreme close up (Fig. 54), and never has a tomato seemed so grotesque and 'present.' The extreme close-up of the fruit and the soundtrack combine to create a bizarre intensity; we hear the squelching of the tomato's flesh as Peter clumsily cuts through it, and the inside of the fruit glistens and wobbles under his grip. The scene is strangely tactile, and everyday actions (such as the mother's sipping of the tea) seem unnecessarily heightened, intrusive

and claustrophobic. The scene teeters on the edge of bearable in its paradoxical stark intensity. Rather than close-ups of the mother's face communicating intimacy, security, and wholeness, they convey Peter's detachedness, insecurity, and his fragmented view of himself and others.

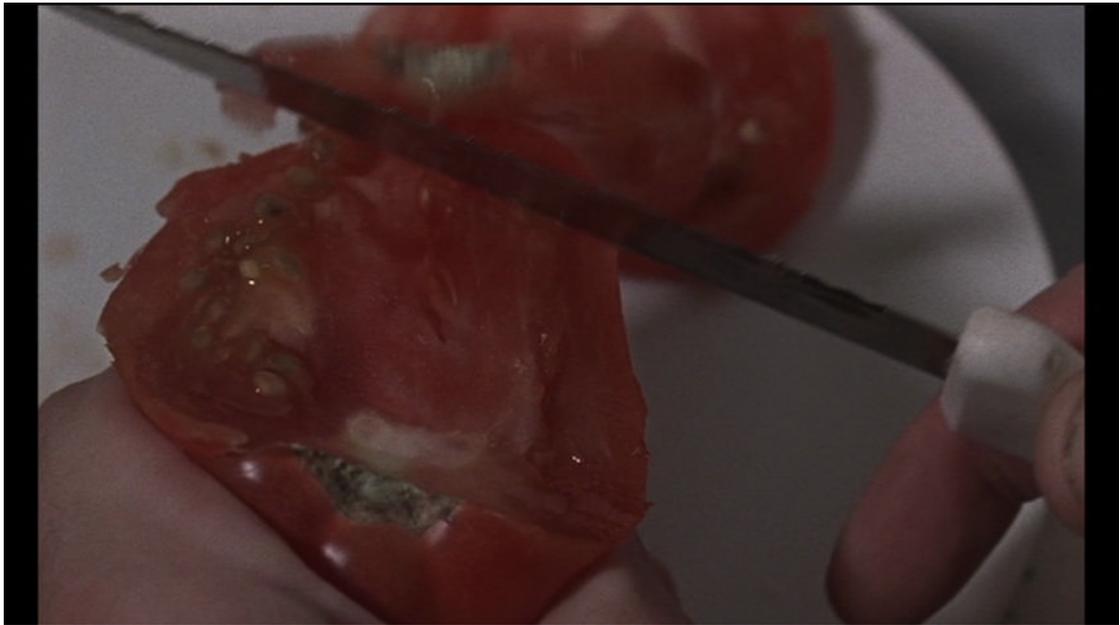


Figure 54. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 55. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 56. *Clean, Shaven*

As Peter's mother tells him he needs to get out of the house because 'it's not healthy' to sit indoors all day, the composition is unbalanced, invasive and stark (Fig. 56). This does not look like a soft, human face, but rather depicts dislocated features that seem cold and uncanny. The grey colour palette and unforgiving lighting highlights the lines on her face and makes her seem harsh and uncompromising, detaching the audience from her. The gravelly tone of her voice adds yet another level of discomfort to the scene. We see an extreme close up of her mouth, fracturing her face and signalling hers as the voice of command whilst removing any motherly softness. The mouth interrogates and instructs Peter, threatening him just like the faces through his car window.



Figure 57. *Clean, Shaven*

The fact that Peter's mother is so detached from him engages with another key theme in *Clean, Shaven*, that of the relationship between parent and child. Denis Lim writes that 'Parental anxiety courses through all of Kerrigan's films: a child represents equally the possibility of loss and of redemption.'⁵³ Peter is searching the island for his daughter who has now been adopted, and thus the sounds and images of children take on huge significance for him (and an uncomfortable one for us, since Kerrigan has set up the question of whether or not Peter is the murderer of the girl whose body is found nearby). Here, stranded in his rain-drenched car, Peter is subjected to the accosting, unflinching gaze of a young girl who walks past holding the hand of a young woman (Fig. 57). The sinister nature of this gaze is enhanced by the little girl's frowning expression, her drenched hair, and the fact that she has the support of a guardian whereas Peter is totally alone. (Of course, the unsettling exchange is also heightened by Peter's intense stare back at her, as he is searching for a daughter he has not seen for years).

⁵³ Lim, 'Clean, Shaven,' <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/453-clean-shaven-inside-man>>

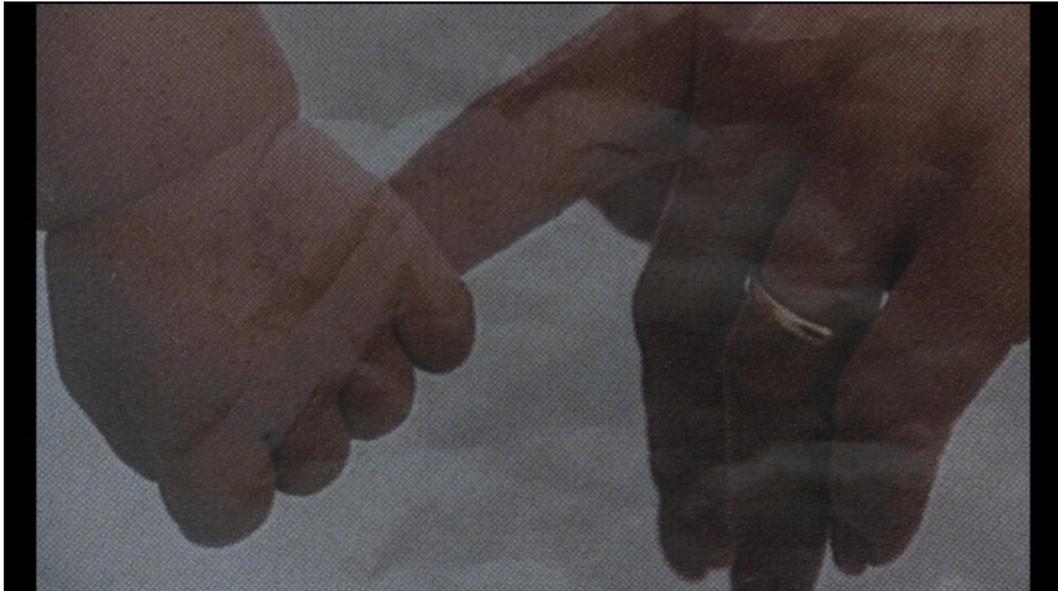


Figure 58. *Clean, Shaven*

The image of the baby holding the mother's finger (Fig. 58) is reflected from a poster when Peter is in the car with his daughter, creating a moment of calm and comfort amongst the chaos. The image communicates the idea of the security of the bond between mother and child, a security which is emphasised by the wedding ring, which symbolises the eternal promise of love and commitment as well as signalling the stability of a secure family unit. The intimate composition represents the way Peter is exploring this relationship not only with his daughter but also with his own mother (perhaps indicating a fear that a similar distance will grow between him and his child). The sadness of the image comes from the fact that it is *just* a poster, a superficial, mediated, and detached portrayal of the intimacy it depicts.

Yet, *Clean, Shaven* does offer moments of intimacy and calm in the scenes in which Peter spends time with his daughter, Jessica. In these scenes, the disruptive noise disappears and we are given the space to appreciate the movingly direct exchanges between them (despite the question that hangs over the audience regarding the murder of the young girl). Greene's performance at this point indicates a shift in Peter's mental state, and Kerrigan comments that Greene 'wanted to have

much less anxiety' in this scene.⁵⁴ When he approaches Jessica she regards him cautiously (Figs. 59 and 60), but still accepts his invitation to go to the beach with him. Their conversation is stilted, but honest and sincere, which is perhaps what allows Peter to be as relaxed as he is. When they sit by the sea and he describes the dilemma he has about removing the radio transmitter from his skull, she listens openly, and Peter is visibly lifted by the possibility of being understood (Fig. 61). In these beach scenes a visible breeze refreshes the stagnant air that Peter has been suffocated by from the beginning of the film, and offers a wider space of freedom.



Figure 59. *Clean, Shaven*

⁵⁴ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.



Figure 60. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 61. *Clean, Shaven*



Figure 62. *Clean, Shaven*.

After Peter is fatally shot, we see Jessica's face gaze out of the window of her father's car at his body, mimicking the isolated shots of children's faces we saw earlier (Fig. 62). It is the face of the child who offers the most understanding, but rather than looking up at her father warmly as the image in the book showed, Jessica looks down on her father searchingly. The chilling final shot of the film shows her using the radio on her adopted mother's boat, calling out 'Daddy, Daddy, are you there? Over. Daddy, are you there?' She was the only one who appreciated the urgency of his reality – it was real to him, and thus in his world, it made sense for her to call out on the radio to try and make contact. Her response to Peter's mental anguish addresses the very issue Laing discusses about how we should understand the experiences of those who deal with the symptoms of schizophrenia: 'Now it seems clear that this patient's behaviour can be seen in at least two ways, analogous to the ways of seeing vase or face. One may see his behaviour as "signs" of a "disease"; one may see his behaviour as expressive of his existence.'⁵⁵ Though an adult would view Peter as insane, the child breaks through this conceptualisation of

⁵⁵ Laing, *The Divided Self*, pp. 30-31.

order/disorder and somehow reaches a greater reality beneath the unreality of Peter's beliefs.

In *A Beautiful Mind*, the delusional characters that Nash creates are in many ways a response to his own fears and needs, and it is with them that Nash explores aspects of his own personality. Howard comments that the 'Delusional figures in his life are serving a purpose, giving him a sense of meaning, and value.'⁵⁶ Charles shows Nash compassion and nurtures him when he needs it most, asking him 'When is the last time you ate?' and reassuring him of his genius when he doubts his abilities. Played by the wonderfully warm and charismatic Paul Bettany, Charles is everything Nash is not: a laid back arts student, charming, and socially at ease. Akiva Goldsman argues that he also represents all of the things missing from Nash's life: 'intimacy, connection...human connectedness ... Charles is funny and witty in a way that John is not, and he is boundaryless; he reaches into John's life, crowds into his space, and forces a connection.'⁵⁷ Charles is first introduced after Nash gazes out of the window at fellow students on campus, a moment symbolising his total isolation and triggering the delusion of an accepting friend (Fig. 63).

⁵⁶ Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD, Commentary.

⁵⁷ Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD, Commentary.



Figure 63. *A Beautiful Mind*

Marcy and Parcher have similar character cues: Marcy, representing love, childhood innocence and acceptance (repeatedly shown running up to and hugging ‘Uncle John’), appears when he feels vulnerable and insecure, and Parcher is a figure who recognises the brilliance of Nash’s work after he feels undervalued by the agents at the Pentagon, saying to Nash that he is, ‘quite simply, the best natural code breaker [he has] ever seen.’ After being used and then discarded once he discovers the secret code, Nash’s sense of unimportance is the trigger for the first time he sees Parcher, who looks down on John from a corridor. Akiva argues that Nash ‘creates a character who will approve of him as a man ... a father figure or super ego.’⁵⁸ His work with Parcher ‘makes him feel important, part of something special ... his work has lifted him into rare air... [Parcher] flatters John, and moves him into a heightened state of self-importance.’⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Bentall argues that the fact that delusions often involve trying to understand the value of the self suggests ‘that problems of self-esteem may be the engine that drives paranoid thinking.’ Bentall, *Doctoring the Mind*, p. 168.

Nash is terrified by the possibility that he will not be recognised in his time and that he will fail to amount to anything. He describes his work as all he is to Charles, who responds by helping Nash throw his desk out of the window. This is a charming and humorous moment of bonding at the time, but hints at the greater destruction Nash's delusions will cause him to commit. Indeed, the appearance of the desk as it shatters on the floor (Fig. 64) mimics the appearance of the work he undertakes during his delusions, consisting of random nonsensical collages over his walls.



Figure 64. *A Beautiful Mind*

Just as Nash grows attached to the characters that form such an important part of his life, as do we. Sentimentality is utilised to a specific end here, as we wish for the delusions to be real just as Nash does, and are reluctant to accept an alternative reality in which they are fiction. However, these delusions, which were once comforting and helping Nash to make sense of his own identity, become

destructive and turn sinister (hinted at visually by the noir-ish aesthetic this section of the film adopts).

Nash questions his own value, and after he is diagnosed, he looks at his fractured, broken reflection in a smashed mirror as he carries it out to the bin (Fig. 65). It is significant that it is Alicia who smashed the mirror (in frustration at Nash's lack of interest in her due to the medication), as this represents not only the broken and dislocated sense of identity he holds of himself, but also how he feels he appears through his wife's eyes.



Figure 65. *A Beautiful Mind*

At the beginning of the film, Nash loses a tactical board game and his academic rival mockingly calls after him: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the great John Nash!' after he falls over in his scramble to get away. The shame and embarrassment (he mumbles to himself 'the game is flawed' repeatedly to justify the loss to himself and those around him) has evidently stayed buried deep in his psyche, because the line recurs when he is being shouted at by Parcher in the courtyard at Princeton (Fig. 66). Though he is saying 'You're not real, you're not real' to Parcher, he cannot get the

delusion to leave him alone, and as students gather round and stare at him he is simultaneously aware of how he appears to others in their reality and the parallel reality of his own experience. Since Marcy was always a delusion who offered unconditional love and affection, he finds her hugs difficult to ignore as he walks by her day by day (Fig. 67). These characters formed an important part of Nash's development – indeed, they were created by him and thus knew him intimately – and the end of the film features a moving exchange when he explains that they mean a lot to him but he can no longer speak to them. Nash repeats a line to a student that Charles said to him ('When was the last time you ate?'), suggesting that a little bit of the characters have stayed with Nash and that in some ways he has learnt from them. Goldsman comments that by asking the student when he last ate and helping him with his work, Nash 'becomes, in a weird way, the nurturer that was externalised earlier – he has now owned that part of himself.'⁶⁰ It is here we have an interesting interaction between the experience of intimacy and detachment, since the characters are aspects of Nash's mind that he can either own or reject.

⁶⁰ Goldsman, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.



Figure 66. *A Beautiful Mind*.



Figure 67. *A Beautiful Mind*

Performance

Security, Trust, Recognition

Both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* attempt to create unease through the performances of their lead actors, but they do this in very different ways. *Clean, Shaven* features a (then) relatively unknown actor, whereas *A Beautiful Mind* features one of the most recognisable and iconic actors in cinema. The following

section will investigate the implications of this opposition, and explore the way in which each film works to challenge our sense of the knowable and unknowable, complicating our understanding of these oppositions.

In *Clean, Shaven*, Peter Greene's performance is absolutely pivotal in communicating the vulnerability and anxiety experienced by Peter Winter in the grips of his illness. The fact that he is a relatively unknown actor makes him an unquantifiable entity – the audience simply have nothing by which to compare or conceptualise him, and his centrality in the film is thus unsettling. Much like the unpredictability of the audio track and the fragmented, decontextualized images, Greene's performance adds another layer of uncertainty to the text.



Figure 68. *Clean, Shaven*

Discussing Peter in the scene in which he makes three identical cups of coffee by the roadside, Kerrigan notes that it was 'his energy that I thought would be perfect for

this character.⁶¹ Securing the right actor for the part was always a key block in creating the architecture of Peter Winter's mind:

In my experiences in interacting with a lot of people who are suffering from the illness, their sense of anxiety is so high, this energy level is so high, that I knew it was really crucial to communicating the illness. Even when he's in repose, there's an enormous amount going on, ...the camera has to be able to sit on him and you still need to continue to invest, and there's obviously a lot going on.⁶²

Greene's face is incredibly sculptural and yet elements of it are childlike (he has high cheekbones, full lips, and long eyelashes), and there is an intensity and pain in his eyes that demands empathy and recognition (Fig. 68). His open face and searching blue eyes encourage our sympathy for him. Through the cinematic construction of his subjectivity, Peter and his actions become far more understandable, and thus he gains sympathy from the audience as just another troubled human being trying to make sense of the world he encounters.

Crowe's performance in *A Beautiful Mind* is exceptionally nuanced, especially since it spans decades through periods of delusion and mental breakdown. The casting of Russell Crowe has many implications for the way we read John Nash, both in terms of our ability to empathise with him and with respect to our understanding of his mental distress. In many ways, the film plays with what the audience expects from Crowe, tipping these expectations of their head and creating uncertainty despite Crowe's fame.

During the filming of *A Beautiful Mind*, Crowe was awarded an Oscar for his performance in *Gladiator*, firmly tying his persona to the character of a man who rights the wrongs in his life through violent brute force. His masculine face, Adonis-like muscular physique and deep voice made him the ultimate icon of masculinity (Figs. 69 and 70).

⁶¹ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁶² Ibid.

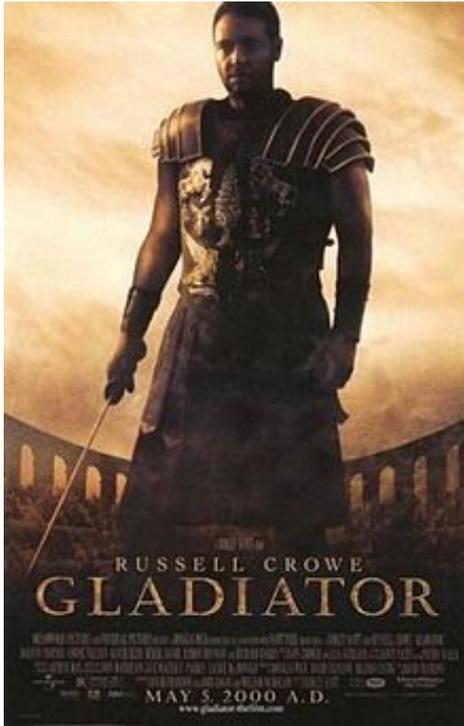


Figure 69. *Movie poster for Gladiator*, (dir. Ridley Scott, Prod. DreamWorks SKG and Universal Pictures, 2000). Crowe dwarfs even the Coliseum.



Figure. 70. *Gladiator*

The speech made by Maximus when confronting his enemy, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), became a mainstream quote when fans re-enacted the role (accompanied by an impressionistic deepening of the voice), as it encapsulated all this character

represented. The speech communicates his military status, loyalty, masculinity (both in terms of sexual partner and father figure), as well as his absolute confidence in his physical, mental, and moral superiority:

My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, commander of the Armies of the North, General of the Felix Legions, loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son. Husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next.

Compare the transparency and absoluteness of this line, which makes the character fully knowable in terms of his values, motivations, and conceptualisation of himself, to the infinite complexity and opacity of the character of John Nash.

Thus, in the context of this star persona in the minds of audiences at the time, Crowe's casting as John Nash would appear completely against type. In her biography of John Nash Sylvia Nasar writes:

Most of the graduate students were slightly odd ducks themselves, beset by shyness, awkwardness, strange mannerisms, and all kinds of physical and psychological tics, but they collectively felt that Nash was even odder. 'Nash was out of the ordinary,' said a former graduate student from his time. 'If he was in a room with twenty people, and they were talking, if you asked an observer who struck you as odd, it would have been Nash. It wasn't anything he consciously did. It was his bearing. His aloofness.'⁶³

Choosing the formidable 'Gladiator' to play an aloof, 'weird and socially inept' mathematician is not an obvious choice.⁶⁴ If already a sex symbol, *Gladiator's* showcasing of Crowe's body propelled his status as such to even greater heights, yet Nash is shown to be incredibly inept when dealing with women (in one instance receiving a slap from a woman for his forthright and inappropriate suggestion that they go 'straight to the sex'). Yet, the casting is effective for many reasons. Though we may feel uncomfortable with Greene in *Clean, Shaven* because he is a relatively unknown entity, a not dissimilar uncertainty is created by the sight of Crowe

⁶³ Nasar, pp. 72-73, quoting Hausner interview.

⁶⁴ Nasar, p. 42.

fumbling awkwardly in discussions with his peers, crying because he cannot find the solution to a mathematical problem, or being teased relentlessly by those around him. The idea of someone mockingly imitating Maximus would be unfeasible. Once a body that yielded powerful agency, Crowe's physique now only adds to his awkwardness and makes his powerlessness in the face of his illness all the more distressing. It also creates an interesting feeling of entrapment through the seemingly bizarre juxtaposition of his imposing physique and the tiny, intricate solutions he writes on the glass/blackboard. There is the sense that this powerful body is of no use other than its ability to hold a pen and record the even more powerful workings of his mind, and the sculptural solidity of his build contrasts with the delicate balance of his mental state.

Crowe's performance was heavily influenced by his meetings with the real John Nash, which allowed him to mimic the mannerisms and expressions from first hand observation (Crowe even added dialogue from his real conversations with Nash into the script, most notably the rambling about tea varieties when he is met by the Nobel Prize representative). Crowe was obviously hugely committed to his portrayal of Nash, and the physical power and energy he exhibited in *Gladiator* is instead redirected to his nuanced facial expressions. Howard focuses on this aspect of Russell's performance, saying that: 'One of the million miracles of Russell's performance ... is the pain and the loss that lives in the eyes.'⁶⁵ Interestingly, James Horner said that 'behind Russell's eyes you can almost feel that the weather is changing inside his mind.'⁶⁶ This beautifully echoes the pathetic fallacy device used in literature and film that I explored in my graphic novel chapter.

⁶⁵ Howard, *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The ability to communicate such complex emotions without words requires outstanding skill and talent, and though it is still mediated through the face, it is arguably one of the most intimate connections we can have from one human being's mental state to another (though of course, this is not to say that Russell's performance is not as carefully constructed as the script, lighting, set and camera work – acting is an art like any other, and just one element in a shifting framework that combines to communicate his interiority). Russell states that he felt it was important that with his performance and the film he could 'simply illustrate that a schizophrenic is the same as anybody who has any type of sickness.'⁶⁷ Performance is thus another mode through which binary oppositions between knowable/unknowable, truth/untruth, intimacy/detachment, transparent/opaque, and communicable/incommunicable are challenged and dismantled.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to illustrate the ways in which similar devices and motifs are utilised by the medium of film to construct the symptoms of schizophrenia. I have aimed to illustrate how the medium may be particularly suitable for communicating mental experiences because of the fact that those experiences themselves are often visual, verbal and audio in their nature. Due to its limitless variations, the visual and audio channels also mimic the plasticity of the mind and serve as media to present the framework of decoding that takes place when we cognise imagery and/or sound. Kerrigan describes the process of presenting psychological illness in the medium of film, saying: 'It is really cinematic, and it allows you tremendous freedom when you

⁶⁷ *A Beautiful Mind*, DVD Special Features, 'Production Notes' (quoting Russell Crowe).

deal with subjective hallucinations, to cut across time, to really be very interpretative in reality and different layers of reality.’⁶⁸

Both *Clean, Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind* are motivated by a desire to grant access to disordered subjectivity and increase understanding of the experience of mental illness. Dennis Lim writes of *Clean, Shaven*:

Of the films that have tried to evoke or arrive at an understanding of insanity, from the inside or outside, using the first or third person, none have done so with *Clean, Shaven*’s remarkable alchemy of clinical detail and raw poetry. The abrasive, subjective sound design, the visual abstractions, and the nerve-jangling ellipses all inch the movie toward the realm of experimental film – which is only fitting, given that the condition in question is characterized by discontinuity, the erosion of boundaries, and the failure of narrative. Kerrigan does not in any way venture that his protagonist has a beautiful mind – this is as unsentimental a depiction of mental illness as you’ll find in movies – but the film has a frayed, terse lyricism all the same.⁶⁹

But we should not dismiss the construction of the disordered mind state we encounter in *A Beautiful Mind*, as the film still constructs a complex world and then dismantles it, forcing us to move inside and outside the mental experiences and thought processes of its central character. It is easy to dismiss a film as ‘sentimental’ and ‘Oscar bait,’ but in doing so we risk missing the opportunities to appreciate not only the complex ways in which abstract concepts are communicated, but also how the sentimental is deployed to particular effect. *A Beautiful Mind* is successful if for no other reason than that we totally understand Nash’s behaviour – we are not closed off from him, and he is not treated as a case study to be observed. The experiences he goes through are as real as any experience can possibly be. As Laing argues, ‘To look and to listen to a patient and to see “signs” of schizophrenia (as a “disease”) and to look and to listen to him simply as a human being are to see and to hear in as radically different ways as when one sees, first the vase, then the faces in the

⁶⁸ Kerrigan, *Clean, Shaven*, DVD Special Features, Commentary.

⁶⁹ Lim, ‘*Clean, Shaven*: Inside Man.’

ambiguous picture.’⁷⁰ Both of these films attempt to explore the symptoms of schizophrenia very much from the perspective of the person experiencing them – not relying on external manifestations, but creating a whole world of meaning which can be interpreted and understood.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 33.

⁷¹ Laing addressed the difficulty of working with descriptions or conceptions of mental illnesses through an analysis of language: ‘The thought is the language, as Wittgenstein has put it. A technical vocabulary is merely a language within a language. A consideration of this technical vocabulary will be at the same time an attempt to discover the reality which the words disclose or conceal.’ Laing, p. 19 ‘The difficulties facing us here are somewhat analogous to the difficulties facing the exposition of hieroglyphics, an analogy Freud was fond of drawing; they are, if anything, greater.’ Laing, p. 31.

**The Cinematic Construction of Dissociative Identity Disorder
(Central Case Studies: David Koepp's *Secret Window* (2004) and David
Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999))**

He expected to sound crazy to himself: a lonely, paranoid man addressing the intruder who only exists, after all, in his own imagination. But he didn't sound crazy to himself. He sounded, instead, like a man who has tumbled to at least half the trick. Only getting half a scam wasn't so great, maybe, but half was better than nothing.¹

Secret Window, Secret Garden, by Stephen King

This chapter will focus on the cinematic communication of Dissociative Identity Disorder (or 'DID', as it is often referred to) in David Koepp's *Secret Window* and David Fincher's *Fight Club*. Unlike *A Beautiful Mind* and *Clean, Shaven*, neither of the key case studies within this chapter have the communication of the mental disorder as their primary aim, ultimately making my analyses of them less straightforward. *Secret Window* is an adaptation from the Stephen King novella *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, and utilises Dissociative Identity Disorder as a narrative device to construct a chilling horror movie villain (perpetuating the cinematic stereotype of the mentally ill as being dangerous and violent).² *Fight Club* uses the disorder in a more sophisticated way to explore issues of identity and masculinity in contemporary capitalist society, whilst also engaging with complex philosophical frameworks. The fact that these films both use mental disorder primarily as a catalyst or structuring device obviously has implications for my approach, as their adherence to any medical or diagnostic model is weak at best (in addition, my analysis of *Secret Window* will have to negotiate horror movie tropes

¹ Stephen King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden* in *Four Past Midnight*, (USA: Signet, Penguin Group Ltd, 2004, First published 1990), p. 310.

² Despite it being created 44 years after Hitchcock's *Psycho* was first released, *Secret Window*'s approach to mental illness is no more informed, politically correct, or socially conscious. The film's central character, Mort, is unknowingly murdering people whilst under the control of an alternative identity that resides in his consciousness. I wish to reassure the reader I am fully aware of the problematic nature of the film - my analysis will be steered firmly towards establishing the visual vocabulary that the film draws on to present a split identity or mind.

when assessing the coding of disorder). Still, since neither realism nor faithfulness to a medical diagnosis is my concern within this thesis, this issue is minor. These films still prove to be interesting case studies for the way in which they use the medium of film to construct disorder. They each have a nuanced visual vocabulary that allows the viewer understand the way in which the disorder is experienced by the protagonist, and it is this aspect that makes them so valuable to my project.

Films featuring Dissociative Identity Disorder have the task of constructing a subjectivity that is compromised by the existence of multiple identities within a single consciousness. Both *Fight Club* and *Secret Window* demonstrate very specific and deliberate devices through which they construct and then dismantle two distinct identities, ending with the merging of these dual personalities via a cognitive battle between them. The narrative approach adopted by each of the films entails the disorder being constructed from the subjectivity of just *one* identity. Both *Secret Window* and *Fight Club* use the same strategy I explored in depth in the previous chapter in my analysis of *A Beautiful Mind*, constructing an apparently ‘objective’ world and then dismantling it, revealing assumptions to be false and key characters to be creations of a disordered mind. What makes *Secret Window* and *Fight Club* different from previous case studies is that the ‘reveal’ presents a different problem to the cinematic medium, that of the representation of the merging of identities and the communication between them.

This chapter will investigate how the multitrack nature of cinema communicates this experience textually, and will draw out similar patterns of collision and fragmentation that were observed in the previous chapter dealing with schizophrenia. My exploration of the way in which each of these films constructs disordered subjectivity will also involve referencing the books from which they are

adapted. My concern here is not with fidelity, but with the way in which a compromised mind state can be constructed in different media. An understanding of how this can be achieved in the written word will allow a greater insight into how the abstract experience of subjective disorder can be communicated cinematically, highlighting the specific devices and frameworks that are accessible to the multitrack medium of film.

Dissociative Identity Disorder

Since neither of the films are attempting any fidelity to a medical model, the time I spend discussing the disorder itself will be minimal. What is important as far as my project is concerned is the fact that *Movies and Mental Illness* references both of these works when discussing Dissociative Identity Disorder, and my analyses seek to redress this balance by approaching them from the perspective of a visual theorist. My analysis of *Fight Club* also seeks to offer an alternative reading of the film to counteract the numerous essays that analyse the film within the framework of philosophy and social/cultural theory. So much time has been devoted to discussing what it *means* that the Narrator has a split identity, and little thought has been given to how this complex subjective experience is actually *communicated* visually and aurally. My thesis seeks to fill this gap by providing an account of the construction of the protagonist's disordered subjectivity and exploring the nuanced visual vocabulary that serves as building blocks to form a complex, layered framework of mental processes.

Secret Window

Being a far simpler film than *Fight Club* both narratively and thematically, my exploration of *Secret Window* will limit itself to the specific devices and motifs that explore subjectivity and will avoid a wider discussion of the aesthetic of the film (in terms of its horror movie genre). I will discuss how the film explores the relationship between the word and the image, whilst also investigating the use of the mirror analogy to chart Mort Rainey's breakdown and the eventual merging of his split identities. My analysis will also draw out the parallels and differences between how Mort's mental state is constructed in the book and how it is communicated in the film, hoping to highlight how cinema draws on the distinctive properties of its medium to represent abstract thought processes and mental experiences.

Secret Window tells the story of a writer, Mort Rainey (Johnny Depp), who has recently divorced from his wife and is now living in an isolated house by a lake whilst attempting to write his next novel. One day he is awoken from a nap by a knock at the door. The man he meets, John Shooter (John Turturro), presents Mort with a manuscript and accuses him of stealing his story, an accusation which Mort flatly denies. After Shooter leaves the manuscript on his doorstep, Mort compares it with his own story, 'Sowing Season,' and discovers that they are indeed uncannily similar to the point of plagiarism. Determined to establish himself as the original author, Mort inquires as to when Shooter wrote his story, and discovers that it was *after* Mort's was published in a literary magazine. Shooter, however, is undeterred by this claim, and the situation escalates, resulting in Shooter killing Mort's dog, burning down his house, and eventually murdering his lawyer and neighbour. Unable to call on the police (for Mort believes Shooter has framed him for the crimes), Mort sends for the manuscript of his original story to prove to Shooter that

he published the story first. When the magazine arrives, however, the pages have been cut out. Confused as to how Shooter could have possibly done this, Mort's subconscious starts questioning him. Inside the house, Mort places Shooter's hat on his head, and after a mental battle involving his inner voices and alter identity he arrives at the terrifying realisation that he *is* Shooter, and has committed all of the crimes himself. His ex-wife, Amy (Maria Bello), arrives at the house to find Mort dressed in Shooter's hat and speaking with Shooter's accent. He tells her that 'You got a wrong number, missy. Ain't no Mort here.' Despite her frantic protestations that he is Mort Rainey, her effort to flee and her partner's rescue attempt, Mort murders them both and thus 'fixes the ending' of his story as Shooter earlier demanded of him.³

The issue of Mort Rainey's consciousness is raised in the first line of Stephen King's novella, which describes him as feeling only 'halfway into the real world':

Morton Rainey, who had just gotten up from nap and who was still feeling only halfway into the real world, didn't have the slightest idea what to say. This was never the case when he was at work, sick or well, wide awake or half asleep; he was a writer, and hardly ever at a loss when it became necessary to fill a character's mouth with a snappy comeback. Rainey opened his mouth, found no snappy comeback there (not even a limp one, in fact), and so closed it again.

He thought: *This man doesn't look exactly real. He looks like a character out of a novel by William Faulkner.*⁴

Describing Mort as 'halfway into the real world' (which is attributed to his sleepy state) is an early hint at a cognitive divide in his mind that positions him on the tipping point between reality and delusion. The novel quickly establishes Mort Rainey's thought processes as demarcated by italics, thus implying that when John

³ Shooter demands of Mort: 'That's how the story ends, pilgrim, it's the only ending. You gonna write it for me, and get it published, and it's gonna have my name on it.'

⁴ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 241. The surreal appearance of Shooter is also reinforced by Mort's observation that 'Shooter's round black hat looked blacker, his blue shirt bluer, and the air was so clear the man seemed scissored from a swatch of reality that was brighter and more vital than the one Mort knew as a rule' (p. 261).

Shooter speaks, and his words are not in italics, he is real. This differentiation serves to visually create a divide between the subjective and the objective, but, as we soon discover, this divide is not to be trusted. The creation of a false dichotomy between the real and the imagined allows the reader or viewer to be drawn into a complex framework of subjectivity that casts John Shooter as a genuine character and a material reality. Despite obvious clues (such as the depiction of Shooter as a fictional character and the reference to Mort's talent for being able to 'fill a character's mouth'), we rely on the framework of interior/exterior we have initially been given to distinguish the objective from the subjective and thus view Shooter as distinct from Mort's consciousness.

In a similar way, the film also quickly establishes the mechanisms by which we will be given access to Mort's interiority. The film opens with a shot of Mort staring through the window of his car with a voiceover – Mort's inner monologue – saying 'Turn around. Turn around. Turn the car around and get the hell out of here.' At first, he is shown to obey this inner voice and drive away, but then he sharply reverses his car and drives back to the motel, grabs keys from behind the counter, and drives up to the room in which he finds his wife sleeping with another man. As he storms into the room in a fit of rage, we are plunged into sensory confusion; the sound is muffled and muted, his scream distorted and quietened (which paradoxically heightens its impact, adding a hopelessness and futility to its appeal, much like the Munch painting), and the colour palette is a blue-grey, adding to the claustrophobia of the scene and demarcating it from the scenes that follow which are set in the present. This opening is key in terms of how we read the rest of the film, as it not only suggests the traumatic event which caused the fragmentation of his psyche, but also provides the beginnings of a visual and aural vocabulary that

represents the past – Mort has numerous flashbacks throughout the film, both real and imagined, and this is an essential mechanism for constructing his experience.

After the opening sequence we are shown a long aerial shot moving over a blue sparkling lake, eventually arriving at a secluded house. As I will now discuss, our navigation through the window (Fig. 1) and eventually through a mirror (Fig. 2) starts the beginning of a nuanced metaphor that runs throughout the film, involving the mirror and the construction of the self.

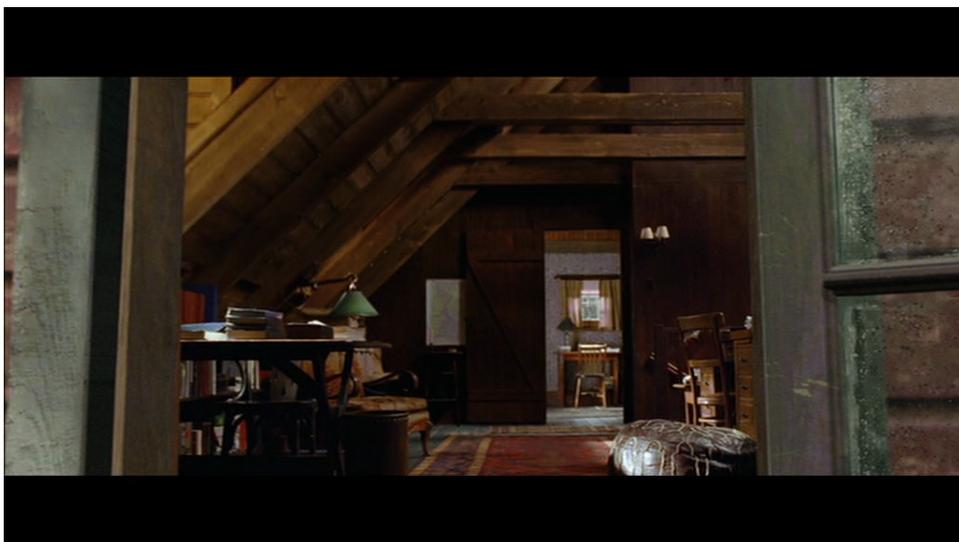


Figure 1. *Secret Window* (dir. David Koepp, Prod. Grand Slam Productions and Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2004). We enter the house where Mort stays through the window of his house, frames within frames suggesting the secret passageways and dark spaces of the author's mind.



Figure 2. *Secret Window*. We enter through the mirror into Mort's subjective reality.

The Mirror Analogy

After entering through the window and scanning the layout of the house (a shot which establishes Mort as a writer by pausing at his desk and laptop), the camera travels around to face a mirror in which we see Mort sleeping on the sofa. The camera then tracks towards the mirror, closer and closer, until eventually we lose the frame and it is as if we have entered *through* the mirror to position us with Mort in *his* reality. The camera never turns back around to switch our view from reflection to reality, and this is our first textual clue that what we are seeing may be subjective and thus untrustworthy. The transition is so seamless that we hardly notice that the camera does *not* cut back to the actual Mort, but stays with the reflection. We have, like Alice, stepped through the looking-glass, and it is only when we re-emerge through the mirror at the end of the film that we realise the significance of the fact that everything we have seen has been a distorted fantasy, with alternative rules of space and time. This use of the mirror plays a key part in engraining fragmentation into the text and narrative. Mirrors are intrinsically linked not only with identity, but also with an apparent indexical relationship to reality, and this relationship can be distorted via the fracturing of light and space. Mirrors thus become a site of instability.

If we consider Elliott's and Plath's approaches to the metaphorical richness of the mirror as a literary device and a way of understanding the relationship between word and image, we can appreciate that the use of the mirror in *Secret Window* is deceiving in its simplicity. The mirror fulfils multiple functions, serving not only as a 'portal' into the mind of Mort, but also providing the surface onto which his projections of identity are manifested, visually as well as metaphorically splintering his sense of self.

One example of the allegorical significance of the mirror can be explored when Mort is alone in his house and thinks he hears a noise upstairs. Believing this to be Shooter, he creeps upstairs armed with a baseball bat to confront him, the whole time calling out to Shooter to reveal himself. Thinking he sees Shooter reflected in the bathroom mirror, Mort charges in. The book describes the sequence as follows:

He turned the knob of the bathroom door and slammed in, bouncing the door off the wall hard enough to chop through the wallpaper and pop the door's lower hinge, and there he was, there he was, coming at him with a raised weapon, his teeth bared in a killer's grin, and his eyes were insane, utterly insane, and Mort brought the poker down in a whistling overhand blow and he had just enough time to realize that Shooter was also swinging a poker, and to realize that Shooter was not wearing his round-crowned black hat, and to realize it wasn't Shooter at all, to realize it was him, the madman was him, and then the poker shattered the mirror over the washbasin and silver-backed glass sprayed every which-way, twinkling in the gloom, and the medicine cabinet fell into the sink. The bent door swung open like a gaping mouth, spilling bottles of cough syrup and iodine and Listerine.⁵

The initial long sentence communicates Mort's thoughts as a rolling, tumbling stream of interconnected realisations, giving us no time to respond properly to the information as the revelations accumulate. The precise image that follows it (of the bottles spilling out of the cabinet) serves to finalise the impression of spilling over and loss of containment that the form of the previous sentence has conveyed. The realisation – at least in this instance – that Mort is the very same mad man he fears is directly reached from his initial belief that Shooter is a separate identity, hinting that ultimately this same conclusion will be reached at a later point. Although in this case he just believes that he was mistaken when he saw Shooter in the bathroom, the connection is something that lingers and comes to full fruition when faced with his reflection in the living room mirror, as will be discussed shortly.

The description of the mirror itself as something liquid, with the glass 'spraying' everywhere, draws on the symbolism of identity as something fluid and

⁵ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 313.

mutable. The simile in the last sentence, which describes bottles spilling out of the cabinet ‘like a gaping mouth’ (presumably breaking some of the bottles and also spilling their contents) develops the overarching metaphor of the container and the liquid as reflective of Mort’s mind, communicating the fragility of something on the verge of breaking or splintering.

This instability is visually explored in the film when Mort goes to investigate a sound from outside and places a glass of water on the edge of the kitchen counter (Fig. 3). There is the immediate unease created by the precariousness of the glass – if it fell, the glass would shatter – and because of this precariousness the image is loaded with symbolic content. The glass is fragile and contains liquid, liquid that is stable and held in place by the container; if the glass were to fall and shatter, everything would disperse and lose shape. There is consequently a sense of the delicate balance between the pliable imagination and the boundaries of the mind that contain it, a mind which in Mort’s case has allowed imagination to spill over into delusion, externalising abstract ideas into fleshy reality. The fragility of the glass is all too apparent, and our innate desire to push the glass safely onto the counter is suggestive of a more profound unease. This single image is densely packed with meaning, vividly representing the dividedness of Mort’s mind, his distraction, and also the unbalanced and unstable nature of his mental state.



Figure 3. *Secret Window*

After Mort smashes the bathroom mirror, we see a shot of the smashed glass in the place where Mort's face should be (Figs. 4 and 5). When his belief in Shooter as a separate identity collides with the reality that it is in fact *himself* that he is chasing, the result is an obliteration of his own image, leaving broken shards where his face should be.



Figure 4. *Secret Window*



Figure 5. *Secret Window*. The mirror represents a splintering identity, so that the real Mort is no longer recognisable.

After smashing the mirror, Mort hears a noise behind him and smashes the shower door. He discovers a mouse in the bath, further reinforcing his aloneness in the house and the fact that, despite having only just mistakenly smashed the mirror, he is still unable to give up on the idea that Shooter is in the house with him. The idea is insidious. Mort is framed by the cracked glass, yet again characterising him as someone whose core being is splintering and shattered (Fig. 6). The jagged glass appears almost like ice, communicating the coldness and dissociation of his mental state. Rather than employing the symbolism we encounter in the book, which develops themes of liquidity and instability, the film uses the opacity of the glass to communicate an eerie murkiness, echoing the visual symbolism developed in *A Scanner Darkly* when Arctor's identities begin to become confused.



Figure 6. *Secret Window*

One sequence in the book describes Mort watching Shooter through the window, detailing the way in which ‘Both windows were reflectorized, which meant he could look out but anyone trying to look in would see only his own distorted image, unless he put his nose to the glass and cupped his eyes against the glare.’⁶ In the film, it is in fact Mort who is unable to recognise that his view of himself is a mere distortion, and that far from being able to see out clearly, this distorted image is reflected on *both sides* of the glass; there is no point at which he can see clearly until confronted with the reality of his alter identity, a confrontation that happens, of course, in the mirror.

After placing Shooter’s hat onto his head (the significance of which will be explored later), Mort approaches himself in the mirror and begins to question why he would do this (Fig. 7).

⁶ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 244.



Figure 7. *Secret Window*

Two channels of sound occur here: one is an external voice as Mort speaks out loud to himself, and the other is an internal voice that questions him about why he wanted to put the hat on in the first place. This dialogue all occurs as he looks into the mirror, as if this is the surface onto which his identities are projected and this is where the discussion takes place. When questioning why he might have put the hat on, Mort turns (Fig. 8) and we cut to a shot of another ‘Mort’ (without the hat on), telling him that it was because Shooter wanted him to ‘get confused.’ (Fig. 9). This other Mort motions to his temples, miming the visual gesture for ‘crazy.’ The inner voice, which until now has been restricted to the aural channel, has manifested into a physical presence on the screen, representing a significant ‘stepping over’ into another mode of existence. He stares straight into the camera lens, placing the viewer in an impossible space between the two Mort’s as we cut from one to the other. Mort replies ‘Oh I’m already confused, Pilgrim. Plenty confused. So don’t talk to me about confusion.’ Using the word ‘Pilgrim,’ a word Shooter called him earlier, throws his identity into question and starts blurring the boundaries between himself and Shooter. It also draws on the use of language as the beginning of

character formation, tying words to the identity they refer to. The word ‘Pilgrim’ is also particularly suggestive of the journey and transformation Mort undertakes through his mental disintegration.



Figure 8. *Secret Window*



Figure 9. *Secret Window*

We then cut to a mid-distance shot and see that this ‘inner’ Mort is in the shot with him, circling him and questioning his understanding of his relationship to Shooter

(Figs. 10 and 11). Mort is thus visually unstable, navigating the space in impossible ways as additional Morts occur either side of him. An apparently ‘objective’ overhead shot confirms that this additional character is a delusion, though the voice of the inner Mort continues over the objective shot and thus still compromises its reliability via the aural channel. This device functions in a similar way as it does in *A Beautiful Mind* by plunging us in and out of the subjective experience of the character and complicating layers of reality (Fig. 12). Despite the fact that Mort understands the characters to be delusions, he is unable to stop seeing them, as are we.⁷ Though the strategy is the same, the shots operate in a slightly different way in comparison to *A Beautiful Mind*, as our alignment with Mort is one of perspective as opposed to emotional attachment. Because of the fact that the film is a horror movie, we watch Mort’s breakdown with interest as opposed to sympathy – there is no sentimentality in the portrayal of his mental deterioration.



Figure 10. *Secret Window*

⁷ The Narrator expresses exasperation in *Fight Club* when unable to stop seeing and hearing Tyler, saying ‘you’re just a voice in my head.’ This realisation in itself is not enough to stop the delusion or merge the identities.



Figure 11. *Secret Window*



Figure 12. *Secret Window*

As Mort listens to the argument presented by this inner voice, which pleads ‘Listen to me, because this is how it happens. This is how it happens to people ... There is no John Shooter. There never has been, you invented him,’ he becomes visibly anxious, pulling at his hair and gasping for breath (Fig. 13). It is important to appreciate that this identity is not that of Shooter, but another facet of his personality

that attempts to present him with the truth (in the novel, this voice is characterised as a ‘midbrain’ or ‘deep brain’ voice).⁸ Flashbacks (an important mechanism I will discuss later) begin to occur, signalled by bleached out colour palette, harsh lighting, blurry focus, and unsteady framing.



Figure 13. *Secret Window*

One of the most visually and symbolically interesting interactions with the mirror occurs when Mort turns to face himself in the mirror but now finds his reflection turned away from him (Figs. 14 and 15). Not only is this representative of his inability to configure his own identity anymore (as the Mort he thought he was is turning his back on him, creating a tunnel-like image of blankness that

⁸ This is characterised in a section in which Mort questions his motives for misleading Greg regarding his beliefs about Shooter:

‘A voice in his midbrain kept muttering that he was either making a mistake or deliberately misleading Greg. Shooter was dangerous, all right. He hadn’t needed to see what the man had done to Bump to know that. He had seen it in Shooter’s eyes yesterday afternoon. Why was he playing vigilante, then?’

Because, another, deeper, voice answered with a kind of dangerous firmness. Just because, that’s all.

The midbrain voice spoke up again, worried: *Do you mean to hurt him? Is that what this is all about? Do you mean to hurt him?*

But the deep voice would not answer. It had fallen silent.’ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 289.

communicates Mort's bafflement as he stares into a personal abyss in which his face disappears), but it also serves to fracture our perceived notion of the reliability of the mirror. When we consider that all of this takes place as if through the looking-glass, the distortion of the relationship between reality/illusion, and object/reflection fits perfectly into the visual language of the film. The frame of the mirror is constructed from intertwining wood, communicating entanglement and confusion as alternative versions of reality become meshed together.



Figure 14. *Secret Window*



Figure 15. *Secret Window*

We cut back to Mort's face and see Shooter standing on the stairs behind him, positioning Mort as overwhelmed by the enormity of his mental situation and making Shooter a blurry figure in the background, ever present to Mort (Fig. 16). Shooter tells the story of Mort's creation of him, and we see Mort's remembering the instant when he discovered the hat at a junk sale (Fig. 17). As he places the hat on his head, he stares into a mirror and begins to perform the mannerisms and accent of Shooter's character, 'a dairy farmer from Mississippi.' (The importance of the fact that it is Johnny Depp performing this act of transformation will be explored in depth.) The mirror thus becomes the place for reality and illusion to become confused, and the divide between real identity and performed identity to become blurred. This symbolism does not work in isolation, however. The motif of the mirror interacts with other cinematic and literary devices in the text to construct a framework through which we can understand the coding of disorder, as I will now explore.



Figure 16. *Secret Window*



Figure 17. *Secret Window*

The written word and the image

The dismantling of Mort's subjectivity in *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden* is carried out visually by inner voices and thoughts that interject Mort's mental meanderings mid-sentence, in a similar mode as we encountered in Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (Fig. 18). We see these intrusive realisations demarcated with brackets and italics, making

them abrupt both visually and sub-vocally. As we read the narrative they cut off the sentence and make an alternative statement that lacks punctuation and thus has an immediate and frantic feel, resulting in our return to the previous sentence feeling disrupted and uneasy. Yet despite the sentence ‘cutting-off’ the one before it, it does follow on in terms of sense. The two options that proceed from the initial line therefore both present valid endings to the sentence, as if we are seeing and comprehending the train of thought – and thus the mind – dividing in front of us. The effect is thus not as disjunctive as that we encounter in *A Scanner Darkly*, in which huge sections of prose bearing no relation to the sentence they have broken up are entered into the text. If *A Scanner Darkly* aims to represent the right and left hemisphere of the brain competing, then *Secret Window, Secret Garden* seeks to communicate the moments in which the mind can divide or split, carrying us down alternative pathways.

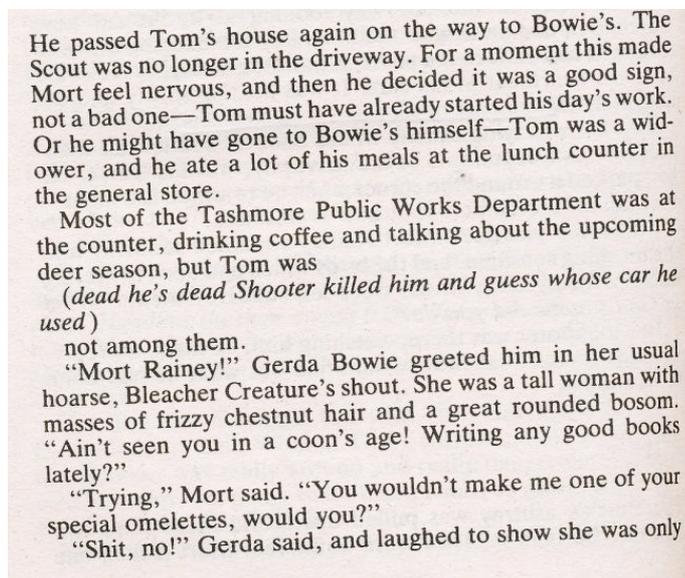


Figure 18. Extract from Stephen King's *Secret Window, Secret Garden* in *Four Past Midnight*, (USA: Signet, Penguin Group Ltd, 2004, First published 1990), p.328.

Parts of the book represent Mort's thinking process in terms of a 'Question and Answer' format, again visually creating a dual consciousness in terms of the aesthetic of the conversation and allowing the reader to navigate Mort's mental state

by establishing exactly what he thinks of the situation. (The final line of this section, in which he answers out loud, to himself, has a wonderful irony (Fig. 19)).

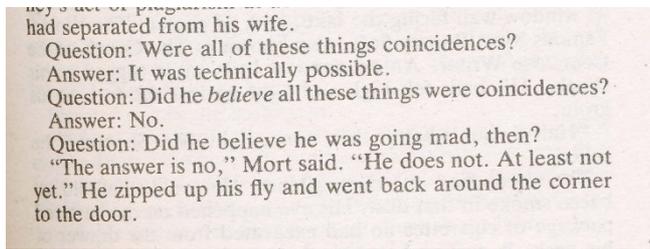


Figure 19. Extract from *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 309.

This representation of a dual consciousness, or layers of consciousness that interact, is also communicated visually in *Secret Window* when Mort frantically compares his story with that of Shooter's (Fig. 20). The two similar stories visually represent a split identity as he thumbs up and down the pages, metaphorically constructing the idea of two consciousnesses. This is especially striking when we consider that the process of writing itself is traditionally held as one of the truest reflections of something from deep within the creator's mind.

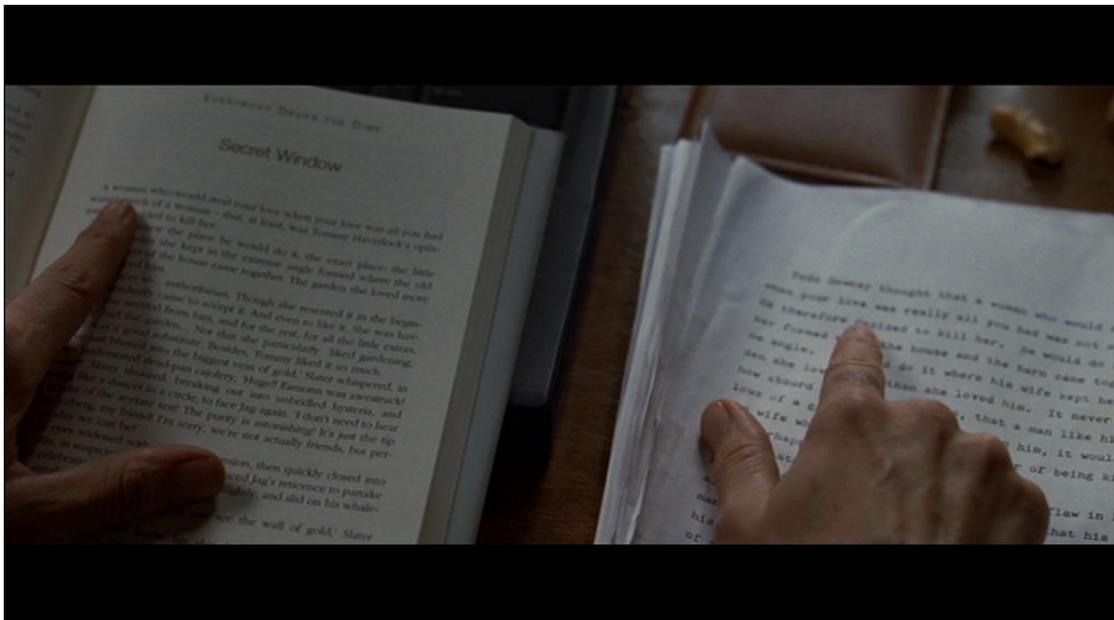


Figure 20. *Secret Window*

This sequence visually represents two minds arriving at the same story. We cut between the two manuscripts in a kinetic series of close-ups that force a comparison,

not only between the words, but between the aesthetic of the papers - one is professionally published, straight edged, and flawless, and the other is manually typed, dog-eared, and scruffy. The book describes how ‘Most of the letters were as crooked as an old man’s teeth,’⁹ creating an inextricable link between the manuscript and the character of its author, Shooter. As Mort uses his fingers to follow two trains of thought simultaneously, we have a physical manifestation of his internal grappling with his relationship to Shooter.¹⁰ The image recalls the left hemisphere and right hemisphere split in *A Scanner Darkly*, and the fact that at the centre of this division there is an ellipsis is suggestive not only of the gap in Mort’s understanding, but also of the impossibility of reconciliation – there is seemingly no bridge from one identity to the other and no hope of harmony.

After Mort opens the parcel containing his magazine and discovers that the pages containing his story have been cut out, he runs his finger down the rough edge of the stump (Fig. 21). Everything about this image suggests division and fragmentation, vividly capturing the idea that something is missing or incomplete. The page on each side of the screen echoes the earlier image of Mort scanning the two stories, reminding us of the connectedness between two halves and the missing piece of the puzzle in the centre that unites them. Mort’s physical appreciation of the missing pages by running a finger down the gap suggests a mental musing on the thought that something is not quite right in his comprehension of the situation – he quite literally does not have the full story. By appealing to his sense of touch, Mort

⁹ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 248.

¹⁰ In one scene, Mort discovers a handwritten letter written by Shooter, which utilises the written word to symbolise division and instability. The writing appears childlike, erratic, and inconsistent (perhaps Mort wrote the note with his left hand?), containing a mixture of capital and lowercase letters and with some letters drawn over more than once. The crudeness of the handwriting and expression could not be more oppositional to Mort’s profession as an author, and thus the letter creates a split between the two identities through one of the most personal modes of expression, the handwritten note.

attempts to find an understanding that his vision has failed to give him. Like doubting Thomas touching the wounds of Christ, Mort attempts to grapple with the truth of the situation by appealing to the physical, and this physical reality forces a shift in his mental reality. Mort's internal voice starts questioning his assumption that Shooter must have cut the pages out, asking 'Wait a minute...how would he do that?' to which Mort replies: 'I don't know...but he did it.' Yet still the internal voice persists: 'Think about it. How?' This voiceover allows the audio channel to structure in another layer of consciousness and thus another mode of conflict into the text.



Figure 21. *Secret Window*

The mind of the person in Mort's story, 'Sowing Season,' is said to disintegrate: 'In both versions, the killer eventually went crazy and was discovered by the police eating vast amounts of the vegetable in question and swearing he would be rid of her, that in the end he would finally be rid of her.'¹¹ King writes that Mort 'thought he had done a fair job of painting Tom Havelock's homicidal breakdown,'

¹¹ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 251.

using an interart analogy to suggest the sensitivity with which Mort ‘painted’ the colours of this character and brought him to life.¹² Mort’s mental state is also compared with a sense of detachment and dislocation:

The worst of it wasn’t physical. The worst was that dismaying, disorientating sense of being outside yourself, somehow – just an observer looking through dual TV cameras with blurry lenses.¹³

Just as in *A Scanner Darkly* (and also with *Fight Club*’s ‘copy of a copy of a copy’) we encounter the moving image (in this case the medium of television) being used to describe the sensation of untrustworthiness, the sense of life being mediated or distorted by a recording. Mort also asks at one point: ‘*Is it live, or is it Memorex?*’, quoting a television commercial released by Memorex to illustrate the listeners’ inability to tell the difference between live sound and an audio cassette recording.¹⁴ The deceptiveness of recording media is intrinsic to the Memorex advertising campaign, and the fact that Mort quotes this slogan is reflective of his growing awareness that his senses are not always trustworthy. As explored in Chapter Two, the sense of sight is always associated with knowledge, but *Secret Window* challenges this assumption and makes us question the validity of everything we see and hear.¹⁵

The fact that King explores this sense of detachment and delusion through the process of writing is equally significant, as it uses the metaphor of the written word as creative, fictive, and illusory, and questions the trustworthiness of this medium as

¹² King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 251.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322. The television advert featured Ella Fitzgerald singing a note that shattered a glass, and then showed that an audio cassette recording of her singing also broke the glass. The advert asked, ‘Is it live, or is it Memorex?’

¹⁵ The film also has moments of aural hallucination, such as when Mort goes to pick up his magazine. The postal worker asks Mort not tell her bosses that she handled the UPS parcels, and as Mort walks away we hear her say ‘cause I saw what you did.’ Mort turns around and says ‘I’m sorry?’ and she looks up and says ‘I said they’d shoot me if you did.’ The audience, of course, experience the same delusion as Mort, and the reliability of the aural channel is immediately thrown into question.

much as visual devices. The written word is depicted in many ways as the pathway to insanity, and the page a place for the identities to play off against one another. As Mort notes in *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, ‘It was ink on paper, but it wasn’t the ink and it wasn’t the paper.’¹⁶ The written word is thus portrayed as creating something fuller, something ‘other,’ and this idea of transformation is explored through Mort’s gradual mental connection and eventual submersion into the fictional character of Shooter.

Depp as Mort and Shooter

The book constantly hints at the link between Mort and Shooter, with Shooter reasserting over and over again that ‘This is between you and me.’ At the same time, a distance between the two characters is created, as Mort views Shooter as ‘a representative of the Crazy Folks’ (which, of course, he is).¹⁷ Rather than focusing on the way they are linked narratively in the film, I want to focus on the significance of the fact that Johnny Depp is cast as Mort, focusing primarily on how this allows for the two identities to merge at the end of the film. After all, John Turturro is playing the part of Shooter and Depp is playing Mort, so the film must negotiate the physical realities of these two identities and find a way to allow Depp to take over from Turturro when the identity of Shooter overcomes that of Mort (in this respect, *Secret Window* is arguably more successful than *Fight Club*, for reasons I will address later).

From the opening sequence, Mort is shown to be quirky, arty, and eccentric; he wanders around in a dressing gown eating Doritos, has dishevelled dirty blonde hair, and spends the majority of his days napping on the sofa (Fig. 22).

¹⁶ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 254.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.



Figure 22. *Secret Window*

Yet, despite this sluggish behaviour, Depp's portrayal of Mort makes him fascinating to watch, with distinctive mannerisms and a physicality suggestive of his inner tensions and frustrations (such as his jaw-stretching, bumbling walk, and anxious hair adjusting).

What makes Depp absolutely ideal for this role is his ability for physical transformation (as suggested in my comparison of him with Reeves in the previous chapter). In her review of *Secret Window*, Leslie Felperin scathingly comments that 'Depp seems to have dug into his old costume chest - glasses reframed from *Nick of Time*, blond highlights from *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, demented tics from *Benny & Joon* - to construct his character,'¹⁸ but seemingly fails to appreciate the significance of this conceptualisation of Depp textually. Felperin appears to expect some sort of deeper transformation from Depp, despite the fact that he is an actor who has always constructed his characters via surface. When we consider his past roles as Edward Scissorhands (Fig. 23), Willy Wonka, Jack Sparrow (Fig. 24), Sweeney Todd, and the Mad Hatter (Fig. 25), the extent to which these characters

¹⁸ Leslie Felperin, 'Secret Window,' *Sight & Sound*, vol. XIV, Issue 5, May 2004, pp. 70-71.

represent their eccentricity through costume is fully apparent (especially when we compare this to earlier publicity shots, such as Fig. 26). Not only that, but the characters often admit their constructedness within the text, with Edward Scissorhands saying ‘I’m not finished’ and Willy Wonka assuring us that ‘‘Improvisation is a party trick – anyone can do it.’



Figure 23. Publicity shot of Johnny Depp in *Edward Scissorhands*.



Figure 24. Publicity shot of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.



Figure 25. Movie poster for *Alice in Wonderland*.



Figure 26. Black and white publicity shot of Johnny Depp.

Depp thus negotiates identity as a costume that can be taken on. In *Secret Window*, it is Shooter’s hat that provides the ultimate transformation in Mort, and conceptualising Depp as an actor with a costume chest is crucial for the depiction of his morph into another identity. The prop does not facilitate the transition, but is the

identity *itself*, because, where Depp is concerned, identity is all about surface. Depp's vocal dexterity also plays into his ability to morph into different eccentric characters. When talking to Shooter about his relationship with Amy, Mort mimics his deep-Southern accent, exaggeratingly spelling out 'D-I-V-O-R-C-E.' This moment of mocking imitation gives us an insight into Mort's – and Depp's – ability for adaptation and performance, and hints at the suggestion made in the novella that Mort was a man capable of 'filling a character's mouth.'

Shooter says to Mort that 'I exist because you made me ... You thought me up. Gave me my name, told me everything you wanted me to do.' This process of creation is analogous to the role of an actor in the creation of a character, and the casting of Depp is absolutely pivotal for the conveyance of this idea.¹⁹ Known for his eccentric performances and physical transformations, the film draws on the extra-textual connotations of Depp to communicate the possibility for multiple identities existing within one physical body. Depp's association with costuming (Ricky Gervais introduced him at the Golden Globes as 'the man who will wear literally anything Tim Burton tells him to') reinforces the extent to which Depp creates characters through disguise. In sharp contrast to the way in which Keanu Reeves has a consistent state of *being* on screen, hinting at a depth beneath his striking features, Depp arrives at his characterisation through the obliteration of his beauty through obvious and eccentric make-up, hair, and costuming. Foregrounding the surface of his characters – and indeed, suggesting that there is nothing beneath that surface –

¹⁹ In a recent interview with Graham Norton, Depp responded to the comment that he was 'the best character actor in the world' by saying that 'I think it's more like some sort of schizophrenia that's just worked for me.' (The interview can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEsfjDcZJdE&>). This aspect of Depp's persona was the inspiration for his recent cameo in Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's comedy *Life's Too Short*, broadcast on Thursday 10th November 2011 on BBC2. In this episode, Depp is shown to try and get into the mind of Warwick Davis in preparation for his role as Rumpelstiltskin, asking the actor to do ridiculous character performances and mimicking his impressions of Warwick into a dictaphone.

makes us acutely aware of the constructedness of his personas (a constructedness brought to the fore by the title sequences of Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Sweeney Todd*, all of which entail a vivid journey through the mechanics of a factory). This emphasis on costume allows for the symbolic importance of Shooter's hat to be brought to the fore.

Shooter's hat is an object that seems to be alive for much of the film – at one point Mort nervously throws a plastic bag over it in order to pick it up without actually touching it, in much the same way one would capture a wild animal. Of course, his wariness of the hat is fully justified when we realise the essential role it has played in the creation of Shooter in the final scenes of the film. In a sense, the hat *is* alive, because it is intrinsically a part of the manifestation of Mort's idea. The book describes the moment when Mort puts on Shooter's hat as follows:

And the hat felt like quite a good fit, actually.
Then the restless voice in his mind asked, *Why'd you put it on? Who'd you think you'd look like? Him?* and the laughter died. Why *had* he put the on in the first place?
He wanted you to, the restless voice said quietly.
Yes? But why? Why would Shooter want Mort to put on his hat?
Maybe he wants you to...
Yes? he prompted the restless voice again. Wants me to what?
He thought the voice had gone away and was reaching for the light-switch when it spoke again.
...to get confused, it said.²⁰

The hat thus triggers a series of questions that result in the emergence of the idea that it plays a fundamental part in the relationship between Mort and Shooter. As Mort places the hat onto his head, the costuming allows the identity of Shooter to take a firmer hold; costume is thus framed as a gateway to identity. When Amy returns to the house to find Mort (now Shooter), Mort is framed so that the hat takes up the majority of the screen and we cannot see his full face (Fig. 27). The costume of Shooter's hat becomes a crucial part of Mort – and Depp's – performance of this

²⁰ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 333.

identity, and communicates the control of this on his psyche. The hat sits directly on Mort's head, symbolising one identity's overthrow of the other in Mort's mind.²¹

When Shooter overtakes Mort's mind in the novella, King describes the way in which 'the hand pulled the shade in Mort's head all the way down and he was in darkness.'²² In the film, it is very much the hat that blocks out the windows of Mort's mind, a dark symbol of the triumph of one identity over another. Though within this image of Mort he is mostly submerged in darkness, we can still see the glasses and the highlights, other exaggerated aspects of Mort's identity. There is a sense in which we are aware of the layers of disguises, or disguises beneath disguises, in Mort's character, and the glasses (which act as a frame within a frame) begin to seem like part of this new identity, as if we have lost sense of any 'real' or 'true' Mort and everything is now just surface. As Murray Pomerance suggests, 'The "Johnny" beneath the many screen Johnnies is many Johnnies.'²³ The disguise is never 'peeled' off, and thus we are denied the revelation of something stable *beneath* the surface. Depp's negotiation of identity through costuming is fundamental to the way we understand the disintegration of identity and notions of mental stability. With Depp, everything is in flux, a never ending parade of costumes presenting identities that are all as valid/invalid as each other.

²¹ In the novella, King writes that 'He called it his thinking cap,' yet again tying this object to the cognitive process of forming of identity. King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 368.

²² King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, P. 366

²³ Murray Pomerance, *Johnny Depp Starts Here*, (New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 77.



Figure 27. *Secret Window*

Flashbacks and the process of realisation

The film is punctured with flashbacks. Like the light that in one shot shines through the secret window, the film is consistently being infiltrated with an alternative version of reality that briefly flashes up on the screen and ruptures our sense of spatial and temporal stability. Both *Fight Club* and *Secret Window* use flashbacks as a device to reassemble the protagonists' split identity. When addressed by the multiple 'Morts' that represent his inner voices, the screen is visually divided as we see Mort recollecting events as they actually happened. Visually, this alternative reality is demarcated by yellow tinged lighting and over exposure. Mort's prominence in the frame draws our focus to these images as mental processes, and creates a direct opposition between the two identities of Mort and Shooter. Images are layered over one another to represent the puzzle-like cognitive process of remembering (Fig. 28), and as the flames burn in the house the image of Mort fades, as if this very realisation disintegrates his identity (Fig. 29). The book describes this

moment as ‘pieces of the puzzle’ that ‘began to fly together,’²⁴ and here the film uses the same ‘mental mapping’ aesthetic as described in *A Beautiful Mind* and *Clean, Shaven* in an attempt to communicate the cognitive process of assimilating information. Cinema’s repeated use of these devices (flashbacks, layered images, montage) makes them instantly recognisable and readable to a contemporary audience, but the speed at which we read these tropes is unreflective of the complexity of the way in which they generate a cognitive understanding of abstract mental processes.²⁵ Our ability to acknowledge these conventions as signalling a distinctive mental mechanism allows the medium to facilitate an almost instantaneous negotiation of the move between interiority and exteriority and creates a conceptual mapping of intricately complex mental processes.



Figure 28. *Secret Window*

²⁴ King, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, p. 363.

²⁵ Despite the similarity in technique, we respond very differently to the ‘mental mapping’ aesthetic in *Secret Window* than we do in *A Beautiful Mind*, mostly because the film is less sentimental and the realisation that Mort committed the murders is not one that fosters sympathy on behalf of the audience. This distinction with regards to audience alignment and allegiance (to use Murray Smith’s categories) will be explored fully in my analysis of *Fight Club*.



Figure 29. *Secret Window*

Because of the seemingly superficial horror movie tropes used throughout the film, it is easy to underestimate the sophistication of the visual grammar used to communicate Mort's interiority. The complexity of the way we read interiority is often overlooked; what we notice incredibly quickly and label as 'obvious' is mistaken for simplicity (surprisingly illustrated by Koepp himself saying in his commentary on *Secret Window* that film as a medium is rarely successful when dealing with interiority). What *Secret Window* achieves is the construction of a complex metaphor regarding the mirror as the catalyst for the fragmentation of identities whilst utilising the trademark character acting of Depp to form an understanding of identity that revolves around performance. In the novella, Mort's disordered mental state is partly understood through analogies regarding the unreliability of recording media. My analysis of *Fight Club* will take this further by investigating how it fully explores a construction of subjectivity that is fundamentally reliant on us understanding it through the medium of film.

Fight Club

The thematic complexity of *Fight Club* is illustrated by the numerous essays that have read the film primarily in terms of the philosophical and cultural frameworks with which it engages. As Thomas E. Wartenberg comments, ‘It is difficult to find a consistent perspective in the film and in our response to it.’²⁶ I will argue that this thematic and narrative complexity and the overarching subject of alienation in modern society are intrinsic to the film’s portrayal of a disordered mind state. Therefore, my analysis will approach the film from a very different and specific angle, aiming to read the film *solely* in terms of the way it cinematically constructs a disordered subjectivity. My argument posits that the main way in which the film does this is through a nuanced self-reflexive engagement with the medium, using film specifically to allow us to work through our conceptualisation of certain thought processes and mental states. *Fight Club* not only generates a complex framework which uses the medium of film as a continuing metaphor for the Narrator’s mind, it also capitalises on film’s capacity to be a textual surface for aural and visual disruption, building on the susceptibility of the medium to interference and tampering.

Tyler as Editor

Even before the film has begun, the DVD menu for *Fight Club* identifies the corruption of the medium as intrinsic to the coding of subjective disorder. The traditional red copyright ‘Warning’ screen appears, but instead of the traditional text it has an alternative message. The text begins: ‘If you are reading this then this

²⁶ Thomas E. Wartenberg, ed. *Fight Club*, (USA; Canada: Routledge, 2012), p. 2. These essays range from Murray Skees’ exploration of the film through Nietzsche’s metaphor involving Apollo and Dionysus, to Nancy Bauer’s reading of the film as a philosophical engagement with Plato and questions of reality and illusion.

warning is for you. Every word you read of this useless fine print is another second off your life. Don't you have other things to do?' and ends: 'If you don't claim your humanity you will become a statistic. You have been warned ... Tyler.' Thus, even before the film has begun, Tyler is presented as being in complete control of the feature we are about to see; he is the editor and has infiltrated the text on a fundamental level. The DVD menu itself is subject to flickering interruptions; near-subliminal footage flashes up as the image becomes fuzzy and shaky and the elevator music is interrupted by intense heavy metal music. The medium is presented as penetrable and subject to sabotage.

The title sequence introduces us to the place in which the film is really set, the mind of the Narrator. Stunning CGI allows us to travel backwards through the organic structures of the brain, allowing us to ride the neurological connections like a rollercoaster (Fig. 30). This serves as an indicator of what the film will be – a fast-paced journey through someone else's thoughts and mental processes. The images themselves are pictorial representations of previous visual patterns I identified that mimic brain connections (such as the Pollock drip paintings), and bright flashes of light over synapses visualise moments of understanding and creation. The preliminary drawing for this sequence also illustrates the organic and spiralling nature of the connections (Fig. 31).



Figure 30. *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, prod. Fox 2000 Pictures, 1999).

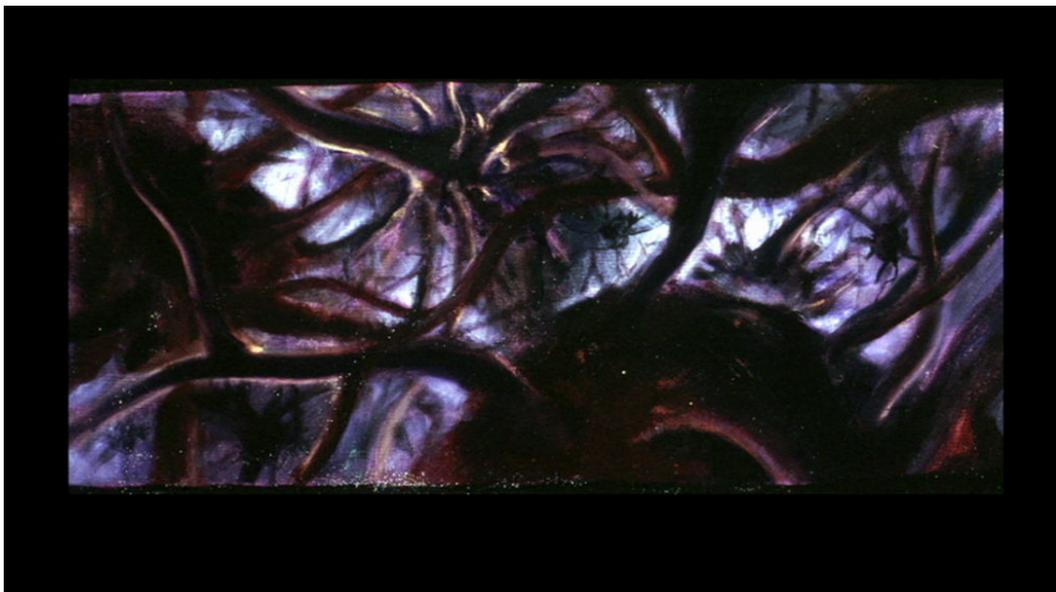


Figure 31. Image from *Fight Club* storyboard, available on Disc 2 of Special Features DVD (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000).

We eventually emerge from this tangled mind-map through a pore in the Narrator's face and then travel down the barrel of a gun, which we discover is pointed into the Narrator's mouth. A voiceover – the Narrator's – tell us that 'People are always asking how I know Tyler Durden,' throwing us immediately into the question of their relationship and establishing the importance of Tyler from the start. Detached sentences, such as 'You know that saying, how you always hurt the ones you love?

Well it works both ways' present us with confused snatches of thought that refer to a bigger picture we do not yet have access to. By holding the gun in the Narrator's mouth and preventing him from speaking, Tyler initiates the voiceover as our primary access to thought, and we rely on this device heavily throughout the film. We then learn that Tyler is counting down to an explosion, and a CGI shot allows us to soar down the exterior of the building into the basement and through the window of a van containing a bomb. The Narrator's voiceover explains how and why this bomb is there and states that 'I know this, because Tyler knows this.' The structure and rhythm of this sentence (with one part echoing the other) communicates the reflective relationship between the two characters – they are intimately connected.

The Narrator's voiceover often serves as our navigating device throughout the film, allowing us to jump from one space or time to another whilst still maintaining the feeling that we are following the same train of thought. The Narrator says that he suddenly realised 'that all of this, the guns, the bombs, the revolution, has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer.' We then cut to an abrupt close-up shot of his face in Bob's chest as we hear about Bob's testicular cancer and the support group that he attends ('Remaining Men Together'). Aware of how disruptive this jump is for the audience, however, the Narrator tips his head to the side, the audio makes a strange tuning sound and he says 'wait a minute, back up – let me start over.' (Fig. 32) This presents the medium as a structure that can be manipulated and negotiated, and something that can be explored through aural and visual channels that mimic the jumpy and sometimes erratic nature of memory and thought processes.



Figure 32. *Fight Club*

The Narrator then explains that he has been suffering with insomnia for six months, and that ‘with insomnia nothing’s real. Everything’s far away. Everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy.’ It is at this point that we encounter the first near-subliminal flash of Tyler. As the Narrator says these words, with a dull buzzing sound droning on and the light of the copier machine scanning across his exhausted and washed out face (Fig. 33), we cut to a shot of his perspective of the office. As he describes everything as ‘a copy of a copy of a copy,’ an image of Tyler flashes up for a fraction of a second (Fig. 34). The moment is so quick, in fact, that one needs to drastically decrease the playing speed of the film to capture a screen shot of the instant.



Figure 33. *Fight Club*



Figure 34. *Fight Club*

George Wilson comments that:

‘It is as if the narration were already haunted by Tyler-laced eruptions from Jack’s volatile subconsciousness ... the narration is repeatedly ruptured by outcroppings from Jack’s imagination and memory. In this fashion, the movie’s narration subtly hints at the larger strategy of nontransparency that it so cunningly constructs.’²⁷

²⁷ George Wilson, ‘Transparency and Twist in Narrative Fiction Film,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 1, Special Issue: Thinking through Cinema: Film as Philosophy (Winter, 2006), p. 93.

It is significant that the image of Tyler is inserted *into* the office scene – it is not a whole distinct frame that flashes up, it is just a flicker of his image in the Narrator’s field of vision (I will discuss the significance of Tyler’s incongruence in this setting and his opposition to the Narrator in the following section). The medium allows the visual surface to be disrupted by these visual glints, like sparks of ideas, in much the same way the Narrator’s mind gradually creates and introduces the person of Tyler. This tampering is digital – it is not a whole frame that has been spliced in, and this creates a distinction from the way in which Tyler tampers with the medium of 35mm projection. The fact that one has to slow down the playing speed of the film to look at the shot properly is a demonstration of the way in which we read film and how we attempt to grapple with it by manipulating it ourselves. The ability to carry out subliminal messaging in this way is built into the very mechanism of the medium due to its technical properties. *Fight Club* exploits this quality to the full in order to visually code the gradual development of delusion.

Tyler is non-existent and yet ubiquitously present in the text. Murray Skees writes that:

...he is a fictional character in the fullest sense of the term. He is obviously a fictional character in a Hollywood film, yet he is also a fictional entity within the story. He is not real. Kavadlo argues that Durden has been “taken too seriously by both fans and critics alike. Durden is not a generational spokesperson; even with the fiction of *Fight Club*, he is a fictional character, a hallucination, another kind of a copy of a copy of a copy, his own simulacrum.” As Tyler himself quips, “You are not your job. You’re not how much money you have in the bank. You’re not the car you drive. You’re not the contents of your wallet. You’re not your fuckin’ khakis”. You are also not Tyler Durden. No one is.²⁸

Whilst I agree with Skees’ statement, I would argue that Tyler represents so much more than a ‘fictional character’ and the associations that result from that. He is a disruptive force that is seen to orchestrate the unravelling of the Narrator’s psyche

²⁸ Murray Skees, ‘Have I Been Understood? Dionysus vs. Ikea-Boy,’ Wartenberg, Thomas E., ed. *Fight Club*, (USA; Canada: Routledge, 2012), p. 18. Quoting Jesse Kavadlo, ‘The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist,’ *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature*, 2 (2), Fall/Winter, 2005.

from *within* the film and becomes an entity capable of puncturing the medium with his own image. There are thus several layers of disorder in the diegesis coded through the distinction between digital media and film reels, as Tyler is not only associated with the disruption of the medium via his job as a projectionist, but is shown disrupting the medium through the insertion of his digital image.

When Tyler first asks the Narrator to punch him, the screen freezes as the Narrator's voiceover tells us: 'Let me tell you a little bit about Tyler Durden.' We cut to a shot that shows Tyler sitting at a projectionists' desk and the Narrator – breaking the fourth wall and addressing us directly – tells us that Tyler splices single frames of pornography into family films. As Cynthia Stark notes, 'The narrator is pictured as a narrator – not as part of the narrative – in the frame in which he explains to us the requirements of Tyler's job as a projectionist,' and I would argue that this reflexivity is key to how the film invites us to understand disorder via the mechanisms of the medium.²⁹

The Narrator explains 'the changeover' when the projectionist switches film reels, and Tyler designates himself as the master of this manipulation when the 'cigarette burn' comes up in the corner of the screen (Fig. 35). Later on in the film, psychologically traumatised from the realisation that he *is* Tyler, the Narrator faints back onto his bed, the sound dims, and his voiceover says: 'It's called a changeover...the movie goes on, and nobody in the audience has any idea.' This earlier scene demonstrates the technical mechanisms by which we can understand the significance of this analogy, and allows us to understand the Narrator's shifting mental state through the medium of film. It is evident that the Narrator conceives of his psyche in terms of the mechanisms of 35mm film, but his mental disintegration is

²⁹ Cynthia A. Stark, 'There's Something About Marla: *Fight Club* and the Engendering of Self-Respect,' Wartenberg, *Fight Club*, p. 62.

conveyed digitally. The distinction here creates another duality in the text, and conveys a textual tension that hints at film's capacity for manipulation. The vocabulary *Fight Club* develops to code disorder can be contrasted to *Secret Window*'s communication of Mort's breakdown, as the properties of the medium are used to communicate and construct disorder but are not overtly presented as means by which to understand its processes.



Figure 35. *Fight Club*

Before the Narrator even meets Tyler, he is seen going in the opposite direction to the Narrator on a travelator (Fig. 36). The shot is largely suggestive of the changeover to come, as Tyler moves in a different direction to the Narrator but they are on crossing paths. The fact that the Narrator's back is to him suggests that it is Tyler who is in the background the whole time, almost as a director overseeing the Narrator's life. The difference in stance between the two creates further opposition and initiates a vocabulary of contrast that develops as the film progresses (as the following section will explore). The Narrator is shown to be slumped, defeated, and

wearing a homogenous, ill-fitting suit, allowing himself to be carried along by the travelator without facing forward to his destination. Tyler, on the other hand, is shown to be confidently staring straight ahead, embracing the direction he is going in and leaning casually on the handrail bar, a man completely in possession of himself and his surroundings. He is dressed in a stylish, statement suit with rock star sunglasses, creating a visually striking contrast between himself and the monochrome image of the Narrator.

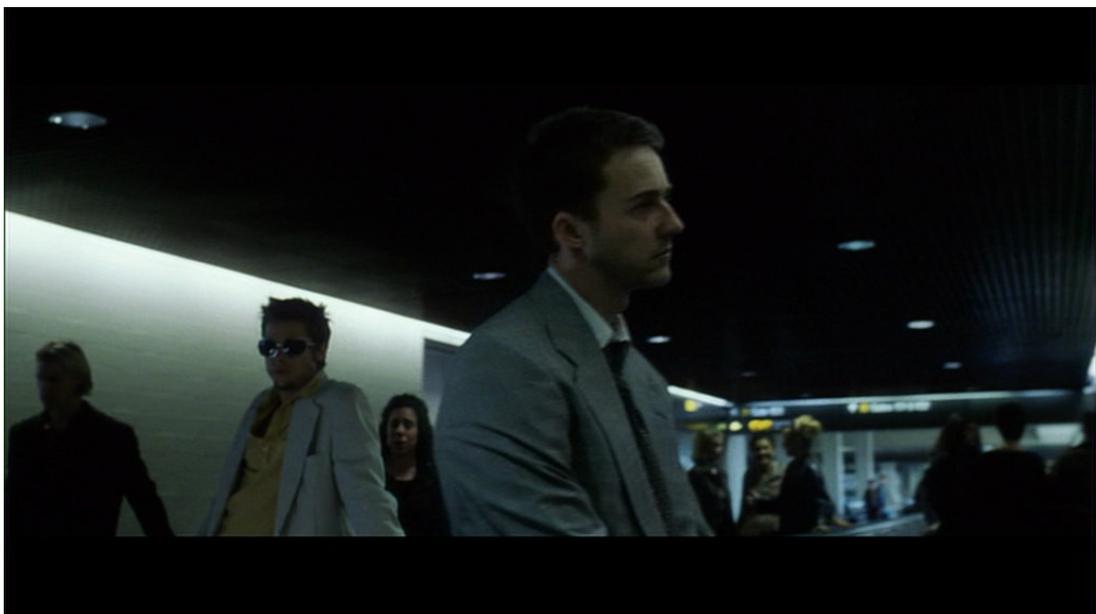


Figure 36. *Fight Club*

When the Narrator arrives at a hotel room and watches the welcome video, Tyler can be seen on the far right hand side, dressed in the employees' uniform – again, it is through the moving image that he has entered into the Narrator's mind as well as ours, as even the media within the film is compromised by the Narrator's disordered subjectivity (Fig. 37).

When Project Mayhem becomes fully operational, an extended sequence shows Tyler giving a manifesto-like speech directly into the camera. We cut to him after a shot of computers exploding, another assault on a medium known for being susceptible to electronic bugs and tampering. As Tyler speaks, the sound becomes

increasingly intense and sketchy, featuring disks screeching on a mixing desk, and the image blurs and the camera shakes, so that the edge of the film frames can be seen on the left and right side (Fig. 38). It is as if Tyler's confrontational stare into the camera is capable of shaking the mechanism of film to its very core, and it also gives the impression of him being a force 'trapped' inside the medium.



Figure 37. *Fight Club*

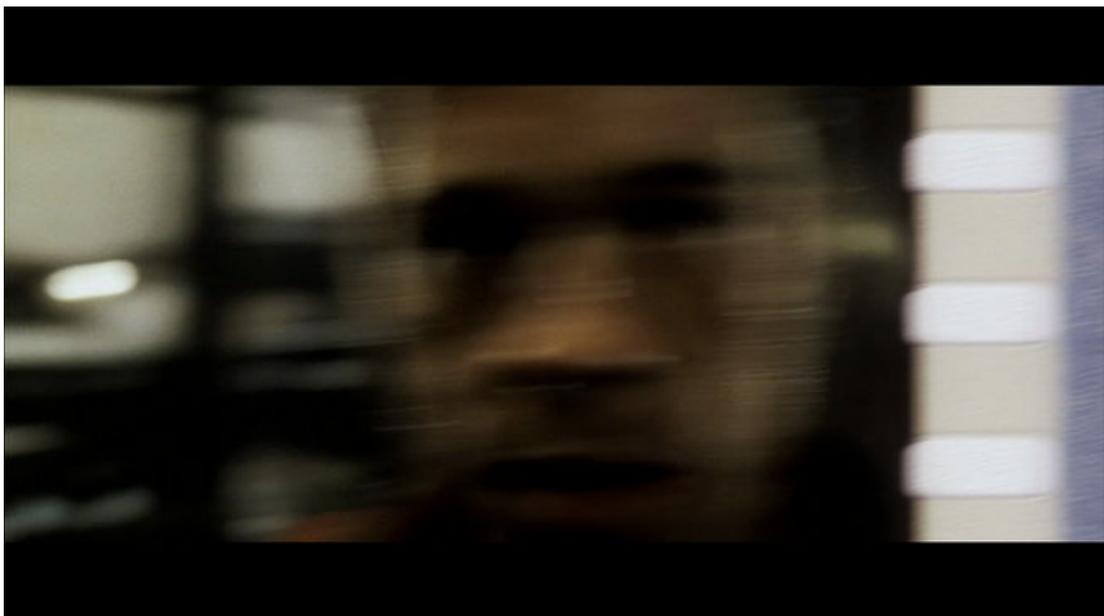


Figure 38. *Fight Club*

After the Narrator's mental battle with Tyler to defuse the bomb, the pair begin to fight (though, at this point, we know that the Narrator is fighting himself). Here again, the specific capacities of the medium are utilised to explore the nature of mental disorder and the cognitive processes that the Narrator experiences when coming to terms with his split identity. We see Tyler dragging the Narrator around and beating him up (Fig. 39), but when we cut to an image of a CCTV camera recording the event, we see just the narrator dragging himself around (Fig. 40).



Figure 39. *Fight Club*



Figure 40. *Fight Club*

The CCTV footage is presented as objective reality, and it is here that the conception of Tyler as editor/director is really brought to the fore. If there is anything that CCTV footage is *not* conceived as, it is an artistically produced and edited film. If Tyler is the editor of a medium into which frames can be spliced, reels switched, and imagery digitally manipulated, then the CCTV medium provides a traditionally detached and tamper-free alternative channel. The nature of CCTV (that it is used for security and to provide future evidence) means that objectivity is built into its technical mechanism (otherwise it could not serve this purpose). The aesthetic of CCTV is thus one typically connected with objective reality, especially as it is usually an analogue device using videotape, making it the perfect opposition to the medium of digital film that has been infiltrated by Tyler. Of course, the fact that the CCTV footage appears *within* the film is something that hints at the impossibility of anything escaping the brackets of subjectivity, as does the constant conflict between the use of classic film reels as metaphor and the digital effects used to create these references. The CCTV footage also conjures associations with vulnerability, as people we usually encounter in CCTV footage are either victims or perpetrators of crimes – in this case, the Narrator is both. The grainy quality of the footage makes the images have an eerie, ghostly feel, and here Tyler is very much the ‘invisible man’ that the Narrator has no chance of catching or fleeing from.³⁰

Edward Norton and Brad Pitt

Collision within the text occurs not only via the clashing of the two modes of the medium (digital and analogue), but also within the relationship between the Narrator and Tyler. The creation of the dichotomy between these two characters is largely

³⁰ This sense of the invisibility of the alter identity is also communicated in *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, which described Mort feeling ‘helpless, like a man trying to box cobwebs.’ King, p. 272.

reliant on the way we read Edward Norton and Brad Pitt in these roles, as they visually represent the reality of everyday corporate life versus the dream figure of masculine rebellion. As I have already mentioned, the insertion of Tyler's colourful image into the Narrator's dull, lifeless world vividly demonstrates an alternative way of living and presents values that stand out against the monotony of the Narrator's predictable existence.

Consider, for example, the single frame in which Tyler flashes up in the Narrator's testicular cancer support group 'Remaining Men Together.' Tyler has his arm around the support group leader in a possessive and confident stance, with his hand in his pocket, and is wearing an iconic red jacket reminiscent of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Fig. 41). He is thus shown to be rebelling against the status quo and the social structure of his surroundings; his jaunty stance completely mocks the seriousness of the group. His appearance here hints at the role he will play later as leader of his alternative support group, in which rather than encouraging the disillusioned to share their feelings in order to 'remain men,' he will encourage them to fight one another to *become* men. He mimics the language of the support group leader (beginning Fight Club meetings with 'I look around me and I see...'), and it is significant that this is where Bob eventually ends up, saying he's 'got something so much better now.'

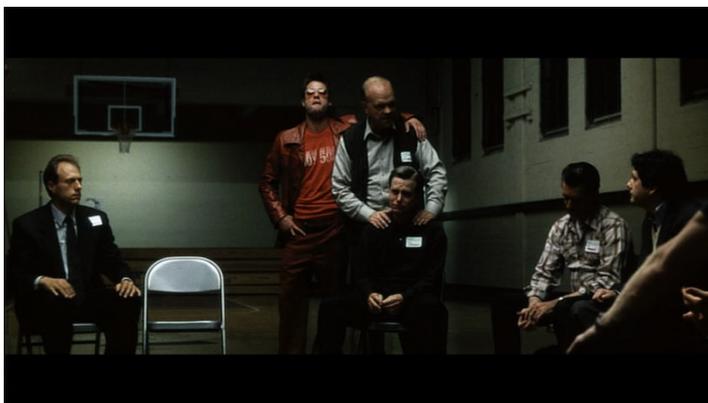


Figure 41. *Fight Club*

Considering the extreme nature of the character of Tyler, it is worth noting that Pitt plays the role almost entirely without irony (though, of course, there is inherent irony in his casting as Tyler in the first place). Pitt's performance in *Burn After Reading* (Dir. Cohen Brothers, 2008), in which he plays a naïve personal trainer (at 'HardBodies,' no less) with bleach blonde highlights who is almost entirely devoid of street sense and is shown exaggeratingly head-banging whilst he works out (Fig. 42), demonstrates that Pitt is more than capable of completely sending up the connotations of his image as a nice but dim hunk who is an icon of superficial masculinity.³¹



Figure 42. *Burn After Reading* (dirs. Ethan and Joel Cohen, prod. Focus Features and Studio Canal, 2008).

This understanding of Brad Pitt adds a playful sense of irony to the character of Tyler despite the fact Pitt plays it straight, as it presents him as yet another image suitable for product placement. This is never more prominent than in the scene in which Pitt's character tells the members of Fight Club that 'we've all been raised by

³¹ Pitt's character is shown to be unintelligent, pronouncing the word 'rapport' as 'report' and has to be corrected by Osbourne, the man whom he is (very unsuccessfully) blackmailing.

television to believe that one day we'll all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won't.'³² The way in which the Narrator's subjectivity forms his alter ego as the Calvin Klein-ready persona of Tyler, complete with a James Dean jacket and Marlon Brando black t-shirt, reflects the way his thinking is drawn from the recycled images in advertising and media and directly links the character of Tyler to an adopted visual representation of rebellion in film. When Tyler confronts the Narrator at the end of the film, he has transformed into an over the top rock star pimp, complete with fur coat, a shaved head and shades (Fig. 43). Just as he plots his apartment as an IKEA catalogue (Fig. 44), the Narrator understands his own psyche through film metaphors and cultural recordings and projects these frameworks onto his surroundings.³³



Figure 43. *Fight Club*

³² At the beginning of this speech, Tyler says 'I look around me and I see a lot of potential,' mimicking the leader of the support group we encountered at the beginning of the film. This is a hint that the Narrator is drawing inspiration for his construction of Tyler from the text around him, just as Mort does in *Secret Window*.

³³ By blowing up his condo, Tyler attempts to obliterate this way of mapping the world and introduces the Narrator to the run down house on Paper Street – for their friendship to succeed, the safe domestic space must be destroyed. The house on Paper Street is fully reflective of the disintegrating reality of the Narrator's mental state, much like Mort's house in *Secret Window* is. Even the name of the road connotes impermanence, instability and disintegration, and the fact that 'at night, Tyler and [the Narrator] were alone for half a mile in every direction' indicates his acute mental isolation.



Figure 44. *Fight Club*

Despite not having quite the same level of stardom as Brad Pitt, the casting of Edward Norton is no less crucial to the creation of the duality that is central to the dynamic between the two characters. There is an intensity and openness to Norton's face, and a slumped weakness to his stance, that makes him the perfect opposition to Pitt's angular face and muscular physique. Norton's physical characteristics and acting ability are exploited to the full in *Primal Fear* (Dir. Gregory Hoblit, 1996), and a brief examination of his performance in this film will allow us to appreciate the significance of his casting in *Fight Club*.

In *Primal Fear*, Norton plays Aaron Stampler, a character who apparently experiences Dissociative Identity Disorder (though it is revealed at the end of the film that he has been faking the disorder to escape a jail sentence for murder). Norton's performance creates a character who is incredibly meek, with hunched shoulders, a bowed head and an endearing stutter and deep country accent. His lawyer, Martin Vail (Richard Gere), describes him as looking 'like a boy scout.' He tells Aaron that during the court case it is his job to 'just to sit and look innocent,' to

which Aaron replies ‘but I am innocent.’ A close-up of Norton’s face reveals his open expression and boyish looks (Fig. 45). Martin replies: ‘That’s it, that’s exactly how I want you to look, that’s it, now can you remember that? Look in the mirror if you have to,’ but Aaron replies ‘I don’t have to – this is how I always look.’

Martin’s suggestion that Aaron look into a mirror conjures associations with performance and layers of identity, and forces us to engage with the opposition between sincerity and disguise. Martin says to his opposing council, Janet Venable (Laura Linney), that ‘all it takes is for one juror to look into that face,’ and she begrudgingly admits that ‘that face is great’ and ‘that stutter is priceless.’ She tells the jury to look past Aaron’s ‘innocent appearance and demeanour,’ a line which highlights just how crucial the casting of Norton is to the creation of this character.

But Norton’s astounding acting ability is just as important as his ‘boy scout’ appearance. When Aaron apparently transforms into Roy, he is being recorded during a psychological assessment, and this reference to the medium conjures associations with mediation and performance. Norton uses a harsh voice and snarling expression when transforming into Roy, creating a jarring contrast with the meekness of Aaron. Unlike *Fight Club* and *Secret Window*, there is no alternative actor to help portray the notion of multiple identities, and Norton does not even have the aid of costuming as he is always dressed in his prison clothes. Acting is thus central to the communication of dual identities, and his performance skills are drawn upon in his interactions with Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*.³⁴

³⁴ *The Scarlet Letter* is quoted in the film, highlighting the importance of these issues of duplicity: ‘No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.’



Figure 45. *Primal Fear* (dir. Gregory Hoblit, prod. Paramount Pictures, 1996).

The apparent emotional depth of Norton is contrasted with the perceived superficiality of Pitt in the portrayal of the Narrator's inner experience. In an early scene at the 'Remaining Men Together' support group, the Narrator cries on Big Bob and tells us that 'losing all hope was freedom.' He steps back to discover that his face has left a tear-stain imprint on his friend's shirt (Fig. 46). The music playing sounds like a religious hymn one would expect in a monastery, making the experience seem spiritual and sacred – after this release, we learn that 'babies don't sleep [as] well' as the Narrator now does. The image looks reminiscent of a Rorschach inkblot test, conjuring associations with the psyche and explorations of the mind, and also that of a doubling over or mirror image (intrinsic to the process of creating the pattern). In this instance we are introduced to the idea of a reflective or mirror identity which is the direct result of the Narrator's emotional and mental energy; it is an intimate, personal transposition of his face and tears onto an external canvas. Much like Bobby Baker's exploration of this theme in her *Diary Drawings*, the watery aesthetic of the face gives rise to the notion of a 'spilling over' or 'leaking out' of identity and personality. This is the first hint that the Narrator may be

projecting aspects of himself onto the outside world and forming an alternate identity.

It is not just that his alternative identity, Tyler, *would* never cry like this, but that he *could* never cry like this, as it would be impossible for him to ‘leak out’ in the same way. He is a projection and thus has no alternative inner life – there is no division between the internal values he holds and his external representation of them visually and verbally. Tyler encourages the Narrator not to respond to pain in the same way he has done in the support groups (by crying or retreating into his meditation cave), and this attitude communicates another way in which the identities conflict. The casting of Norton and Pitt is thus essential for the successful conveyance of these colliding value systems.



Figure 46. *Fight Club*

Though brilliantly crafted, it is exactly the success of the contrast between the Narrator and Tyler that makes the reveal at the end that they are the same person – and that it is in fact the Narrator that has been leading Project Mayhem – difficult to believe. When, during altered flashbacks, we see Edward Norton as the Narrator

giving the members of *Fight Club* the speech we earlier saw Tyler give, it is nowhere near as inspiring or convincing as when spoken by Pitt. It is thus difficult to believe that the characters within the film would follow Norton. The narrative relies on the charisma of Brad Pitt to convince the audience of the viability of what takes place, and thus the reveal is somewhat unpersuasive. Though we can easily believe that Johnny Depp could be the deranged dairy farmer played by Turtorro, Edward Norton simply cannot be Brad Pitt. Reintegrating the dual identities becomes an impossibility, as Norton cannot adopt Pitt's physicality and visually seems irreconcilably differentiated from him (even when the pair go to sell soap at the department store (Fig. 47), Norton reads as a character unsuccessfully trying to mimic the stylishness of his friend). We experience the discovery that Tyler is not real with a sense of loss, and this in itself serves as an effective critique of our love of the unattainable constructed image.

This critique is a key part of the distinction between the structure of *Fight Club* and that of *Primal Fear* and *Secret Window*. It is not only that the Narrator could never be Tyler in the way that Norton could be both Aaron and Roy in *Primal Fear*, or Depp could be both Mort and Shooter in *Secret Window*. Rather, it is that the Narrator could never conceivably bring the ideals Tyler represents into being. Tyler is an idealised projection, and as an impossible ego ideal there is no way the persona of the Narrator could ever instantiate him. Brad Pitt, as an icon of masculinity in Hollywood, is thus pivotal to communicating a wider notion about our relationship with the medium of film and the impossible images and ideals which it presents to us. Because Tyler is both a projectionist and a projection himself, he simultaneously represents not only the ability to invade the medium of film via its mechanisms, but also the impossible ego ideal that the cinematic image represents.

Rather than coming to terms with Tyler's actions (as Mort has to do with Shooter's), the Narrator must grapple with what Tyler *is* – an emblem for values that could never be subsumed into the Narrator's personality.

Even after the reveal, the Narrator could still choose to follow Tyler's values, but recognises that his alter identity has pushed these values beyond where he is willing to follow. Tyler visually and aurally conflicts with the views he espouses. He is very obviously a carefully constructed image, and yet continuously advocates re-engaging with the primacy of physicality, as I will go on to discuss. He is thus very much part of the system the Narrator has attempted to escape, and the more he has pushed for the escape from alienating capitalism the more he has sought inspiration and solace from the very images it produces. Since Tyler is the Narrator's creation, any idea that he is somehow outside of the all-encompassing web of late capitalism is as much an illusion as the existence of his character. Everything Tyler says is produced from within the mind of the Narrator, originating from a mental space that is as susceptible to corruption and manipulation as the walls of his apartment.

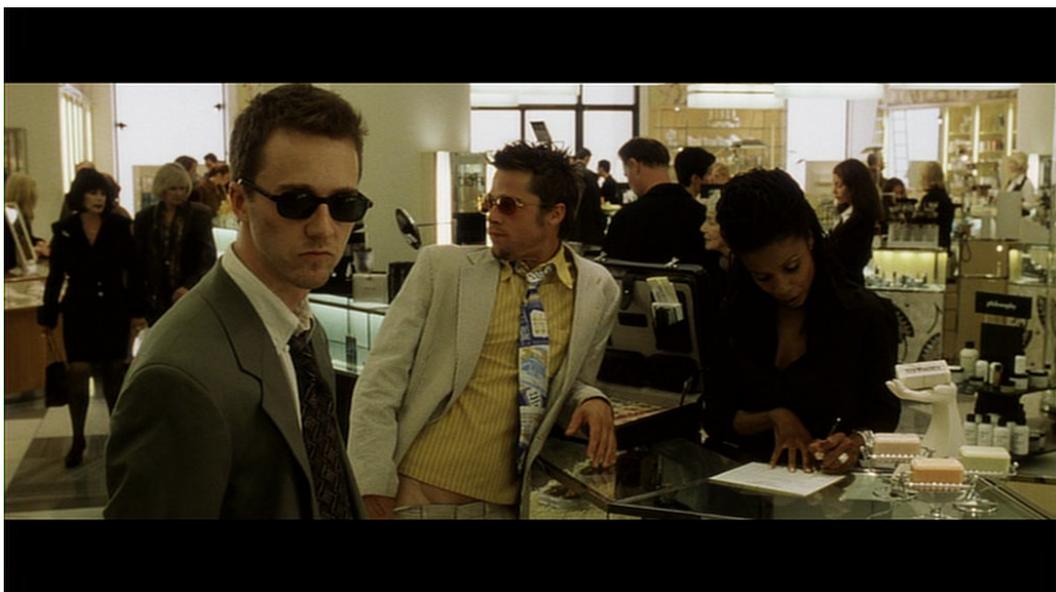


Figure 47. *Fight Club*

Re-imagining

If Tyler is presented as the editor of the medium, he is also the one who has access to ‘alternative takes’ that reflect another mode of reality. Much like the Narrator who attempts to reassemble his memories, the film’s reveal has us questioning the hints we were given, as we mentally backtrack and unravel the signs, both aural and visual, that what we were experiencing was not reality but in fact the subjective perspective of the character’s imagination. This process of refiguring mimics the mental processes of the Narrator as he is bombarded by flashbacks that reassemble his understanding of events.

We can compare these shots with the shots earlier in the film that depict the same situation. Sometimes they are briefly superimposed on one another, sometimes they are just shown as complete alternate versions (Figs. 48-55). Wilson comments that ‘These later shots model for us what we are now to imagine about the real circumstances after we have discounted for the subjective inflection. In certain scenes, the fantasized relationships are even more complicated.’³⁵ As the Narrator talks to Tyler, we cut to a shot of him leaning over to talk to no one. Much as in *Secret Window* and *A Beautiful Mind*, these shots serve to remind the audience of the compromised nature of the images we are seeing, and suggest that there are multiple layers and interpretations of reality contained within the frame. The properties of film mean that we can access these shifting layers and are guided through them by an established visual grammar. Just as in the previous films I have analysed, it is an assault of layered images, memories, and overlapping aural channels that attempt to communicate the process of reconfiguring in the Narrator’s mind cinematically. It is also significant that the music being played here is the racing techno/punk/rock

³⁵ Wilson, pp. 91-92.

music played in the opening sequence when we travelled through the Narrator's brain. This music signals cognition, connections, and flashes of understanding, and we are told that everything we are seeing is an attempt to dissemble and reassemble a subjective experience.

Figure 48. *Fight Club*Figure 49. *Fight Club*Figure 50. *Fight Club*Figure 51. *Fight Club*Figure 52. *Fight Club*Figure 53. *Fight Club*

Figure 54. *Fight Club*Figure 55. *Fight Club*

Faced with these intense flashbacks, the Narrator tells Tyler ‘You’re insane,’ to which Tyler comically replies ‘No, *you’re* insane,’ verbally articulating the visual questioning of our conception of the boundary between delusion and reality, and truth and untruth.

Whilst portraying the process of re-imagining, the medium draws attention to the inherent tensions in its form. We see the edge of the film reel shaking, and yet we know this is a digital effect. The material mechanisms of the medium thus generate abstract concepts that extend beyond this materiality. Though the film to some extent seeks to replicate mental processes, it primarily represents how we *understand* them through cinematic terms, creating a new ‘mental language’ specifically in relation to film. This can be seen in *Fight Club*’s reference to the flashback. When we return to the opening scene at the end of the film, Norton says ‘I still can’t think of anything,’ and Pitt acknowledges this reference to the manipulation and navigation of the text by saying ‘ah, flashback humour.’³⁶

Though, as I have argued, the cinematic device used to communicate mental reconfiguring/realisations is very similar to that we encounter in *A Beautiful Mind*, it operates very differently within the text of *Fight Club*. This is primarily because are

³⁶ In Burton’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, after cutting away to a flashback from Willy Wonka’s childhood, Wonka apologises to the characters around him, saying ‘I’m sorry, I was having a flashback.’ This not only references the use of this device textually, but also acknowledges the fact that this is how we understand and communicate the experience of remembering a specific event or time to others. If cinema attempted to mimic a cognitive process, it now seems that we cannot understand this cognitive process *apart* from cinema – they are circularly related.

not invested in the Narrator's delusions in the same way and do not experience the same sense of sympathy for his character. In *A Beautiful Mind*, we are emotionally attached to Nash's supportive roommate Charles and his doting niece, and are invested in our perception of Nash as a top undercover agent. We view the Narrator's breakdown in *Fight Club* more with interest than dismay, as we have been aligned with his disintegrating subjectivity from the beginning and thus there is no shift from a stable world to an unstable one. Our energy as audience members is spent trying to understand the puzzles the film presents us with as opposed to investing emotionally.

However, despite not feeling the same sadness as when Nash is forced to accept Marcy and Charles as delusions, as I have previously commented, there is without doubt some sense of loss when we discover that Tyler is not real. His character has offered us colour, humour, and charisma throughout the film, and the discovery that it is in fact the Narrator who has been leading Fight Club and Project Mayhem seems somewhat of a disappointment (especially when we are confronted with the alternative images of him giving speeches that all of a sudden seem much less rousing). Even as a projected and impossible ideal, we thus still prefer the jaunty, Kodak coloured character of Tyler over the Narrator, a sobering evaluation of what we have responded to as viewers.

Mental Spaces

In addition to the flashback device, another way in which the film communicates the thought processes of the Narrator is through the sequences in which he travels into his 'cave' during meditation. The first time this happens is at one of his support groups, in which he is guided to 'go deeper' into his cave where he will find his

power animal. The Narrator's cave is icy and cold, suggesting his intense isolation and detachment from those around him (Fig. 56). Instructed to find his power animal, he looks down to see a penguin, which tells him to 'slide' (Fig. 57). If we compare the two images, there is a striking similarity between the posture of the Narrator and the penguin, aligning them in terms of connotations. The Narrator is encouraged to seek a 'power animal,' and a penguin – an animal certainly not known for its predatory nature or physical prowess – is what he comes up with. Asbjørn Grønstad comments on the symbolism of this creature, noting that as 'a bird incapable of flight, the penguin provides an especially resonant symbol of processes of environmental dislocation and costly adaptability.'³⁷ The penguin, whose body mimics Norton's suit, also suggests conformity and an inability to escape the capitalist system the film comments on (especially when we consider the way in which penguins stand in huge, regimented lines). Even in his mind space, the Narrator is unable to conjure up a powerful animal and is shown to be mentally infiltrated by notions of impotency and conformity.

In addition to the symbolic significance of the penguin, its very appearance on screen illustrates the randomness and oddity of mental imaginings, and the plasticity of thoughts – the mind is shown as capable of vividly imagining a penguin that can talk. The visual nature of this cognitive creation reinforces the link between film as a medium and the way in which we think through the morphing nature of mental cognitions. Later in the film the Narrator comments on Tyler's ability to 'let that which does not matter truly slide.' The Narrator's first encounter with his playful power(less) animal is thus a demonstration of a yearning that the Narrator

³⁷ Asbjørn Grønstad, 'One-Dimensional Men: Fight Club and the Poetics of the Body,' *Film Criticism*; Fall 2003; 28, 1, p. 10.

feels for freedom from the controlled and predictable monotony that his life has become.



Figure 56. *Fight Club*



Figure 57. *Fight Club*

It is interesting to note the extent to which the aesthetic of the cave is similar to the aesthetic of the journey through the structures of the brain at the beginning of the film (Fig. 58), as if the cave echoes the organic framework of the Narrator's mind.



Figure 58. *Fight Club*

After the Narrator meets Marla at all of his support group meetings, he describes how he is no longer able to cry, as her lie reflects his lie and he can no longer indulge himself in the freeing honesty of those around him. He loses his mechanism for emotional release and thus is unable to sleep. The next time he enters his cave at guided meditation, he discovers Marla sitting there. She is presented as a grubby, dark contaminant in his mental sanctuary; her black dress and hair stand in stark contrast to the white purity of the ice around her and she pollutes the pure air of the cave with her cigarette smoke (Fig. 59). Her presence in the cave represents the extent to which the Narrator's mental activity is focused on her intrusion into his physical and psychological space, and suggests the Narrator's inability to consciously deal with the feminine. Like the reference to Baudrillard's simulacrum earlier, in which everything is 'a copy of a copy of a copy' so that there is no longer an original, the imagery of the Narrator's cave represents a closed system that allows for no escape. It is a space that can be infiltrated and corrupted, but most importantly a space that was never 'pure' or trustworthy in the first place.



Figure 59. *Fight Club*

Materiality

An inherent tension in *Fight Club* lies between the abstract concepts it communicates and the intense materiality of its expressive imagery. Through the combination of the brutal fights that take place in *Fight Club*, Tyler's violent actions towards the Narrator by chemically burning his hand, and the scene in which both characters find themselves covered in disgustingly visceral fat from a liposuction clinic, the film presents masculinity's connection with materiality as a way to leave behind the hyper-consumerist, alienating, image based ethos of a late capitalist civilisation. Tyler champions a return to a feral materiality, describing people as 'the same decaying, organic matter as everything else' and asking: 'How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?' Materialistic images are used to code disorder, but they also represent a problematic response to the Narrator's perceived disempowerment of men. By valorising materiality, physicality, and pain, masculine behaviours are seen to find their expression via a return to 'nature'. Thus,

just as in *A Scanner Darkly*, mental breakdown serves as a way to explore a wider social problem.

Jennifer Barker discusses the aestheticization of violence in both *Gladiator* and *Fight Club*, arguing that ‘There is a fundamental cynicism about political action or dialogue in both movies and a yearning and nostalgia for the simplicity and moral clarity of violence that clearly evokes fascism.’³⁸ She identifies the promotion of the ‘the image of the cut male body – cut in terms of both muscular definition and ritual wounding’ and argues that ‘these wounds only serve to make the body even more impervious to what it perceives as the ill-defined and weakly structured world within which it functions.’³⁹ There is thus the constant attempt to use the materiality of flesh as a response to ‘life’s complexities, sufferings, and disappointments’ and a ‘pining for simplicity.’⁴⁰

However, as I will argue, the Narrator’s attempts to find meaning in non-meaning, in accepting that he is ‘decaying organic matter’ and that someday, as Tyler forces him to confront, he is going to die, results in the startling realisation that he does not want the extreme solution with which his mind has presented him. Far from endorsing this violent materiality (which numerous misreadings seem to conclude the film does), *Fight Club* presents Tyler’s approach as completely unacceptable even to the mind from which it originated.⁴¹ Perhaps these misreadings

³⁸ Jennifer Barker, “‘A Hero Will Rise’: The Myth of the Fascist Man in *Fight Club* and *Gladiator*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*; 2008; 36, 3, p. 172.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴¹ Seemingly unable to distinguish Tyler’s stance from that of the film as whole, Green writes that: ‘For all of its considerable hipster credibility, *Fight Club* has a lot more in common with earnest male reclamation projects like Iron John than it does with the rebellious underground, underworld cultures it feverishly references ... *Fight Club* is not an anti-capitalist movie. Rather, this film targets male weakness as a site of scorn. It is precisely The Narrator’s submission to the effeminizing quality of corporate life that the film critiques. It marvels in horror as he shops from the Ikea [sic] catalogue, filling his apartment with modular furniture.’ David Green, ‘Destroying Something Beautiful’ Narcissism, Male Violence, and the Homosocial in *Fight Club*, *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush*, (University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 163.

are the result of Fincher's success in using Brad Pitt's iconic image as a mechanism by which to seduce us as much as he has seduced the Narrator. As Amy Taubin notes, 'Tyler's nihilism and incipient fascism are not the values *Fight Club* espouses, though Fincher complicates the issue by making Tyler so alluring and charismatic. Tyler is posed as an object of desire and of identification – and Pitt, who has never been as exquisite as he is with a broken nose and blood streaming down his cut body, emerges as an actor of economy and control who can rivet attention merely by turning his head.'⁴² The heavily constructed image of Tyler thus serves as a constant contradiction to the pure physicality he calls for, and the iconic status of Pitt plays a crucial part in communicating how the subjectivity of the Narrator is formed from recycled images and brands. There is no escape from the system, and Pitt's allure, which seems to offer an escape route, paradoxically confirms this as it denies it.

In addition to the slow-motion fight sequences which seem to revel in their contradictory gritty hyperrealism, this materiality is explored in the scene in which Tyler burns the Narrator's hand with lye. The Narrator attempts to escape his pain by retreating into his meditation space, and here, materiality meets abstraction in a dynamic sequence of cutaways. The novel communicates this moment with short, stilted sentences that express the Narrator's attempt to avoid being present. His panic is visually communicated with repetitive sentence structure (such as three consecutive sentences beginning with the word 'Don't'). The erratic nature of the prose ('Don't hear yourself cry. Guided meditation. You're in Ireland. Close your eyes.') conveys a mind desperately flitting from one subject to another to distract itself from the immediate pain the body is experiencing (Fig. 60).

⁴² Amy Taubin, 'So Good it hurts,' *Sight and Sound*, 1999, v. 9:11, Nov. pp.16-18.

“Because everything up to now is a story,” Tyler says, “and everything after now is a story.”

This is the greatest moment of our life.

The lye clinging in the exact shape of Tyler’s kiss is a bonfire or a branding iron or an atomic pile meltdown on my hand at the end of a long, long road I picture miles away from me. Tyler tells me to come back and be with him. My hand is leaving, tiny and on the horizon at the end of the road.

Picture the fire still burning, except now it’s beyond the horizon.
A sunset.

“Come back to the pain,” Tyler says.

This is the kind of guided meditation they use at support groups.

Don’t even think of the word *pain*.

Guided meditation works for cancer, it can work for this.

“Look at your hand,” Tyler says.

Don’t look at your hand.

Don’t think of the word *searing* or *flesh* or *tissue* or *charred*.

Don’t hear yourself cry.

Guided meditation.

You’re in Ireland. Close your eyes.

You’re in Ireland the summer after you left college, and you’re drinking at a pub near the castle where every day busloads of English and American tourists come to kiss the Blarney stone.

“Don’t shut this out,” Tyler says. “Soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand.”

You leave the pub in a stream of men, walking through the beaded wet car silence of streets where it’s just rained. It’s night. Until you get to the Blarney-stone castle.

The floors in the castle are rotted away, and you climb the rock stairs with blackness getting deeper and deeper on every side with every step up. Everybody is quiet with the climb and the tradition of this little act of rebellion.

Figure 60. Extract from Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (Vintage Books: London, 2006. First published by Vintage in 1997), p. 75.

In the film, this sequence uses near-subliminal images to construct the Narrator’s erratic mental processes. In an attempt to escape his agony as the lye burns into his hand, the Narrator’s voiceover says ‘Guided meditation worked for cancer, it could work for this.’ We see him close his eyes (Fig. 61) and an image of luscious green trees flashes up on the screen (Fig. 62). Tyler holds his hand down and urges him

‘no, stay with the pain, don’t shut this out.’ Violins screech in the soundtrack, conveying the intensity and sharpness of the pain. The voiceover again says ‘I tried not to think of the words *searing, flesh.*’ As he says ‘searing,’ we cut to the shot of the lush green woodlands coupled with the sound of birdsong, but then this bleaches out and a shot of trees on fire flashes up (Fig. 63) followed by a close-up of the Dictionary entry for the word ‘searing’ (Fig. 64), simultaneously communicating detachment and yet awareness of the full meaning of these words, the reality of the situation versus the theory. After the word ‘searing’ an image of a leaf flashes up (Fig. 65), but this again bleaches out (Fig. 66) and the word ‘flesh’ appears followed by flames (Fig. 67). This all happens so quickly that we can barely grasp what we are seeing, and yet we are aware of the symbolic richness of the images, the connotations of the bright green shots, their freshness, coolness and calming quality, contrasting vividly with the hot dry flames that engulf the screen, communicating intensity and burnout. As each word appears, a low dull beat accompanies it, as if each mental attempt to block out the agony is overcome by the thudding intrusion of the words and the reality of the pain they refer to.

Tyler refuses to let the Narrator go, saying ‘This is your pain, this is your hand, it’s right here,’ but the Narrator responds: ‘I’m going to my cave, I’m going to my cave and I’m gonna find my power animal.’ However, as he closes his eyes it is Marla he discovers in the cave, and she breathes smoke into his face causing him to cough. Even this seemingly safe mental space is inhospitable to him now. After Tyler tells the Narrator that he must ‘know, not fear, know’ that someday he is going to die, a lingering close-up shot of the Narrator’s burning hand visually communicates the intensity of his pain and the Narrator’s controlled acceptance of it, a graphic depiction of mind over matter. This scene presents a drastic cognitive shift

for the Narrator, as Tyler forcefully and violently encourages him to submit to a worldview that argues that ‘without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing.’ Pain is presented as a pathway to ‘enlightenment’ as Tyler tells the Narrator ‘you have to give up ... it’s only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything.’ The way that an individual responds to pain is shown to be crucial in determining the way in which they approach life. The way Tyler guides the Narrator through his pain and teaches him to respond to it is shown to be a transformative event that leaves scars on the mind as much as the body.



Figure 61. *Fight Club*

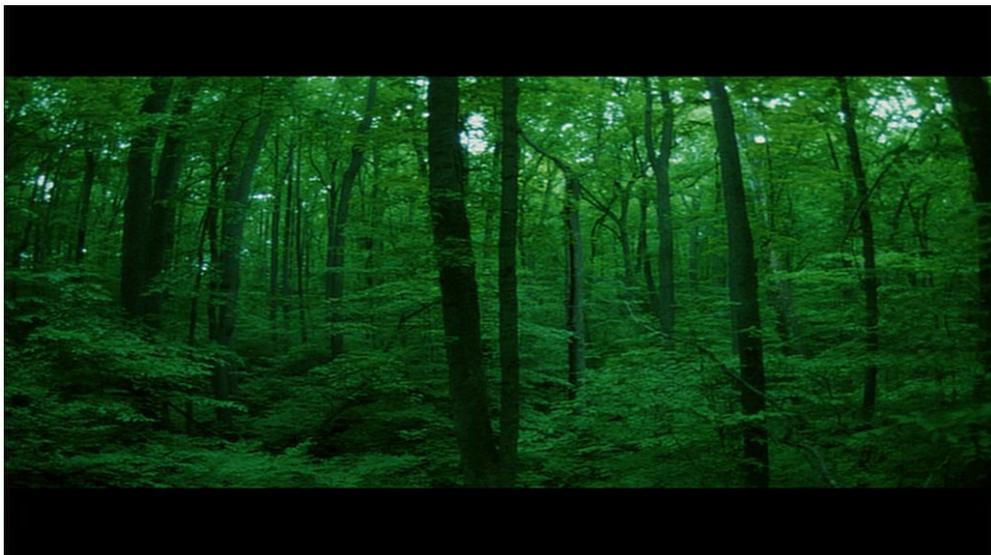


Figure 62. *Fight Club*



Figure 63. *Fight Club*

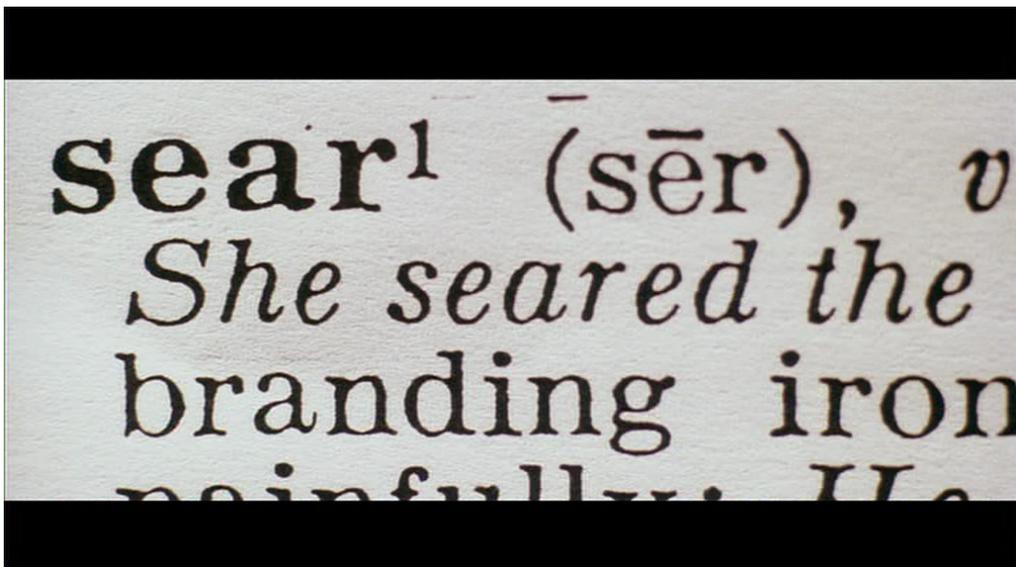


Figure 64. *Fight Club*



Figure 65. *Fight Club*

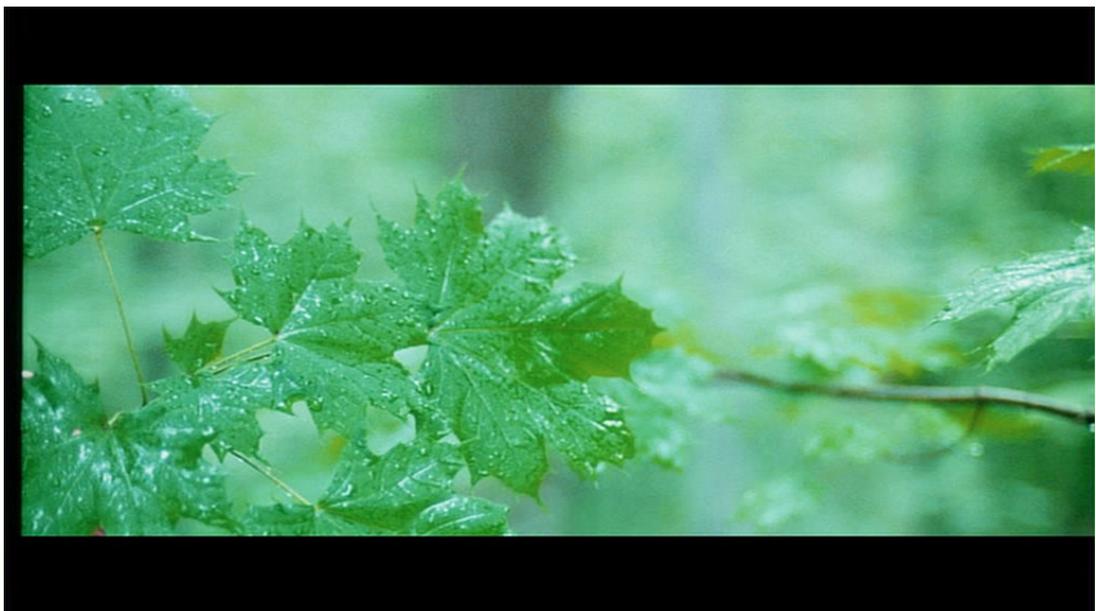


Figure 66. *Fight Club*

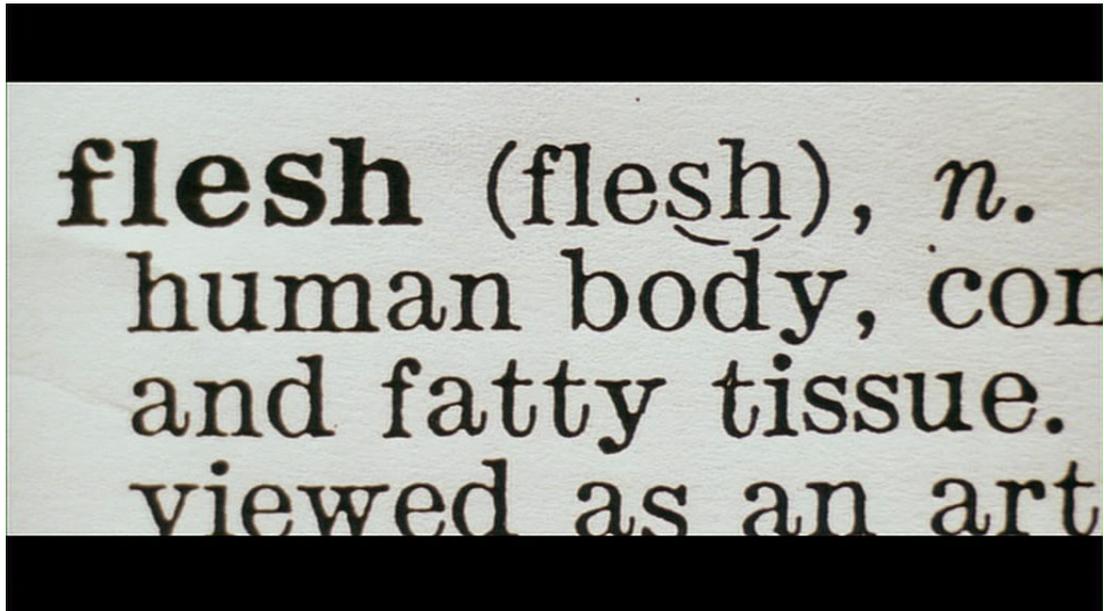


Figure 67. *Fight Club*

Charles Guignon links this materiality back to the Narrator's mental state by arguing that 'in experiencing intense physical pain, he was able to really feel something':

The experience of being hit, striking back in rage, followed by a rain of blows – all this brings him fully into the present moment and makes him feel genuinely alive. The immediacy of powerful sensations breaks through the drab existence of endless commercial transactions. Intense pain produces a capacity for focus and intensity of experience, as seen in the incredibly painful lye burn given on the hand “with a kiss.”⁴³

He goes on to address the significance of this in relation to an understanding of the self (something Tyler argues cannot be understood without fighting), by arguing that 'these men have retrieved the age-old ethos of the warrior, where one's identity as a self is formed by facing mortal combat.'⁴⁴ Again, it is the experience of the physical body that is seen to transform the mental state. I would argue, however, that rather than the instantaneous experience that Guignon describes (in which pain is understood purely as a physical sensation that is instantly interpreted as such by the mind), *Fight Club* communicates the mental response to pain as something mediated

⁴³ Charles Guignon, 'Becoming a Man: *Fight Club* and the problem of Masculine Identity in the Modern World,' Wartenberg, Thomas E., ed. *Fight Club*, (USA; Canada: Routledge, 2012), p. 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

by words and images. Pain cannot be understood apart from the cultural constructions surrounding it. The associations I have explored (such as the calm, coolness of the forest in opposition to the red heat and destructive quality of the flames) are inherent to the mental processes that take place when the Narrator responds to his pain. Thus, rather than the ‘immediacy’ Guignon describes, pain is shown to be heavily mediated by symbols and cognitive processes, and is thus an experience that can only be understood through dictionary definitions and visual, verbal or aural codes. The Narrator’s mental battle with his pain is one that takes place between images, sounds and words, and he is guided through these symbols by Tyler. When we consider Tyler’s role as editor, it is clear that his negotiation of the Narrator’s pain via cinematic imagery is the key element that shifts his worldview, as opposed to some sort of transformative instant effect of the pain itself.

Guignon also argues that ‘the deep split between his identity as a participant in the bourgeois moral order and his subconscious need to be a “manly” man asserting his warrior identity cannot be healed’ and that the Narrator is ultimately left with ‘no identity at all.’⁴⁵ I would dispute this conclusion, as it is at the end of the film that the Narrator is shown to finally confront the totality of his situation and is able to assert himself through his mental recognition that the gun held by Tyler is in fact in his hand. It is one of the few instances in which we see him assert his agency as an individual outside of Tyler’s influence, and it is via his physical situation. He also makes a tentative physical connection with Marla, holding her hand during the Pixies’ track ‘Where is My Mind?’ that plays over the film’s closing credits, a tentative suggestion that perhaps the searching for identity is in itself fundamental to the construction of it.

⁴⁵ Guignon, ‘Becoming a Man,’ p.47.

Searching for Tyler: Mental Disorientation and Travel

A key way in which the film communicates the Narrator's mental dislocation is through sequences which convey his exhausting travel schedule, creating a dizzying sense of disorientation and spatial dislocation. In Palahniuk's novel, disjointed sentences create rupture aesthetically on the page and with the sentences around them. This fragmentation is pivotal to the way in which the book communicates the thought processes of its central character. Interestingly, when Palahniuk describes his writing style for *Fight Club*, he uses language we would associate with cinema:

Instead of walking a character from scene to scene in a story, there had to be some way to just – cut, cut, cut. To jump. From scene to scene. Without losing the reader. To show every aspect of the story, but only the kernel of each aspect. The core moment. Then another core moment. Then, another.⁴⁶

Palahniuk desires to be able to simply 'cut, cut, cut,' and the film version of *Fight Club* utilises the qualities of the medium to construct this fragmented mode of communication. As part of his job, the Narrator has to travel, and the disorientation this causes is portrayed by Palahniuk's use of unlinked sentences and a skipping from one subject to another (Fig. 68). The ease with which this is done is suggestive of the Narrator's ability to switch between one identity and the other.

⁴⁶ Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 213.

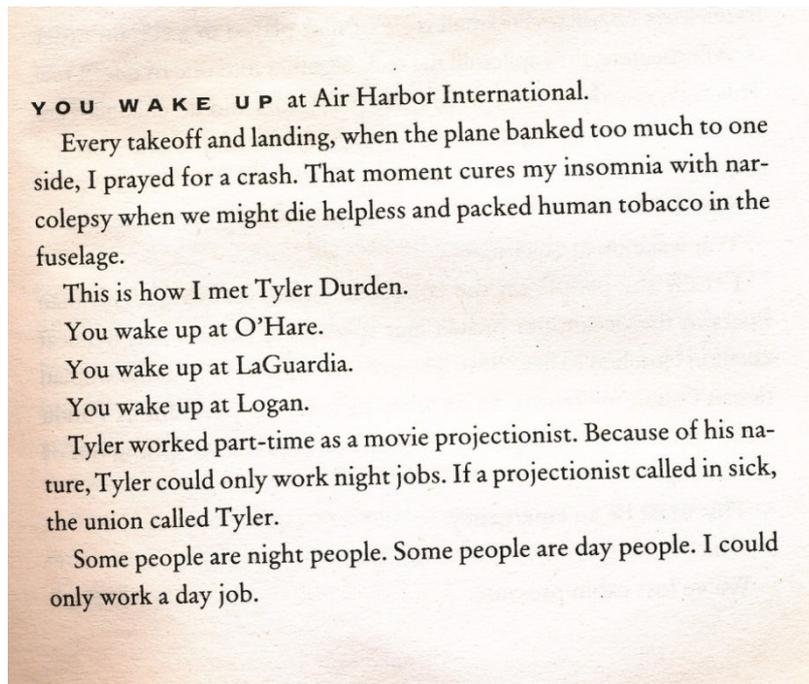


Figure 68. Extract from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, p. 25.

When the Narrator travels – particularly in the final sequence when he is searching for Tyler – the camera cuts from shot to shot of aeroplanes landing, taking off, and the Narrator travelling on escalators, handing in tickets, and waiting for buses. The movement is generated in different directions across the screen, and the speed of the cuts makes the sequence exhausting to watch. The voiceover asks ‘Is Tyler my bad dream, or am I Tyler’s?’, reflecting a disorientation mimicked by the kinetic collision of shots. The medium’s ability to cut/navigate through time and space presents a framework for our conception of the Narrator’s mental ability to lose time and space. He describes the experience as trying to chase ‘an invisible man’ and a feeling of ‘perpetual déjà vu.’ This again communicates a cognitive loop, with physical travelling symbolising the mental journey the Narrator is on as well as creating a parallel between the dissociating nature of travel and the ability of film to disorientate by jumping from one time and space to another. When Marla first calls him Tyler on the phone, he expresses his shock by saying ‘we have just lost cabin pressure,’ conceptualising his mind as a point on a fraught journey. The issue of

impossibly navigating space is developed in the final section of the film when Tyler is positioned in different places in the van (with no time to move there) through the use of editing. Breaking continuity rules like this powerfully expresses the way in which, unlike the Narrator, Tyler cannot be contained by the traditional storytelling structures of the medium, and that he can flit from frame to frame as he is fully in control of the form.



Figure 69. *Fight Club*

As the Narrator attempts to dismantle the bomb, saying to Tyler that ‘If you know then I know’ which wires to cut, Tyler taunts him by suggesting that ‘maybe I knew you’d know so I spent all day thinking about the wrong one.’ It is in this sequence that Tyler begins to navigate space in an impossible way, as in one shot he is the blurry figure in the background (Fig. 69), but then we cut to a close-up shot of his face situated in the front seat of the car. The Narrator visibly jumps at this unexpected change in positioning, conveying the idea that Tyler is now recognised as an unpredictable and intrusive element but that the Narrator still cannot quite

comprehend that he is not restricted to the same rules of space and time (or continuity editing) as he is.

A disorientating CGI shot travels through the mechanisms of the bomb as the Narrator attempts to think about which wire he should cut. The pattern of the wires mimics the organic connections of the brain, making the Narrator's attempt to disarm the bomb a striking metaphor for his attempt to grapple with his unstable mental state (Fig. 70).

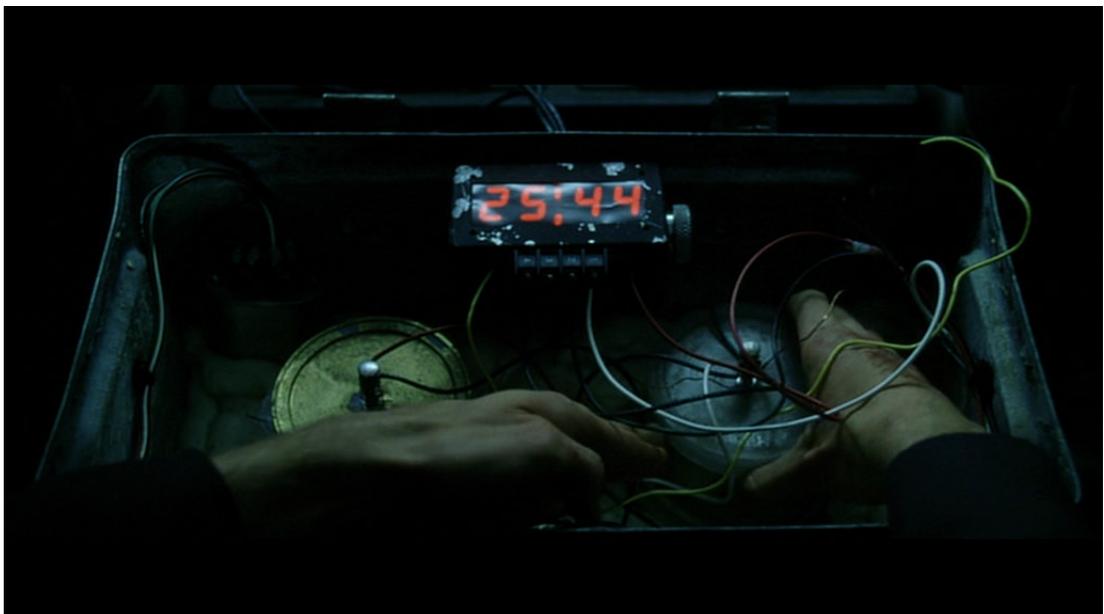


Figure 70. *Fight Club*

The sense that the cutting of the wire will somehow contain the threat of the bomb illustrates the Narrator's desire to cut Tyler out of his life; once a persona he idolised, Tyler is now someone who the Narrator recognises as having gone too far. By investigating the structure of the bomb with his hands, the Narrator is physically trying to control the abstract creation in his mind, mimicking the way in which Mort feels the missing pages of his short story in *Secret Window*. These instances also point to the wider notion of the materiality of film being capable of engaging with and communicating abstract concepts.

Conclusion

The nature of film means that the structures through which we understand subjectivity are built up across the text, so that in the case of *Fight Club* we are carried through a series of connections and layered experiences that lead to the fragmentation and ultimately the reassembling of the self. Taubin comments on the way in which the film ‘seems like a projection of an extremely agile, associative train of thought that can back up and hurtle forward and switch tracks in an instant,’⁴⁷ and my analysis of *Fight Club* has hoped to illustrate that the medium of film is sometimes intrinsic to the way we comprehend the psyche. This is to be distinguished from understanding the film as *illustrative* of a model of the mind that we already know. My argument contends that far from being illustrative of a pre-existing model, film is capable of actually *creating* the structures through which we understand specific mental processes (such as the understanding of memory through flashback devices). In *Fight Club*, the mind is repeatedly understood in terms of film metaphors, demonstrating that film can dictate the terms on which we address issues of subjectivity and sometimes facilitate the navigation through abstract mental experiences that are seemingly inaccessible. In both *Fight Club* and *Secret Window*, the films create structures through which we can understand the bizarre relationship between two characters that in fact exist within one physical body, and this is made possible via the way the medium codes subjective disorder.

⁴⁷ Taubin, ‘So Good it hurts,’ p. 17.

The Cinematic Construction of Depression
(Central Case Studies: Tom Ford's *A Single Man* (2009) and Stephen Daldry's
***The Hours* (2002))**

‘If I were thinking clearly, Leonard, I would tell you that I wrestle alone, in the dark, in the deep dark, and that only I can know, only I can understand my own condition.’

Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) in *The Hours*

This chapter will focus on the cinematic construction of the experience of depression in two central case studies, Tom Ford's *A Single Man* and Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*. Both of these films are adaptations of novels of the same name (written by Christopher Isherwood and Michael Cunningham respectively) and both thus face the challenge of translating an experience communicated originally in literary form into the medium of film. Unlike the previous case studies, in which I analysed the cinematic communication of mental disorientation and fragmented thought processes, these films are less focused on the construction of a specific mental framework and more obviously focused on conveying the subtleties of the human condition through subjective mental experience. This chapter will select specific moments in the books and films that convey a subjectivity affected by depression and analyse the way in which these subjective experiences are communicated in each medium.

Both of the films explore complex themes involving human connection and the effects of alienation and loneliness. They also engage with questions regarding the search for meaning in life generally (Daldry argues that *The Hours* is ‘a film that celebrates life with all its complexity, all its difficulty, all its tragedy’).¹ The broadness of this theme makes it necessary that I consciously focus my analysis on the devices that specifically communicate depression and the experience of seeking

¹ Stephen Daldry, ‘The Life and Times of Virginia Woolf,’ *The Hours*, DVD Special Features.

respite from it. Since, unlike the other disorders I have engaged with in my case studies thus far, depression is understood as on the spectrum of normal human emotion and experience, the films have less emphasis on the *construction* of a mind and more on the expression of an emotional *state*, or way of seeing.² With depression, the tendency for introspection is heightened, and both films draw on this heightened awareness to explore questions of meaning. This introspection also increases instances of depersonalisation and the experience of the surreal, an element I will also address in my analyses.

It is fitting that in this chapter we should return to the work of Virginia Woolf, whose opinion on cinema I examined in my opening chapter. *The Hours* was the working title for Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (published in 1925), a novel which established the 'stream of consciousness' style of writing. This form of writing is intimately linked to introspection and the reflection of ever developing thought processes, allowing trains of thought to flit and morph and develop in a way that mirrors shifting interiority. The thoughts appear to happen 'in the moment' on the page, as if the author is linking these thoughts without filtering them. As I noted in Chapter Three, Plath expressed praise for Virginia Woolf's expression of consciousness in *Mrs Dalloway*, saying that 'Our thoughts are inconstant and always changing – a kaleidoscope shifting of images, recollections and impressions. So it is in *Mrs. Dalloway*.'³ Unlike *A Scanner Darkly*, *Fight Club* and *Secret Window*, which visually communicate a disordered mind by splitting words and sentences on the page, Woolf places emphasis on the flowing nature of the linking thoughts, feelings and musings her characters experience. Woolf contended that the medium

² A diagnosis of depression is given because of the longevity of negative feelings as opposed to their intensity. (The *DSM IV* states that feelings must have been present for at least a two week period for a diagnosis of depression to be given.)

³ Connors, *Eye Rhymes*, p. 52.

of cinema simplified the complexity that could be communicated by the written word.⁴ Through an interrogation of the cinematic conveyance of depression, this chapter will argue that film lends itself to a complexity specific to its form, as it allows subjectivity to be reflected through the prism of a multi-channel medium.

This chapter will analyse the films separately, an approach also adopted in the previous chapter, as it is essential that my reading of them allows for an appreciation of their complex temporal structures. During my analyses I will highlight the similarities in the structure and motifs of the two films and examine how these elements communicate subjectivity. Both *A Single Man* and *The Hours* utilise the distinct capacities of the medium to represent shifting subjective experience visually, and use colour to construct a distinct language of emotional perspective across the text. Interestingly, they also share key structural similarities when adapting their literary sources. Both films begin and end with an introspective voiceover, both present a single day in the lives of the protagonists, and both rely heavily on underwater imagery to symbolise and visually explore the experience of depression.

The Word/Image Debate

Before beginning my film analyses, it is important to note that these films are based on very impressive literary novels.⁵ This chapter will thus draw us back to the

⁴ Virginia argues that ‘Even the simplest image: “my love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June,” presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the flow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and the hesitation of the love. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid.’ Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, quoting Virginia Woolf, ‘The Movies and Reality,’ *New Republic*, xlvii (August 4, 1926), 309.

⁵ Cunningham’s *The Hours* won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and Christopher Isherwood, author of *A Single Man*, is described by Gore Vidal as ‘The best prose writer in English.’ Gore Vidal, quoted on the back cover of Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*, (London: Vintage Books, 2010, originally published in 1964 by Methuen & Co Ltd).

medium specificity debate I engaged with in the opening chapters of my thesis, as both of the filmic adaptations were assessed via a comparison with their esteemed literary counterparts. The fidelity debate unmistakably influences critical writing about both of the films, and the deeply embedded valorisation of the written word over the image resurfaces to prevent the appreciation of what the films can offer with their interpretation of the material.

A Single Man

In *A Single Man* we are taken through a day in the life of George Falconer (Colin Firth), an English professor contemplating suicide after the death of his partner of sixteen years, Jim (Matthew Goode). Tom Ford utilises the capacities of the medium to represent George's shifting perspective and create a framework of subjectivity that references cinematic convention. Just as *Fight Club* utilises a filmic history of visual representation and reflexively uses film *as* film to convey abstract thought processes, *A Single Man* self-consciously draws on the history of film and the associations of colour to generate new understandings of emotional perception. Film is often connected with the idealisation of everyday moments, and, somewhat paradoxically, this characterisation of the medium is explored by Ford to construct George's experience of grief and depression.

A Single Man instantly establishes a key motif utilised for the communication of depression within its opening sequence, in which we see isolated shots of George's naked body as it floats around in a huge body of water. The nakedness of the body communicates complete vulnerability. In one of the shots, the figure slowly sinks down to the bottom left of the screen, adding a fragmented feel to the sequence as the composition is unbalanced and George's face is obscured. The

sequence is also in slow-motion, adding a weightiness to George's body as it moves through the water, emphasising feelings of suffocation and claustrophobia. The inability to breathe underwater and the experience of drowning all suggest an intense inner turmoil and emotional suffocation. Violins play slow, contemplative music over the sequence, and the way in which the shots fade in and out suggests the evolving, on-going nature of this emotional state (this is not the fragmented, colliding shots I analysed in the previous chapters). At one point George's voiceover says that 'I feel as if I'm sinking, drowning, I can't breathe' and that 'every day goes by in a haze.' The effect of water on the senses is to blur both sight and sound, as well as to slow down movement. The human body is designed to function in air, not water, and the suffocating presence and claustrophobic closeness of water particles echoes the inability of the mind to function in an emotional environment not suited to it. Completely submerged in water, George is unable to breathe, and the seriousness of this physical situation serves as a vivid analogy for George's depression.

We then cut to a snowy car crash scene, which is interspersed with the underwater images which now show George's face panicking as bubbles fill the screen. We hear an unsettling whistling sound, a heartbeat, and a crash (yet can see that the car has already crashed). This disjuncture between image and sound communicates the fragmented nature of George's memories and dreams. He is stuck underwater and must emerge to breathe. Poignant violin music plays over the image as George approaches Jim's body, which lies next to the car, emphasising the dreamlike state of the sequence as it is so at odds with the disastrous image. With this music overlaying it, George's imagined image of Jim's death becomes almost beautiful. George kneels down to kiss Jim, and then we see a series of jump cuts as

the camera spirals in to Jim's face and eventually his cold, dead eye, mimicking the frantic nature of George's dream. It is after the shot of Jim's empty, icy blue eye that George awakens, and rather than a heartbeat we hear the noise of banging from the neighbours. The film has thus already guided us through a transition from an abstract interior experience to the external realities of George's world. This sequence is not in the book, but its presence in the film instantly establishes that it is through George's subjectivity that we will navigate the text.

George wakes up and 'the cold realisation that I'm still here slowly sets in.' The repetitive actions of beginning the day are shown to be linked with the character's experience of depression, and it is via the daily task of 'becoming' George that Ford first introduces us to the way in which George's life has become merely a *performance* of living as opposed to the experience of it. George's voiceover indicates that 'Waking up begins with saying "Am" and "Now"' and that 'for the past eight months, waking up has actually hurt.' He awakens with a violent start and inhales sharply after a dream in which he kisses his dead lover on the lips. The camera is positioned above him, creating the same visual effect as I examined in *Clean, Shaven, A Beautiful Mind*, and *Secret Window*; our closeness to his face allows us to examine in depth his alarmed and distressed expression, as well as creating a sense of claustrophobia as he appears trapped by the proximity of the looming camera (Fig. 1). The frame cuts off George's forehead, giving us the sense that his mind is elsewhere and is in a dark, 'non' space.



Figure 1. *A Single Man* (dir. Tom Ford, prod. Fade to Black Productions, Depth of Field, 2009).

The book has a specific mode for the way in which George's mental state is communicated upon waking up, and I will analyse this in relation to the way in which the film generates its cinematic construction of George's subjectivity.

Isherwood describes how 'Fear tweaks the vagus nerve. A sickish shrinking from what waits, somewhere out there, dead ahead.'⁶ George's experience of waking up is thus expressed in biological terms, reinforcing George's conception of himself as an 'it' and creating a dissociation between George and the reader, and to an extent his sense of self and his body. Isherwood writes that 'meanwhile the cortex, that grim disciplinarian, has taken its place at the central controls and has been testing them, one after another; the legs stretch, the lower back is arched, the fingers clench and relax. And now, over the entire intercommunication-system, is issued the first general order of the day: UP.'⁷ We seem to be observing George from a distance, his mechanisms and routines, and it is through this observation that we are given access to the experience of George, for he too is detached from his own life and every morning consists of 'going through the motions.' The way in which

⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*, (London: Vintage Books, 2010, originally published in 1964 by Methuen & Co Ltd), p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the routine is described is reminiscent of a regimented army life, and this association is carried through as later Isherwood describes George as playing his role with ‘the skill of a veteran.’⁸

Isherwood describes how ‘The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops.’⁹ This description of the self as struggling and moving inexorably towards death is developed further by George’s conception of his predicament when faced with his reflection:

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face – the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man – all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us – we have died – what is there to be afraid of?¹⁰

These many faces are like masks that George is aware of as other selves that have withered and died through the passing of time (a key theme in both films). By describing these faces as ‘like fossils’ Isherwood makes them capable of carrying their message to George; they are reminders of moments, times, and realities that were once alive and are now as dead and inflexible as stone. We are aware of the weight of George’s past as well as its inalterability. The idea that these fossils are in layers suggests that they cannot be mapped onto one ‘true’ interior George, but rather are all faces that he has used to face the day in the past; his current face is just yet another self that has no interior counterpart and must share the same fate of eventual death.

The film communicates this theme of death and decay via a shot of George’s body from the end of the bed (Fig. 2). This composition is eerily similar to the type of shot we would expect to see of a body in a morgue. George is thus presented as

⁸ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

someone who is already dead – he is lifeless and without agency or connection to the world, and experiences himself as merely an object, a body, an ‘it.’



Figure 2. *A Single Man*

An above shot reveals that George's pen has leaked onto the bed, leaving a seeping black stain where his lover Jim would once have been (Fig. 3). The framing of the shot again reminds us of death, as the edge of the screen appears to entrap George like a coffin. A flashback to the kiss in his dream prompts George to touch his lip, causing the black ink to stain his lip and placing this symbol of loss and grief next to his mouth, the channel which we would usually associate with breath and life coming into the body.



Figure 3. *A Single Man*

Isherwood describes the process of becoming George, writing that ‘Obediently, it washes, shaves, brushes its hair; for it accepts its responsibilities to the others. It is even glad that it has its place among them. It knows what is expected of it.’¹¹ During the transition from object to subject, when George is neither ‘it’ nor George, if forced to answer the phone the body must take over and perform for George. Isherwood writes that ‘its voice’s mimicry of their George is nearly perfect.’¹²

The film sets about contemplating the presentation of a self to the world in a different way, offering the viewer a series of fragmented images that show us snapshot moments of George’s process of getting ready. His feet are shown in close-up touching the carpet, as if this act in itself requires strain and effort and, most significantly, he is conscious of it (Fig. 4).

¹¹ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 3.

¹² Ibid.



Figure 4. *A Single Man*

Colin Firth's gravelly voiceover tells us that 'It takes time in the morning to become George...Slightly stiff, but quite perfect George.' George as a character, as a person, is thus conveyed as a construction, and it takes time and effort each morning to become the functioning human being that society perceives. It requires obvious effort on George's part to maintain this exterior. We are shown his face in shots that crop sections of it out, again creating an aesthetic of disorientation and a lack of a complete or graspable sense of self (Fig. 5). This also allows us to focus on the sensory moments and stages in George's day – the placing of his feet on the floor, the washing in the shower, the straightening of his tie (Fig. 6). Each is shown as a unique stage in the process of becoming George, and is presented as mechanical in nature. The grid-like composition of the shots showing his selection of socks and shirts emphasises how he compartmentalises his life, creating the sense that he is on a factory conveyor belt, piecing together the robot of George. Even the seemingly intimate act of shaving is done with rigid precision and seems incredibly automated.



Figure 5. *A Single Man*



Figure 6. *A Single Man*

The lighting in this opening sequence is a cold blue-white, washing out the colour and symbolising the stark and hostile way that the world looks to George on this morning; with the loss of Jim, his life has been sapped of colour. Tom Ford comments on this link between saturation and perspective, saying that ‘His inner world is related to his outer world...he’s quite tormented and depressed at this

moment in time.¹³ Straightening his tie in front of the mirror, George's voiceover explains that 'Looking in the mirror staring back at me isn't so much a face as a predicament.'¹⁴ Just as with the sequence of shots of the women staring in the mirror in *The Hours*, as I will analyse later, the self as seen in the mirror is not so much an exploration of identity as an exploration of an emotional state or way of seeing. George must face the world *as George*, and he responds to this George by speaking out loud to his reflection with a command to 'Just get through the God damn day.' Time, and moments in time, are framed as something to be endured and gotten through (a theme which is also prevalent in *The Hours*).¹⁵ The harsh cold lighting and make-up effects emphasise the lines and greyish tones of Firth's face, creating the sense of imminent decay and death. We get a similar impression of the fossilised effect the novel describes, but here the contrast is created through our knowledge of Firth's star persona. We read the grey and aged Firth we are confronted with in relation to his youthful appearance in past romantic lead roles, creating a jarring and unsettling sense of his deterioration. George's skin has the pallid tones of someone ill or dying, again making him appear drained of life.

Allowing us to view George beginning his day introduces the theme of performance and highlights the division between his interior and exterior life. The literary sources of both of my case studies within this chapter refer heavily to the way in which the characters are conscious of the need to appear normal to those around them, and communicate the fact that just living normal life entails an element of performance that denies their inner turmoil and emotional state. Interestingly, in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, Richard Dyer discusses the experience of

¹³ Tom Ford, Director's Commentary, *A Single Man*, Bonus Material.

¹⁴ Regarding this voiceover, Ford explained that he wanted it to be understood as if 'We are listening to George watching himself...we're listening to George's soul speaking about his earthbound self.'

¹⁵ On Richard's point of breakdown, when Clarissa tries to reassure him he responds 'But I still have to face the hours, don't I?'

gay men 'passing' as straight (something that is a daily element of George's life in 1960s America), and states that 'The experience of passing is often productive of a gay sensibility. It can, and often does, lead to a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality, and the distinctions to be made between instinctive and theatrical behaviour.'¹⁶ This theme of hyperawareness and the division between natural and learnt behaviour is explored in both the book and the film.

This emphasis on performance is also foregrounded by the acting demanded of Colin Firth, which expresses extremes of emotion, and provides another channel through which interiority is communicated. His vulnerability encourages a closeness to George that fosters the audience's sympathy for him. Ford argues that 'Colin's face is amazing. He can make you feel what he's feeling. All of a sudden, his face can just transform.'¹⁷ In the scene in which George finds out that Jim is dead via a telephone call from a relative, Ford allows the camera to stay on Firth's face in a long shot that lets the viewer observe every shift and nuance in his expression as he processes the information and eventually begins to cry (Fig. 7). This image of a sagging, melting, disintegrating George can then be contrasted with the George we see in the bar with Kenny, whose expression portrays warmth, friendship, and happiness in his smile (Fig. 8).

¹⁶ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 154 (Quoting Babuscio, 1977, p. 45.).

¹⁷ Ford, Director's Commentary, *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material.



Figure 7. *A Single Man*



Figure 8. *A Single Man*

Like the fossil motif in Isherwood's novel, the issue of layers of meaning and self is embedded in Firth's constantly shifting face. The face and body of the actor is a crucial channel through which interiority can be expressed, and is another code of meaning for the viewer to decipher in order to gain insight into abstract experience.

The awareness of the body and the sense of performing is explored by Isherwood in a metaphor involving a chauffeur that takes over for George and allows him to go ‘deep down inside himself.’¹⁸

And now something new starts happening to George. The face is becoming tense again, the muscles bulge slightly at the jaw, the mouth tightens and twitches, the lips are pressed together in a grim line, there is a nervous contraction between the eyebrows. And yet, while all this is going on, the rest of the body remains in a posture of perfect relaxation. More and more, it appears to separate itself, to become a separate entity; an impassive anonymous chauffeur-figure with little will or individuality of its own, the very embodiment of muscular coordination, lack of anxiety, tactful silence, driving its master to work.¹⁹

In the second sentence, Isherwood lists the physical tension that comes into George’s face, using words that are almost onomatopoeic in quality (such as ‘bulge,’ ‘tightens,’ ‘twitches,’ and ‘contraction’) to emphasise the intense nature of the experience. This makes it all the more shocking when we learn that the body, the separate entity, ‘remains in a posture of perfect relaxation.’ During this time, George is shown to be entirely submerged in his own subconscious. Isherwood describes how upon arriving at his destination ‘George comes up dazed to the surface, realising with a shock that the chauffeur-figure has broken a record; never before has it managed to get them this far entirely on its own. And this raises a disturbing question: is the chauffeur steadily becoming more and more of an individual? Is it getting ready to take over much larger areas of George’s life?’²⁰ Isherwood writes that: ‘In ten minutes, George will have to be George; the George they have named and will recognise. So now he consciously applies himself to thinking their thoughts, getting into their mood. With the skill of a veteran, he rapidly puts on the psychological makeup for this role he must play.’²¹ There is thus an incredibly mechanical nature to the way in which George deals with his depression and his

¹⁸ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 22

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

²¹ Ibid., p. 27.

monotonous experience of the routine of daily life, and the continued references to military terminology makes it seem as if he considers himself at war with the world.

This mechanicalness is linked to performance when Isherwood states that George 'is all actor now; an actor on his way up from the dressing-room, hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his entrance.'²² George's position as a lecturer at the university is one that overtly entails performance and places him in the role of presenter and entertainer – it has links with mechanicalness in much the same way as the chauffeur that takes over and drives George to work. It is not a role that anyone would expect to inhabit naturally or instinctively – it is a learned and practised role with negotiated parameters and goals, a professional position that requires years of dedicated training and learning.

In the film, George's awareness of this performance and sense of isolation is foregrounded by the way in which he is painfully reminded of the loss of Jim as he walks around his empty house. Ford comments that 'The fact that he lives in the glass house in suburbia is really important. Because he can see everything going on, but he is trapped by this sheet of glass from everything around him.'²³ As he stares out at his neighbours going about their lives, he is shown to be barred apart from them by a composition that completely entraps him (Fig. 9). As we cut to slow motion shots of the neighbours, they are completely muted, positioning us with George in the quarantine-like space of his house. The motif of grids and bars, evident in many of my case studies thus far, symbolises George's division from the external world and communicates his entrapment in his own mental state.

²² Isherwood, *A Single Man*, pp. 29-30.

²³ Ford, Director's Commentary, *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material



Figure 9. *A Single Man*

George's entrance into the university introduces him as an actor to a crowd not only in how he moves against the flow of everyone else (Fig. 10), (he is always facing them, conjuring up themes of isolation and alienation), but in how he is shot in the lecture room, where all of the students face him and is overtly shown to be performing.



Figure 10. *A Single Man*

George's attempt to break through his isolation and connect with others is represented by the proliferation of close-up shots of eyes throughout the film (Figs. 11-13), such as when he first goes to university and speaks to a receptionist, or within the lecture hall as students stare and whisper in slow motion. These moments are often accompanied by the saturation of the colour palette as George forges connections with objects or people around him. Isherwood writes that George 'draws strength from these smiles, these bright young eyes. For him, this is one of the peak moments of the day.'²⁴ The film communicates these 'peak' moments by manipulating the colour saturation of specific shots or sequences.



Figure 11. *A Single Man*



Figure 12. *A Single Man*
Kenny gazes at George during the lecture.



Figure 13. *A Single Man*
George returns Kenny's stare, his eyes doubly framed by his glasses.

Colour in *A Single Man* is shown to be directly linked to George's shifting mental state. As Amy Taubin comments, 'Along with variable speed motion and a

²⁴ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 41.

variety of film stocks, coloration is Ford's primary cinematic tool for depicting interiority.²⁵ As George looks at specific details that bring him joy (such as his secretary's smile), the colour palette warms and brightens so that it is fully saturated, making the image seem suddenly imbued with life (Figs. 14 and 15).



Figure 14. *A Single Man*

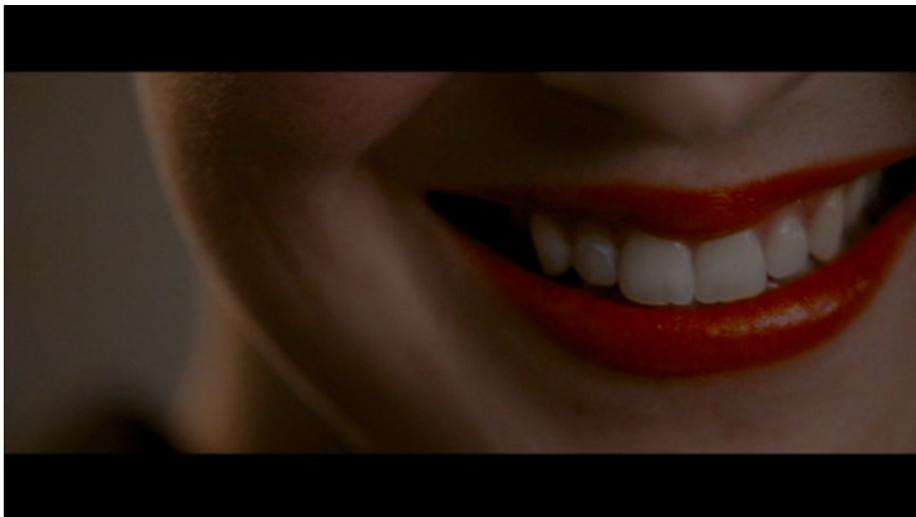


Figure 15. *A Single Man*

When we examine the importance of colour metaphorically in language to convey emotional perspectives (including expressions such as finding something 'dull,')

²⁵ Amy Taubin, 'A Single Man,' *Film Comment*, Nov/Dec 2009, 45: 6, p. 68. Taubin comments on how this, 'In combination with the references in Shigeru Umebayashi's score (as affecting as his contribution to *In the Mood for Love*) and specific images (a scene involving a woman in a car, her hair covered by a silk scarf, where, heartbreakingly, the scent of a dog's hair serves as the "madeleine"), this subjective use of color evokes Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in a manner that seems effortless.'

feeling ‘blue,’ feeling ‘brighter,’ etc.), we can appreciate that colour is a crucial way in which we map and communicate subjective experience. Colour is yet another code or system of meaning through which we can understand and express interiority, and Tom Ford (helped, no doubt, by his career in fashion designing), uses this channel of the medium of film to the fullest extent. Ford comments that ‘colour plays a very important role in the film and helps us understand George’s mood. The flashbacks, which are very vivid for him, are in very intense colour. But on this particular day, he is deeply depressed, and the colour is desaturated, and in fact, there almost is no colour.’²⁶

At the beginning of the film, George’s world is shown to be a washed out grey, but throughout his day little moments (particularly moments of connection with others), bring colour, warmth, and life into his world. As he sees topless male tennis players on the court, has a conversation with a student, and talks to a neighbouring little girl, the colour palette becomes gradually more intensely saturated. With the little girl, this saturation is highlighted by Ford’s allusion to *The Wizard of Oz* (Dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) when she is shown to gradually move into technicolour from the entrance of her shoes into the frame (Fig. 16 and 17).

²⁶ Ford, Director’s Commentary, *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material.



Figure 16. *A Single Man*. When approaching George, the girl taps her foot on the floor three times, alluding to Dorothy tapping her heels together three times to get back to Kansas.



Figure 17. *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming, prod. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1939).

The allusion is heightened by the similarities in composition, the blue colour, and even the echoing of the round-toed shoes and ankle socks. This allusion to *The*

Wizard of Oz is rich in connotations, particularly when we consider the significance of Judy Garland as a gay icon. As Richard Dyer notes, Garland has ‘a special relationship to suffering, ordinariness, normality.’²⁷ Dyer refers to Garland’s talent for communicating emotion in her performances, offering the fact that many accounts of her ‘do not refer to the gayness of the emotionality, but rather suggest the immediate, vivid, intense experience of it ... it is the particular register of intense, authentic feeling that is important here, a combination of strength and suffering, and precisely the one in face of the other.’²⁸ There is a sense in which *A Single Man* also contains this interplay, often between intense suffering and intense joy, or between bleakness and breath-taking beauty.²⁹ It is this tension that runs throughout the film, and does so by utilising the conventions of the medium and its potential for creating surreally perfect cinematic moments. Paradoxically, Ford uses artifice when something is deeply felt, turning over a series of binaries and creating a system of meaning in which artifice is a mode of authenticity.

Another part of Garland’s legacy entails her many comeback performances, constructing a motif of carrying on despite the extreme dissonance between her internal life and her external one. This undeniably links to the performance George must present each day despite his mental suffering. As Dyer notes, the comeback motif ‘evokes a whole showbiz litany of tears-beneath-the-greasepaint, the show-must-go-on, that gives a resonance of tradition to Garland’s coming back. But in addition one of the most frequently repeated stories about Garland was how she used

²⁷Richard Dyer, ‘Judy Garland and Gay Men,’ *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), p. 143.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 149.

²⁹ Garland is linked into many inherent contradictions which are held together in her persona, as Dyer notes: ‘Garland works in an emotional register of great intensity which seems to bespeak equally suffering and survival, vulnerability and strength, theatricality and authenticity, passion and irony.’ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 155.

the act of preparing herself for public appearances as an answer to problems.’³⁰ This resonates with the collage of ‘preparation’ shots that we encounter at the beginning of the film, as if each stage in the process of getting ready is a medicine or armour of sorts that George uses to cope with the very fact of living.

When discussing ‘passing,’ an idea I referenced earlier when discussing George’s performance, Dyer goes on to link this to the ‘disparity between the image and the imputed real person,’ and comments on how Garland became a point of relation within the text, acknowledging the artifice of film.³¹ For example, when Dorothy says ‘Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,’ Dyer asks ‘Are we laughing directly at Dorothy’s charming naivety, or with Garland at the over-the-top sets and Dorothy’s artful gingham frock?’³² There is a sense in which the acknowledgement of artifice also pervades Ford’s film (after all, it is the shot of the blue shoes – which are not so obvious as to be red, but are undoubtedly similar to the colour of Dorothy’s dress – that becomes intensely technicolour, overtly acknowledging the technical mechanisms of the medium). Dyer argues that ‘at the point in the film most signalled as illusion, we get the most direct expression of “true” feeling.’³³ Again, this is the paradox that *A Single Man* demonstrates – it uses the surface of the medium to construct an abstract depth, creating an external sensory system of code that communicates an intense emotional state.

In one scene, George smells a rose and as he does so, the colour palette warms and intensifies (Fig. 18). Ford explains that ‘roses to George don’t just look like roses...they actually breathe and move.’³⁴ Breath and life is thus intimately tied to colour, and the rose is a way for George to connect to life. The motif of the rose

³⁰ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156

³² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³⁴ Ford, Director’s Commentary, *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material.

holds a similar significance in *A Matter of Life and Death* (Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Prod. The Archers, 1947), when it is used to carry a tear to the afterlife as evidence of love (Fig. 19).



Figure 18. *A Single Man*



Figure 19. *A Matter of Life and Death* (dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, prod. The Archers, 1947).

When carrying its proof of love, the pink rose makes the transition from Technicolor to the black and white world of the afterlife, making it the ultimate symbol for the richness of life and the link between materiality and the emotion it can communicate. *A Single Man* also foregrounds cinematic technique to communicate authentic emotion, and by referring to the cinematic past with references to *The Wizard of Oz*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, and *Psycho* (a poster provides the background to the garage scene), the film constructs the present moment. Thus, moments that could be understood as fleeting, are made timeless via the medium and the textual references to iconic films that are still very much living in contemporary culture. The relationship between the superficial and the transient, and the authentic and timeless, is thus overturned, as the superficial quality of the visual medium is seen as a way to the sincere and authentic. The hierarchy is thus dismantled, as the heightened and artificial moments, which could be seen as glossy and superficial, are actually valuable, profound, and authentic.

It is George's inability to hold on to these moments, to this connection with the material stuff of life, that becomes key to understanding his depression – he experiences the world as either full of lush colour and brimming with vitality or drained and depleted. This is the dichotomy that Ford sets up (one not present in Isherwood's novel) to communicate the terms of George's fragile state, and it is the qualities of the medium that allow this distinction to be communicated so vividly.

Other such moments include when George meets Carlos (Jon Kortajarena) outside the gas station. As the extraordinary looking man (whom George says is 'better than James Dean,' another reference to an unattainable cinematic ideal) offers George a cigarette, we are shown a close-up of his lips in slow motion as he exhales

smoke – the colour intensifies, emphasising the beauty of his lips, and there is an increased tempo of George’s heart beating on the audio track (Figs. 20 and 21).



Figure 20. *A Single Man*



Figure 21. *A Single Man*

The composition makes Carlos’ smoke part of the aesthetic beauty of the image, reminiscent of 1930s publicity shots of movie stars, again drawing on cinematic convention to communicate the impossible perfection of the moment. As the pair watch the pink sunset, exaggerated by the smog and pollution, Carlos observes that ‘Sometimes awful things have their own kind of beauty.’ This articulates the inherent tensions in *A Single Man*, as George’s painful emotional state is constructed partly through the glossy beauty of the filmic medium.

George notices in a car a dog of the same breed that he used to own with Jim, and as he smells the puppy’s fur (which he describes as smelling ‘like buttered toast,’ an emotionally provocative description), the colour again becomes saturated and the image moves in slow-motion as Firth tenderly rubs his face against the dog (Fig. 22). Every sensation is characterised as heightened, and the deployment of slow-motion is a strategy that enables the viewer to linger in the moment and appreciate George’s experience of it. In film, slow-motion is often deployed to emphasise moments of intense suspense or joy, and thus using this device here seems to embed this quite ordinary occurrence with a weighty significance.



Figure 22. *A Single Man*

It is important to note, however, that this symbolic framework is not as simple as colour equalling a positive emotion and the washed out palette symbolising George's depression; Ford sets up a far more nuanced system of meaning. After looking at a black and white photograph of Jim, for example, we cut to a sequence shot completely in black and white in which they are laying side by side in the sun (Fig 23). Ford says this was 'because on that particular day George was photographing all day long, and he was thinking in black and white, he was thinking in light and dark, and shadow and light. And so his memory of this sequence is in black and white.'³⁵ The mind and its processes are thus framed as distinctly visual, and the lack of colour in this image does not convey a lack of positivity. On the contrary, the black and white image is textually rich and nuanced, and thus carries its own kind of luxuriousness and fullness. George is seen to navigate through the medium of the photograph to reach this memory, which is then in the same visual tone.

³⁵ Ford, Director's Commentary, *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material.



Figure 23. *A Single Man*

One would perhaps associate colour with intensity and abundance, but in *A Matter of Life and Death* (Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946), the afterlife world is shot in black and white, which actually serves to emphasise the beautiful light in each scene and the scale of the architecture. It also creates a sense of calm (in comparison, the colour back on earth seems messy and frenetic), and gives the sense of a sealed moment in time. The use of black and white in *A Single Man* arguably achieves the same ‘timeless’ atmosphere as well as emphasising the scale of the background and Jim’s chiselled, sculptural beauty.

As I have illustrated, it is usually the case that the colour palette is warm and saturated when George remembers his time with Jim in flashback sequences, creating a vividly stark contrast when we cut back to George’s world which is depleted of colour, appearing washed out and lifeless. As George stares out through the window of his house (a shot interspersed with colourful memories of Jim in the garden, playing with their pet dogs),³⁶ the camera is positioned so that we see George through the glass window (Fig. 24). The reflective quality of the glass makes George appear almost see-through, giving him a ghost-like appearance and again conjuring

³⁶ These flashbacks often contain series of jump shots, making George’s memories seem even more reminiscent of vivid photographs of times he is fond of.

the idea that he is not really living; George is in some sort of semi-existence, and just as the colour from his world has faded with the loss of Jim, so too he is fading. George is trapped in another coffin like space, emphasised by the grid-like composition.



Figure 24. *A Single Man*

Colour thus creates a system of meaning through which Ford can express shifting emotional states and signal the extent of George's washed-out view of the world through the perspective of his grief and depression. The film uses the distinct capacities of the medium and the inherited system of meaning around colour to convey shifting states.

As I described in the beginning of my analysis, the film utilises imagery involving water to communicate the experience of depression, and it is at the end of the film when George rises to the surface of the water that the film conveys his emergence from his depressed state. Water has an established metaphorical significance in relation to depression (for example, in expressions such as 'keeping your head above water' which signal a struggle against emotional and mental

pressures and strains), and it is interesting to see how this metaphor is developed throughout both the book and film.

Imagery involving water is prevalent in Isherwood's novel. When George goes swimming in the sea with Kenny at night, Isherwood writes that 'for George, these waves are much too big for him. They seem truly tremendous, towering up, blackness unrolling itself out of blackness, mysteriously and awfully sparkling, then curling over in a thundering slap of foam which is sparked with phosphorus ... Giving himself to it utterly, he washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less.'³⁷ Water is characterised here as elemental, capable of 'slapping' and 'sparking' and 'thundering.' It is simultaneously a suffocating force with 'blackness unrolling itself out of blackness' (imagery associated with depression, mimicking the endless unrolling days of George's life), and a force capable of cleansing and renewing as George gives in to it. The way in which he 'washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes' implies a stripping back of layers, resulting in him being 'less.'

At the end of *A Single Man*, after an intimate conversation with Kenny in which George tells him 'I'm fine,' Kenny's face gradually blurs and fades as George falls asleep and we return to the underwater imagery from the beginning of the film. This time, rather than being tinted with blue/grey, the water is now a warm golden/red colour, visually differentiating his position from that at the beginning of the film (Figs. 25 and 26).

³⁷ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 132. Water is characterised as an escape, another mode of being: 'But George and Kenny are refugees from dryness; they have escaped across the border into the water-world, leaving their clothes behind them for a customs fee.' p. 133.



Figure 25. *A Single Man*



Figure 26. *A Single Man*

The music also contains flourishes of high pitched flute and piano runs, making it seem more energised and uplifting than the music in the opening sequence. Rather than the air coming out of his lungs, the image is reversed so that the air goes back into his lungs, and it seems as if he is about to emerge from the water. As he does so, we cut to George in bed as he wakes up, with a renewed perspective on life (he smiles warmly at Kenny, thinks of his moments with his friend Charlie, and laughs

to himself). His emergence from the surfaceless water in which he has been trapped by the frame is presented as his emergence from his depressed perspective.

At the end of the film, just before his heart attack, George's voiceover says:

A few times in my life, I've had moments of absolute clarity. When for a few brief seconds, the silences drown out the noise, and I can feel, rather than think. And they seem so sharp, and the world seems so fresh. It's as though it had all just come into existence. I can never make these moments last. I cling to them, but like everything they fade. I've lived my life on these moments. They pull me back to the present. And I realise that everything is exactly the way it's meant to be.

This section of script, written by Ford, uses photographic terms to discuss the experience. He uses the word 'sharp' and 'fade,' and even describes these moments as times when 'it's as though it has all just come into existence,' echoing the experience of happening upon the enclosed world of the film text and even Dorothy's emergence from her black and white house into Technicolour Oz. Just as *Fight Club* uses filmic metaphors to describe mental processes, Ford uses the vocabulary of cinematography to express emotion, and actualises these metaphors in the production of his film through post-production manipulation.

Because George plans to end his life that evening, Firth describes how there is an 'incredible vibrancy to that day,'³⁸ which is expressed in the moments I have described. It is this vibrancy that has led to criticism that the film avoids a serious engagement with the themes of the novel (mental distress, depression, and the contemplation of death), by creating moments in which the sun seems to shine through the clouds. Michael Bronski argues that:

At heart, Isherwood's novel – and Ford follows it to this degree – attempts to chart the boring, psychically deadening minutia of everyday life, showing how it moves us all closer to death ... Yet Ford's visual aesthetic [sic] is, in a very real sense, antithetical to this. He has crafted a George – and Firth plays him to the hilt – essentially brimming with life. Sure, he is depressed and grieving over Jim's death, but Eduard Grau's lush photography and Abel Korzeniowski's haunting music continually signal to us that life, even on its way to death, is to be savoured and enjoyed ... It is as though Ford himself is too disturbed by the novel –

³⁸ Colin Firth, 'The Making of *A Single Man*,' *A Single Man*, DVD Bonus Material.

which, with its utter, unblinking look at death is very upsetting – to fully confront its themes and tone in his film. In what feels like a panic response, Ford continually pretties it up, fills it with lush, even romantic, images, and softens the hard edges with a beautiful-boy love interest.³⁹

What emerges in Bronski's response is a recall to the word/image divide that I engaged with in Chapter One. The visual here is described as 'lush' and 'romantic,' and Ford is accused of 'prettifying up' the upsetting themes and softening the 'hard edges' of the novel. Indeed, Bronski goes as far as to say that the visual aesthetic is 'antithetical' to Isherwood's novel and its attempt to 'chart the boring, physically deadening minutia of everyday life,' as George – and ultimately the film – are both 'brimming with life.' Bronski thus deems the image as superficial and distracting, and a way of allowing Ford to avoid confronting the 'themes and tone' – and indeed what Bronski describes as the very 'heart' – of Isherwood's novel. The seemingly glossy and shallow medium of film is thus judged to be incapable of the profound depths of the novel (or, rather, the novel according to Bronski), with its 'utter, unblinking look at death.'

There are many ways in which I disagree with Bronski's evaluation of the film. In his analysis, which critiques the film in terms of its fidelity to the book, Bronski fails to consider the way in which the film approaches the book's subject matter from within the capacities of its own form. I would argue that Ford utilises the distinct characteristics of the medium to create a dichotomy between a life drained of colour and a life flooded with it in order to present us with a visual language for discussing interiority. It is the moments in which George's perspective floods with colour that allow us to truly appreciate how grey and lifeless his world generally appears, and gives us visual terms through which we can negotiate his

³⁹ Michael Bronski, 'A Single Man,' *CINEASTE*, Spring 2010, pp. 64-66.

shifting emotional perspective.⁴⁰ Not only this, but the ‘lushness’ and fullness of the image links it to cinematic representation, and Ford finds authenticity in these moments by suggesting that they are momentarily attainable. Not only that, they are destined to live on forever through their referral to cinematic tradition and their presentation in the medium (the material is not linked with decay as it is in *The Hours*). I am not objecting to Bronski’s view that both George and the film are ‘brimming with life,’ but rather with his belief that these heightened moments are somehow superficial because of their cinematic presentation, or worthless because they deviate from the approach adopted by the novel. Ford has overturned these binaries and established that it is on the surface that the film will register emotion. Ford finds the depths of George’s character in these moments because it is within them that it appears George is truly living and appreciating his life. Authenticity thus resides in moments presented via heavily constructed filmic techniques, and their utilisation of the visual does not in any way limit their impact to the superficial. Resorting to word/image binaries is a barrier to appreciating what the film is really offering in terms of its representation of subjectivity and emotional experience.

The Hours

In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) describes her concept for *Mrs Dalloway* as ‘A woman’s whole life in a single day. Just one day. And in that day, her whole life.’ It is through this defined structure that we experience a day in the life of Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep), a woman throwing a party for an award-winning poet dying of AIDS, Virginia Woolf, a writer struggling with the return of

⁴⁰ Cunningham strikes the balance between capturing the preciousness of life and its sorrowfulness in the final line of *The Hours*, writing that ‘There’s just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we’ve ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult.’ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 225.

her mental illness, and Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a depressed, pregnant, suburban housewife contemplating leaving her husband and child.

The Hours employs a different strategy to *A Single Man* (and, indeed, all of the films I have analysed thus far), because rather than focusing solely on an individual protagonist and their mental experience, the film explores the impact of a person's mental illness on everyone surrounding them. *The Hours* is very much an ensemble piece, and this allows it to portray the constantly shifting power dynamics between the main characters as the film progresses. It presents the traditional thesis regarding the risks and consequences of living with genius, but, more interestingly, it navigates this theme by constructing complex relationships between characters across the text and exploring the performances they present to one another. The experience of depression and the key ideas associated with it (failure, disappointment, isolation, loneliness, and death) are thus interrogated through an examination and dismantling of heavily constructed performances.

The film is also a meditation on how we treat those experiencing mental illness. With this in mind, my analysis will read the film through the prism of the relationship between Leonard (Stephen Dillane) and Virginia. As well as her partner and husband, Leonard is also presented as Virginia's carer, and this dynamic is reflected in the other partnerships we encounter during the film, with roles shifting back and forth in a mutable framework. The ability to communicate and connect with others is thus approached very differently when compared with my analysis of *A Single Man*, as is the role of idealisation in these moments of connection. In *The Hours*, materiality is linked with death and decay, as opposed to life and longevity.

In many ways, *The Hours* also explores the theme of performance contained within *A Single Man*, but extends this exploration further. It suggests that *everybody*

relies on performance to present a 'self' to the world, and that facades are the mechanism by which everybody appears to those around them to be normal ('normal' being defined by society's conventions and pre-determined roles). Rather than being deliberately constructed (such as when George gets ready, when the process is described as if he is a soldier going to war), the roles in *The Hours* seem to be forced upon the women inhabiting them. Their lack of control over the roles they have been assigned means that they feel painfully ill-equipped to perform or embody them. The film addresses the terrible effects of being forced to play a role in someone else's fantasy, whether that be society's fantasy or the fantasy in the mind of another individual.

The opening sequences of the film provide the framework for the way in which the film will present its ideas and approach the complex subject of mental illness. It begins with Virginia's suicide. Her voiceover reads her suicide note to Leonard, foregrounding the relationship between them and presenting this as the prism through which we can view the other relationships in the film. When reading her note, Virginia states that she is 'certain [she] is going mad again' and that she 'shan't recover this time.' She describes how she begins to 'hear voices' and 'can't concentrate,' and so is 'doing what seems to be the best thing to do' by ending her life. This voiceover is played over images of her leaving the house intercut with shots of her hand writing, sensitively interlinking her emotional state with her artistic talent as a writer. Though she mentions voices, at no point in the film do we ever hear these voices in the audio track, and this differentiates *The Hours* from previous films I have analysed thus far, such as *Clean*, *Shaven* and *A Beautiful Mind*. Rather than viewing depression from the perspective of the character experiencing it, we are

positioned more externally and are offered another mode by which to read their shifting emotional states, as I will discuss.

Kidman's low-pitched, quiet voice is firm and clear as we see Virginia walk out of her house and under an archway full of roses (Fig. 27).



Figure 27. *The Hours*, (dir. Stephen Daldry, prod. Paramount Pictures and Miramax Films, 2002).

Unlike George in *A Single Man*, Virginia's absolute self-absorption means that she is unable to see the beauty of the flowers around her and cannot gain any hope or connection to life through them. As I will explore, the organic and material in *The Hours* is continuously linked to death and decay, and thus Virginia does not reach out to the material in order to ground herself to life as George does. If anything, the rose archway acts as a foreboding tunnel through which the lonely Virginia must walk to her fate. In *A Single Man*, the roses seem to breathe colour into George's world and indeed into George himself, whereas in *The Hours* they are just another symbol of a beauty that cannot be captured and is doomed to decay. The filmic medium is never presented as a safety net against the threat of non-existence as it is in *A Single Man*.

We then see Virginia wade into the flowing river, weighed down by a heavy rock she has placed in her pocket. It is clear that the metaphor of the water functions

very differently in *The Hours* than in *A Single Man*, and it is worth examining the intricacies of this distinction. In the book, Cunningham describes with chilling intensity Virginia's experience as she submerges herself in the flowing river, and personifies the river to emphasise the physical sensations she experiences:

For a moment, still, it seems like nothing; it seems like another failure; just chill water she can easily swim back out of; but then the current wraps itself around her and takes her with such sudden, muscular force it feels as if a strong man has risen from the bottom, grabbed her legs and held them to his chest. It feels personal.⁴¹

The short line 'It feels personal' has a shocking sense of finality that confirms that Virginia will not be able to fight the strength of the river; it has pulled her under and will not allow her to rise to the surface ever again. The personification of the water also adds a sense of intimacy to the experience, as if the water has come for her alone. When we compare this to George's experience in the sea, in which the waves wash 'away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes' and he continually returns to the surface 'cleaner, freer, less,'⁴² we can see that water in *The Hours* is presented not as a source for elemental renewal, but one for irreversible submersion. It represents the eventual engulfing that the characters seem to live in fear of, whether that be the threat of death or the loss of the self to some idealised fantasy role.

This important difference is also communicated in the film. A close up of Virginia's feet as she enters the water encourages us to focus on the determined nature of her actions and also the physical reality of her situation. This has moved beyond contemplation into resolute action. The voiceover on the audio track provides the viewer with a perspective through which to understand her desperate

⁴¹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p.5.

⁴² Isherwood, *A Single Man*, p. 132. Water is characterised as an escape, another mode of being: 'But George and Kenny are refugees from dryness; they have escaped across the border into the water-world, leaving their clothes behind them for a customs fee.' p. 133.

behaviour as she wades into the water. A medium close-up shows her face as she stares down the river into the flow of the current, as if having one final confrontation with the tide that has been against her (Fig. 28). It is significant that her head is the last thing to be enveloped by the water, as this is the location of her emotional pain, and it is this aspect from which she seeks peace. With control, she sinks her head into the water and disappears.⁴³ We then see hazy shots of her legs dragging across the river bed, and see a shot of her left hand highlighting her wedding ring and the central importance of her relationship with Leonard. Similarly to a *A Single Man*, dissociated shots of the body underwater serve to represent the way in which the experience of depression mentally suffocates the character and pulls them under both emotionally and physically. With Virginia, however, this submersion serves as a sort of submission to and release from her mental anguish.



Figure 28. *The Hours*

After the vivid portrayal of Virginia's suicide, *The Hours* begins to sensitively interweave the lives of three women, linking them via the daily domestic tasks they undertake. The women are each introduced in a way that highlights

⁴³Cunningham allows the reader to continue following Virginia after she sinks into the river, writing that 'She is borne quickly along by the current. She appears to be flying, a fantastic figure, arms outstretched, hair streaming, the tail of the fur coat billowing behind. She floats, heavily, through shafts of brown, granular light.' Cunningham, *The Hours*, p.7.

passivity and lethargy; they all lie in bed, whereas their partners are awake and active. Awoken by their clocks, they are each framed in the same way, allowing their similar physical positions to imply a deeper emotional and mental connection (Figs. 29-31). The women each rise and do their hair, overtly linking depression with femininity, and introducing the fact that the film will be navigating the lives of these women through their experience of being women in the different eras they inhabit (1923, 1951, and 2001).⁴⁴ The women attempt to make themselves look nice to prepare for the various feminine roles they play. Their appearance is thus of crucial importance to their performance.

It is interesting to contrast the artfulness of the way the women do their hair with the mechanicalness of George's shaving in *A Single Man*, as this ties into one of the main differences between the ways in which the films portray depression. George's experience is described in terms of the mechanical nature of his tasks and the image is glossy and perfect; in *The Hours*, there is a focus on the supposedly 'natural,' 'organic,' and even 'earthy' roles of the women.

⁴⁴ The difficulties of the social constraints of each era are also explored (Virginia discusses her frustration with medical professionals, Laura is suffocated in post-war suburban America, stifled by the realities of the American dream (a theme also explored by *Revolutionary Road*, dir. Sam Mendes, 2008), and Clarissa is burdened by the weight of maintaining her performance of the good hostess in contemporary New York.

Figure 29. *The Hours*Figure 30. *The Hours*Figure 31. *The Hours*

The structure of this opening sequence is distinctive to the film form; rather than having alternating chapters featuring different women, as in Cunningham's novel, the medium of film is able to seamlessly move between the lives of these women and unite them not only visually, via composition, music, and match-cuts, but also temporally, as they share the space of the screen. Peter Bradshaw notes this

difference, commenting that ‘by intercutting between them, Daldry more or less persuades us that the three women’s stories are atemporal, that they exist alongside each other not in sequence but in parallel.’⁴⁵ The written word cannot navigate the women’s lives in this way as they are separated by the format of the novel, which features a different character in each chapter. Todd McCarthy describes how this results in a difference in how their relationship to one another is communicated, saying that ‘On the page, the intersections of the three narratives creep up on the reader with subtle grace; on screen, the immediacy of intercutting renders them considerably more emphatic.’⁴⁶ Here, we can interpret McCarthy’s use of the word ‘emphatic’ to mean ‘obvious,’ but the way in which this seemingly ‘immediate’ cross-cutting operates is far more nuanced. It allows us to make complex parallels between the different characters and appreciate the web of interconnections between them as the roles they play shift and morph in relation to each other as well as those around them.

The actions of Clarissa and Virginia are intercut so that when Virginia splashes her face with water it is Clarissa’s face that rises up from the sink. This creates a disjunction between the individual and the image that appears in the mirror – this moment of fragmentation symbolises the gap between the internal self and the external image that is reflected to the world. The women are all played by very well-known stars, which makes their introduction in this way all the more confusing – they are not given the star build-up they would usually have, but are intercut and their identities confused. The fact that Nicole Kidman has a prosthetic nose increases the jarringness of this introduction and affects the way in which we read her image, diminishing her beauty much like the beard mars Reeves’ face in *A*

⁴⁵ Peter Bradshaw, ‘The Hours,’ *The Guardian*, Friday 14th February 2003.

Accessed September 2012: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/feb/14/artsfeatures>>

⁴⁶ Todd McCarthy, ‘The Hours,’ *Variety*, Dec 16-Dec 22, 2002; 389: 5, p. 39.

Scanner Darkly. Kidman's face is well known and yet here has an uncanny quality that jars with her fame.

The decision to cast Kidman as Woolf was a controversial one. David Hare commented that 'There was a certain amount of snobbish laughter at the idea of Nicole Kidman playing her, but it was a deliberate attempt to confound expectations and make that material seem much more contemporary.'⁴⁷ She was fitted with a prosthetic nose as part of her transformation into Woolf, a key part of the costume that enabled her to get into the mind and mannerisms of the literary legend. The prosthetic nose is an interesting addition when we consider the emphasis Cunningham's novel places on performance, and the act of 'becoming' Virginia. The film forces us to confront Virginia as a construct (even the controversy over Kidman playing this part demonstrates an already established idea in the minds of the audience about who and what Woolf should be), and brings to the fore questions of identity, masks, and performance in a similar way to that we encounter in *Secret Window*.

The women both stare at themselves in the mirror, intimately linking their hesitancy and anxiety about starting the day with issues of identity and their understanding of themselves. Facing the day means facing it through their subjective perspective, and dealing with the minutia of their daily lives entails an overwhelming level of engagement with the external as opposed to the internal world that demands their time and energy (Figs. 32 and 33).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Sheila Johnston, 'A Day in the Life,' *Sight & Sound*, XIII: 2, Feb 2003, p. 26.

⁴⁸ In the book, the mirror and its reflection also bring up themes of multiple selves. Cunningham describes how Virginia 'is aware of her reflected movements in the glass but does not permit herself to look. The mirror is dangerous; it sometimes shows her the dark manifestation of air that matches her body, takes her form, but stands behind, watching her, with porcine eyes and wet, hushed breathing.' Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2003, first published 1999), p. 31.

Figure 32. *The Hours*Figure 33. *The Hours*

Just as in *A Single Man*, *The Hours* is full of references to the way in which the characters have a sense of themselves as constructions - they are acutely aware of merely acting the part of their lives as opposed to instinctively living or feeling it. However, in *The Hours*, these constructions are less like a coat of armour worn to face the world and more like a suffocating bondage that the characters must wrestle with every day. Interestingly, this idea is explored through the relationship between the carer and the cared-for that is introduced via Virginia and her husband, Leonard.

When Virginia descends the stairs after waking up, for instance, Leonard kindly enquires as to how she slept and quizzes her about what she has eaten. He asks her ‘have you had breakfast?’, to which she answers ‘yes,’ and he responds, knowingly, ‘liar.’ Their closeness and love for one another is communicated in this frank exchange, and he is clearly positioned as her carer as well as her partner. He makes her commit to having lunch with him, ‘proper lunch, husband and wife, sitting down together, soup, pudding and all – by force if necessary,’ before letting her retreat into her writing room to begin her novel.

Virginia takes her pen and settles in an arm chair. We then cut from one woman to the other, so that in 1923 Richmond, England, Virginia vocalises the opening line of *Mrs Dalloway* (‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself’), in 1951 Los Angeles, Laura Brown reads it from a copy of *Mrs Dalloway*, and then in 2001 New York, Clarissa says it to her girlfriend (‘Sally, I think I will

buy the flowers myself’). They are thus linked via a story which is focused on the communication of interiority, and are all shown to be readers or writers (Virginia is an author, Laura Brown reads her work, and Clarissa is an editor). The written and spoken word is presented as a crucial aspect of communicating subjectivity, and is also key to the way in which the women’s lives are linked. The medium of film allows them to share time in much a similar way to the structure of the story – a single day in their lives – as they share a defined time and space on the screen. This structure is pivotal to our ability to understand their mental states as linked and shifting in relation to one another, and the way in which their actions are visually linked reflects this connection.

In Cunningham’s novel, he describes how, upon waking, Laura feels that she ‘should be out of bed, showered and dressed, fixing breakfast for Dan and Richie,’ but instead, in order to combat ‘the dank sensation around her, the nowhere feeling,’ she is reading *Mrs Dalloway*, as if ‘reading were the singular and obvious first task of the day, the only viable way to negotiate the transit from sleep to obligation.’⁴⁹ This sense of obligation leads to a feeling of needing to perform the role that society has cast her in:

...she is again possessed (it seems to be getting worse) by a dream-like feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed. What, she wonders, is wrong with her.⁵⁰

This description is similar to that we encounter in *A Single Man*, except that rather than *choosing* to be an actor in order to face the day, Laura feels that she has been *forced* on stage to play a role for which ‘she has not adequately rehearsed.’ It is crucial to appreciate the social constraints within which Laura exists; the role of the

⁴⁹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

mother and housewife is considered instinctive and natural, and completely the opposite of a constructed professional identity such as George's lecturing position.⁵¹ Laura's loneliness seems to stem from the fact that she is unable to articulate this intense unease, as it contradicts everything 1950s society believes about the role of women and their place in the household.

Laura's mental anguish is communicated more gradually in the film, as there is no voiceover to communicate Laura's complex emotions.⁵² After getting out of bed, Laura hesitantly goes into the kitchen to discover that her husband, Dan, has bought her yellow roses. She says to him, 'It's your birthday, you shouldn't be out buying me flowers,' and comments that he should have woken her up. Dan replies, looking at their son, 'Well, we decided it'd be better if we let you sleep in a little, didn't we?' Her husband and child are thus cast in the role of her carers, and Dan reasserts this positioning by saying that 'You need to rest Laura, you're only four months away.' Laura insists that she is fine, but as she watches him leave, her demeanour visibly changes. She sits awkwardly facing Richie and tells him 'I'm gonna make a cake.' Her awkwardness when left alone with her child begins a developing representation of her sense that Richie can see her attempts at 'playing' the role of wife and mother. There is much silence in the scenes between Laura and her son, as well as medium close-ups that allow the viewer to linger on every nuance

⁵¹ In her exploration of social constructs for men, Barbara Ehrenreich writes that 'Benedek's hypothesis was that the conventional male role, like that of the female, has "instinctual roots." With women, things were straightforward, since "mothering behaviour is regulated by a pituitary hormone."' Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1983, 1984 edition), p. 15. This indicates the extent to which women were considered to be completely designed towards the 'instinctual' role of wife and mother.

⁵² Rob White comments that 'Cunningham dwells on the drift in their minds – the distractions, numbness and moments of clarity – and his impressionistic book isn't promising material for a mainstream film,' but that the performances of the main actors make 'inarticulate depression intricate and tangible.' Rob White, 'The Hours,' *Sight & Sound*, XIII: 3, March 2003, p. 45.

in their expressions. Much of the awkwardness between them is communicated by the way in which Richie is always watching Laura, with the camera lingering on his face and piercing blue eyes. The medium thus allows for a visual representation of the way in which we scrutinise the characters as viewers, again positioning us in a more external role than the previous films I have examined.

This observational placement generates a greater appreciation for the shifting relationship dynamics and allows for an exploration of the impact of depression. As we cut to Clarissa walking through the streets of New York on a frosty but bright morning, we see her entering the flower shop, declaring ‘What a beautiful morning!’ and asking for ‘buckets of roses.’ She displays obvious delight in the abundance and beauty on display (a delight which she later attempts to share with Richard (Ed Harris), as I will discuss). The owner discusses her failed attempt at reading Richard’s novel, and asks Clarissa ‘It’s you, isn’t it? In the novel. Isn’t it meant to be you?’ Clarissa responds ‘Oh, I see. Yeah, sort of. I mean, in a way.’ She laughs awkwardly and Philip Glass’ sombre piano music fades in. The pair are shown in close-up alternately, divided by flowers (which form a multifaceted symbol as the film progresses). Clarissa comments that ‘You know Richard’s a writer, that’s what he is. He uses things which actually happened. And years ago, he and I were students, that’s true, but then, you know, then he changes things.’ The owner replies, knowingly and dismissively ‘oh sure,’ to which Clarissa defensively clarifies ‘I don’t mean in a bad way. It’s more like he makes them his own.’ It is in this line that we are faced with the reality of Clarissa’s place in Richard’s life as a fantasy figure he has constructed – the fact that we then cut to Virginia’s pen makes this process of creation and idealisation overt, and makes the characters’ position as performers in each other’s role plays apparent.

This theme of performance is most obvious in the fact that Clarissa is overtly cast as Mrs Dalloway when she repeats the book's opening line, and this connection is emphasised by the dynamic between herself and Richard, which closely echoes the relationship between Virginia and Leonard. We are vividly reminded of the casting of Clarissa as Mrs Dalloway by her entry into Richard's flat. As she enters the lift shaft, the space is prison-like, emphasised not only by the grey tones but also by the barred shadows on the wall. A shot pointing up through a gap in the lift's ceiling shows only darkness ahead. Clarissa is then shot from above the lift, making the flowers a burst of colour and life against the grim surroundings. She is framed triply, by the lift, the borders of the lift shaft, and then the edge of the screen, visually communicating the incredibly restricted role through which she is allowed to enter Richard's world as the character of Mrs Dalloway, a role which he has ascribed to her (Fig. 34).



Figure 34. *The Hours*

She enters the flat and Richard says 'Mrs Dalloway, it's you.' Clarissa responds 'Yes! It's me!', declaring that it is a beautiful morning and suggesting that they 'let in some light.' She is thus overtly cast as both Mrs Dalloway and as Richard's carer,

asking him questions that mirror Leonard's to Virginia, such as 'They did bring you breakfast, didn't they? ... Richard? You did eat it?' and declaring that 'of course it matters.' Just as Leonard points out to Virginia, Clarissa reminds Richard that 'you know what the doctors say' and thus the question of treatment and medication is brought to fore (Clarissa asks Richard if he has been skipping pills, and proceeds to count them).

It is significant that Clarissa brings life and vitality into Richard's flat with not only her exuberant personality but also the flowers – they stand out as a vibrant marker against the cold blue lighting of his surroundings, and represent her attempt to bring warmth and homeliness to the stark environment. The gesture is a visual manifestation of the great affection Clarissa still has for Richard. She is effectively showering him with 'buckets of roses,' and yet, despite this abundance, he cannot appreciate them, just as Virginia cannot appreciate the archway of roses as she walks to the river and Laura Brown cannot appreciate the flowers given to her by her husband Dan. In Laura's case, she has a great sense that she does not deserve the flowers, and that she should have bought flowers for Dan as it is his birthday. The shared experience that is the emotional gesture of love and affection cannot be appreciated by the recipient. Richard and Laura are both unable to return the affection they are shown, and cannot respond in the way that is expected of them. The roses that would have become saturated with colour in *A Single Man* have no such power here, in a film in which characters feel the flowers are merely props on a set in which they perform. In *The Hours*, flowers are somehow complicit in the fraudulent nature of the characters' lives as well as being a constant reminder of the fleeting nature of experience and the inevitability of decay.

As Clarissa fusses in the kitchen, Richard says to her, ‘Ah, Mrs Dalloway, always giving parties to cover the silence.’ A medium close-up of her face shows that she is visibly affected by his comment, pausing and reflecting on his cutting words. He reads her actions through the fantasy role of Mrs Dalloway, and judges her according to the character he has written her to be. He later asks her ‘Who’s this party for?’ and says to her that ‘I’m only staying alive to satisfy you.’ He references ‘who we once were,’ emphasising their entrapment in the roles he has prescribed them as the author and creator of their story. The on-going tragedy of their relationship is that Richard feels no happiness can be found outside of their memory of this one moment in the past, and Clarissa’s assurance that Richard’s work is ‘going to live’ only causes him to describe his failure at capturing the intricacy and complexity of life.

As writers and poets, both Virginia and Richard are shown to attempt to capture in words the richness of life’s details, the daily sensations, sounds and colours that burst through each moment. The inability to do this successfully causes a sense of failure in Richard. He expresses that he wanted to capture ‘Everything that happens in a moment. Everything all mixed up. And I failed. I failed. No matter what you start with, it ends up being so much less.’ The attempt to capture the complexity and richness of life (as Virginia Woolf attempts to do in *Mrs Dalloway*) is thus shown to be linked to the characters’ depression, as it is this intensity that is communicated as overwhelming and ungraspable.⁵³ Again, it is the distance between how the author imagines their final work will be and the reality of what they have produced that is the cause of a sense failure, just as Laura experiences with the disappointing cake she creates. This also brings us back to *A Single Man*, in which

⁵³ The inability to capture or grasp moments like this is also a key theme in Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999).

George articulates his inability to hold on to moments of clarity and beauty. It is the awareness of the gap between bright and intense abundance and cold, stark reality that fuels much of the mental distress experienced by the characters within the films. The difference, however, is that the moments of abundance in *A Single Man* provide a moment of hope that is rendered timeless by the medium, whereas in *The Hours* no such hope exists.

Richard says at one point that he is being awarded not for his work but for his ‘performance,’ and as the film continues we become aware that this sense of performing (and the implication that doing so makes one a fraud or imposter), translates to most of its characters. In the book, Cunningham writes that Woolf ‘learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation, not simply for the benefit of husband and servants but for the sake, first and foremost, of one’s own convictions ... She feels fully in command of the character who is Virginia Woolf, and as that character she removes her cloak, hangs it up, and goes downstairs to the kitchen to speak to Nelly about lunch.’⁵⁴

The film, however, portrays Virginia as very self-consciousness of the role she plays, showing her to be nervous around the servants and creating uneasiness about her position as mistress of the house. Unlike Laura, who fails at the supposedly ‘natural’ and instinctual role of the mother, Virginia seems to struggle to inhabit the heavily constructed role of mistress of the house. Though both women fail to perform their roles to the standard expected of them, this failure means a different thing to each of them and is specific to the context of their cultural era.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, *The Hours*, pp. 83-84. Woolf is shown to be acutely aware of this division between her interior sense of self and the one she portrays to the world: ‘She is herself and not herself. She is a woman in London, an aristocrat, pale and charming, a little false; she is Virginia Woolf; and she is this other, the inchoate, tumbling thing known as herself, a mother, a driver, a swirling streak of pure life like the Milky Way...’ p. 189.

Virginia's awkwardness in her position is perhaps best communicated in her revulsion at the food Nelly prepares.⁵⁵ The book tells us that as Virginia looks at the food, 'She reminds herself: food is not sinister. Do not think of putrefaction or faeces; do not think of the face in the mirror.'⁵⁶ The film communicates Virginia's revulsion towards food most distinctly when Nelly is preparing the lamb pie. We see close-ups of the meat on the table, and hear the sliminess of the meat as Nelly handles it (Fig. 35). The meat appears disgustingly visceral, much like the squelching tomato shown in close-up in *Clean, Shaven*. The image is intrusive and disturbing to the poetic and interior world of Woolf, a world constructed of language, symbolism and metaphor; the meat is yet another reminder of materiality, death, and decay. The reaction shot of Woolf after the close-up shows her wincing and squirming, externalising her inner revulsion.



Figure 35. *The Hours*

⁵⁵ Stephen Daldry notes, 'all the food [in the film] is somehow perceived from the point of view of Virginia Woolf'). Daldry, Director's Commentary, *The Hours*.

⁵⁶ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 85.



Figure 36. *The Hours*

The close-up of the cracking egg (Fig. 36) is also symbolically loaded, suggesting the explosion of dividing boundaries and the loss of contents. The fragility of the egg reflects that of the mind, and its instability is reminiscent of the glass of water hanging over the edge of the counter in *Secret Window* (but rather than being pure it is slimy and organic). The egg's protective shell is brutally broken by force, and this act seems almost violent in vivid close-up. As if to contrast this visceral matter, Virginia suggests to Nelly that she fetch some ginger for tea, a spice that is associated with purification and cleansing. This demand is also an example of Virginia over-compensating for her fear of the servants, asserting her authority by sending Nelly on a rushed trip to London for a single item.

Walking in Richmond to brainstorm for her novel, Virginia says out loud, 'She'll kill herself over something that doesn't seem to matter.' We then cut to Laura Brown making a cake, linking her to Virginia's heroine and her current fate. In both the book and the film, we are aware of the way that Laura performs 'being' Laura Brown through her making of the birthday cake with her son, a task which I will now analyse in both its literary and cinematic presentation.

In the book, the creation of the cake is the way in which Laura wishes to become an artist and achieve something for herself, wanting to make a cake that is ‘better, even, than photographs of cakes in magazines.’⁵⁷ In the film, we are shown a medium close-up of the recipe for the cake and the picture that accompanies it, communicating the way in which Laura is attempting to live up to the picture-perfect and unrealistic ideal that the cooking book offers; it is the conception of ideals like this which surround Laura constantly in 1950s suburban America (Fig. 37).

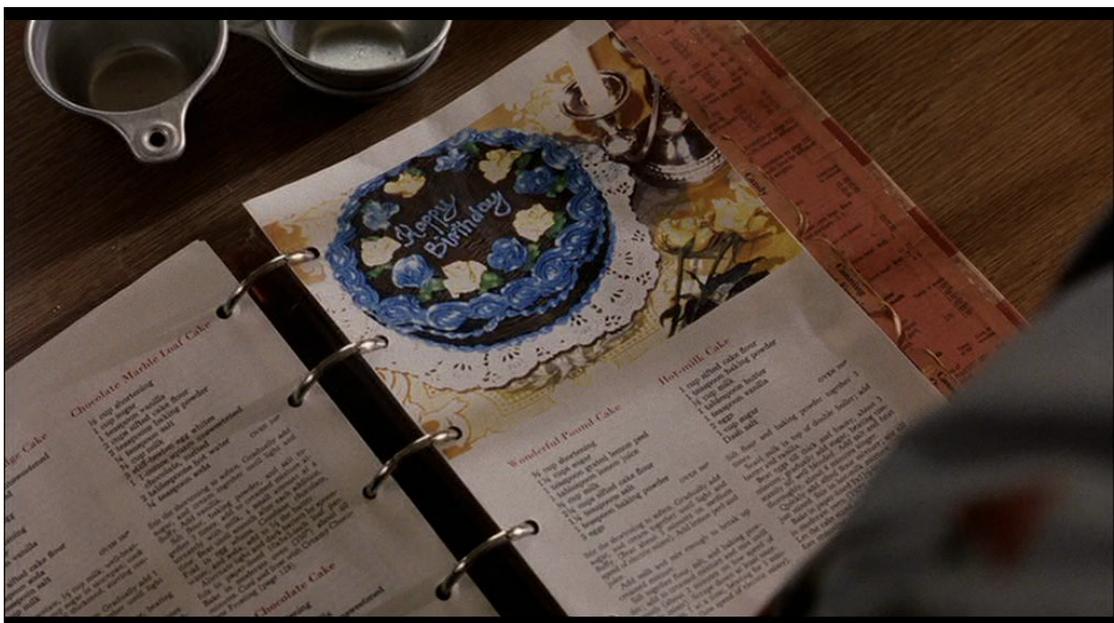


Figure 37. *The Hours*

Just like her experience of being a housewife, Laura is unable to accept the gap between what she expects to achieve and feel and the reality of her situation. Cunningham highlights the significance of this gap by exploring the brief moments in which it is bridged, discussing a key moment in the process of baking the cake with her son:

⁵⁷Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 76. Laura compares herself to great artists in her conception of her what her cake could be, asking ‘Wasn’t a book like *Mrs Dalloway* once just empty paper and a pot of ink?’ p. 76.

They pause, motionless, watching each other, and for a moment she is precisely what she appears to be: a pregnant woman kneeling in a kitchen with her three-year-old son, who knows the number four. She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference.⁵⁸

The film communicates a similar moment through a shot of Laura and Richie's face in close-up sifting the flour. The flour floats across the screen, creating a moment in which Laura asks, 'Isn't it beautiful? Don't you think it looks like snow?' The moment should be carefree and instinctive, and yet Laura is so clearly *trying* to be carefree. She is acutely aware that, according to the expectations of society, baking a cake and spending time with her son should be the most natural and easy thing to do for a wife and mother. Laura's mindful, laboured approach to cake making (she speaks slowly and methodically, and her movements are considered and thoughtful), contradicts this, as does her son's frustration at her slowness, who tells her 'Mommy, it isn't that difficult.' Thus, even if isolated moments *appear* right, Laura's excruciating *awareness* that they do only serves to highlight further that she feels dislocated and as if she is merely performing a role she has been cast in in her absence. When she gets it right, the precariousness of what should be natural, and the effort it takes to achieve this natural position, is fully evident.

Unlike George's position as a lecturer, a role which is all about preparation and acquired skill, the idealised maternal role should not (according to 1950s society) require any effort, and thus Laura feels completely inadequate with the fact that she finds it so difficult. Laura tells her son that 'We're baking the cake to show [Dan] that we love him,' causing him to ask 'Otherwise he won't know we love him?' to which she responds 'That's right.' This fully articulates her belief that her relationship with her husband is based on her ability to perform the role of mother and housewife successfully, and that this success is based on the naturalness and ease

⁵⁸ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 76.

with which she can complete traditional homemaking tasks such as baking a cake. Rather than her actions flowing out of her love for Dan, the view she articulates to Richie suggests that one requires physical manifestations of love to prove that it exists.

The resulting cake, shown in close-up, is lop-sided and messy, and jars painfully with Laura's hopes of how it would appear (Fig. 38). Showing the cake in close-up highlights the enormity of its imperfection and reflects the importance of these flaws to Laura, serving as a powerful symbol for her inability to do something that should come naturally to her. A cut back to her face shows her visibly shaking as she applies the icing, and she then wipes her hands on the kitchen table, frustratingly saying to herself in a shaky voice that 'It didn't work.' The cake has failed to live up to expectations, and Laura judges herself for this failure; she measures herself by the cake.



Figure 38. *The Hours*

A knock on the door prompts Richie to jump and yell that someone is at the door, but rather than answering it Laura adjusts herself in front of the mirror until

eventually her friend lets herself in, asking if she has interrupted anything (as Laura looks so uneasy and failed to answer the door herself). The fact that her child is still in pyjamas makes Laura seem inattentive and disorganised, and this clashes with her friend Kitty's (Toni Collette) perfectly put together outfit. Kitty wears matching daisy necklace and earrings, has flawless makeup with immaculate bold red lipstick, and displays her hourglass figure with a perfectly fitting halter neck dress. When Kitty sees Laura's attempt at a cake she says that she 'doesn't know how [Laura] makes it so difficult ... everyone can make a cake. Everyone can! It's ridiculously easy.' Laura is obviously in awe of Kitty. A wonderful performance by Toni Collette highlights the exceptional way in which, unlike Laura, she is succeeding at performing the role of a 1950s housewife, and the effort she has put into this characterisation is very clear. Laura sits intimidated and unsure of how to act, awkwardly handling her tea and fumbling her words (Fig. 39).⁵⁹

When describing the plot of *Mrs Dalloway* to Kitty, Laura says that it is about a woman who 'because she's confident everyone thinks [is] fine...but she isn't.' Kitty subtly reacts to this possible reflection of her own life, and as she later explains her fertility problems to Laura, we understand why she responded in this way. She says that a lump has been found in her uterus and that 'they are going to have a look' to see if this has been causing the problem. Kitty expresses her feeling that 'I don't think you can really call yourself a woman until you're a mother,' articulating the sense in which to Kitty the role of mother is intrinsically bound to the role of woman, and thus should be instinctive and natural.

⁵⁹ Laura is obviously in awe of Kitty's abilities to fulfil this housewife archetype, pointing out that she and her husband 'both have a lot of friends...you're good at it,' admitting that this another skill at which one can either succeed or fail.



Figure 39. *The Hours*

Kitty outwardly disintegrates as she explains her situation, and her words clash with the visible externalisation of her emotion. Even as she says ‘I’m doing fine, really,’ to which Laura replies ‘I know you are,’ she breaks down crying and is embraced by Laura. Despite her polished and carefully constructed appearance, beneath this façade Kitty is breaking down inside as she is faced with her own mortality and the threat of cancer hidden in her doll-like body. The scene strongly suggests that depression and mental anguish can be caused by a dissonance between the inner self and the external self presented to the world.

Kitty says that her husband Ray is ‘not good with this stuff’ and it becomes clear that she lacks any real emotional connection with him, but it is through a shared detachment from their partners that Laura and Kitty connect. Laura tells Kitty to ‘forget about Ray’ and then tenderly kisses her (Fig. 40). The frame is tight around their faces so that their connection is heightened, making the moment seem even more intimate and intense. Julianne Moore describes the way in which ‘you see Toni accept all of those things, and then deny it ... it’s allowed to exist and then, I

think for Laura the scary thing is that it evaporates ... the connection is completely denied.’⁶⁰ Laura’s loneliness is intensified by Kitty’s complete denial of the moment when Laura asks her if she minded and she replies ‘What? I didn’t mind what?’ Laura tells Kitty that ‘it’ll be alright’ as she leaves, to which Kitty replies, with an eerily picture-perfect smile, ‘Of course it will.’ The music at this point is a slow progression of single piano notes support by string instruments, creating a weighty, serious tone over the superficially perfect domestic scene and making it all the more disturbing when Laura is suddenly left alone with her child.



Figure 40. *The Hours*

Laura’s relationship with her son, Richie (Jack Rovello), is shown to be extremely strained by her inability to feel ‘real’ in the role she is playing. Cunningham writes that when her husband is there, she is capable of being a mother, but ‘Alone with the child ... she loses direction. She can’t always remember how a mother would act.’⁶¹ In the film, as I have addressed, Richie is often shown to be scrutinising Laura with his piercing blue eyes, and reaction shots of Laura show her

⁶⁰ Julianne Moore, Cast Commentary, *The Hours*, Special Features DVD.

⁶¹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 47.

visibly squirming or freezing awkwardly under his gaze. After she kisses Kitty, Laura realises that Richie has been watching her (Fig. 41). The shot is composed so that it is as if Richie is looking up at Laura on a stage, again heightening her sense of exposure. Although the child's gaze appears sorrowful, she reacts to it as though it were interrogative. With panic and stress in her voice asks him 'What? What do you want?' causing him to run away.



Figure 41. *The Hours*

The piano chords get progressively deeper and more foreboding; it is Richie who somehow seems to see through her performance, highlighting to Laura all the more her failure at performing her part convincingly. She then tips the cake away – if the cake is evidence of her failure, she must remake it to redeem herself.

We then cut to a scene between Virginia and her sister Vanessa, in which the question of treatment is again brought to the fore. When asked why she was not invited to her sister's party, Nessa replies 'Do the doctors not forbid it?' to which Virginia answers that 'even crazy people like to be asked,' highlighting her humorous but poignant awareness of the way in which she is gradually being separated from society. Glass' contemplative piano score begins as the children run

in after finding a dying bird, and this introduces one of the most beautiful and disturbing moments of connection in *The Hours*. They make a grave for the bird and surround it with roses, which are yellow just like the ones Dan gave to Laura earlier (beginning a framework which connects Laura with the frail and dying creature). Nessa's little girl sits by Virginia with angel/fairy wings on, making her a symbol of innocence as she observes that the bird is 'very small' and Virginia replies that this is 'one of the things that happens...we look smaller.' Everyone abandons the game and goes inside, distracted by the promise of tea. Her sister is active, running around and laughing, but Virginia is passive and disconnected from these external attractions (she does not respond to her sister's calls). Woolf lies down by the bird and we cut from the bird to Virginia in a sequence that makes each seem connected by their fragility and vulnerability (Figs. 42 and 43). She chooses to connect with death over life.



Figure 42. *The Hours*



Figure 43. *The Hours*

There is an obvious similarity in terms of composition between the two shots, but also in terms of the colour palette. Virginia's hair is a very similar colour to the bird, creating an almost mirror-reflection like effect as she stares at the creature. The fact she is echoing its form and appearance is eerie because the bird here symbolises death, and yet it is here that she finds a connection. The image also echoes Millais' *Ophelia* (painted 1851-2), a painting of the Shakespeare character from *Hamlet* just before she drowns in a river. A close-up of the painting reveals a similar affinity with nature, the accent of the bright yellow, and the earthy brown hair (Fig. 44), and also hints at Virginia's later death.



Figure 44. Close-up of *Ophelia*, Sir John Everett Millais, 1851-2, (oil on canvas).

We then cut to a close-up shot of Laura's face positioned where the bird's face was previously, connecting her to Virginia and also linking her with the small, frail animal Virginia was staring at. As Richie plays alone and attempts to follow his mother around the house, Laura purposefully and silently fills her purse with pills from the medicine cabinet, and then tells her child that they are going to make another cake, 'a better one,' and that they are going to go out.

In the following scene in which Louis (Jeff Daniels) comes into Clarissa's apartment, Streep describes how her character 'doesn't like being caught backstage,'⁶² and this is very much the sense we get as Clarissa greets Louis with her washing up gloves still on and attempts to be light-hearted when she is clearly agitated and stressed by the preparations for Richard's party. Just as Nessa arrived early to Virginia's house in the previous scene, Louis arrives before he is expected, hinting that Clarissa is now positioned in a similar position to Virginia, failing to perform her hostess role (it is Louis who has the busy life and Clarissa who has stayed stationary).

The scene is fraught with tension as the pair discuss Richard, a lover they shared, and Clarissa breaks eggs in a way that echoes the tension in the earlier scene in Virginia's kitchen. Daldry argued that he aimed to create a 'complex emotional landscape' and 'make behavioural language that revealed character as much as dialogue.'⁶³ Clarissa's mindful handling of the eggs clearly communicates her internal angst. She divides the yolks and then drops them into a bowl, allowing the slimy sound of them landing into the liquid to be fully focused on, and conjuring up connotations of the splitting of the self and the dissociation of mind from body, of life's promises from its cold realities (Fig. 45). The egg is also symbolic of life and is connected with femininity – the destruction of the egg poses a threat to the feminine.

⁶² Meryl Streep, Cast Commentary, *The Hours*, DVD Special Features.

⁶³ Daldry, Director's commentary, *The Hours*, DVD Special Features.



Figure 45. *The Hours*

The breaking of the eggs as Clarissa prepares the food for Richard's party pre-empted her breakdown. Clarissa explains that her mood is 'nothing...it's just the party,' trivialising and undermining her concerns in the same way Richard did earlier.

Clarissa eventually breaks down, apologising to Louis that she is in a 'strange sort of mood,' is 'a bad hostess' and that she seems 'to be unravelling.' As she has this breakdown (which is built up to by the progressive cracking and separation of the eggs), her eyes fill with tears, her voice heightens and breaks, and her physical expression of her inward pain and turmoil manifests itself through her backing into the corner of the room, as if the very walls are closing in on her. She holds onto the sideboard for support, then clutches her stomach as if experiencing physical waves of pain, and eventually cowers in the corner, placing a hand up to stop Louis from coming over to help (Figs. 46-49). She crumbles before our very eyes, her physical body portraying an inward collapse.

Figure 46. *The Hours*Figure 47. *The Hours*Figure 48. *The Hours*Figure 49. *The Hours*

We increasingly close in on Clarissa's face as she tries to articulate her inner turmoil to Louis, saying: 'I've been nursing Richard for years, and all this time, I've held myself together, no problem.' As she says this, she points to her stomach and sits upright, as if physically pulling herself together in the centre like seams of fabric. The abstract sensation of 'unravelling' is thus translated into the medium of the body, which Streep uses to externally communicate an interior experience. She holds her hand up to Louis to stop him coming closer, but it is in fact the unrelenting gaze of the camera she is holding at bay. During the entire scene with Louis, when Clarissa breaks down and then continues making the food, there is no music, creating an eerie stillness around her breakdown that allows her acting to dominate our response to her emotional state. It is at this point in the film that we become more aware that Clarissa is just as ill as Richard, though in a different way. Her

interaction with him has led to the sense of being ‘stuck’ that she articulates, not just ‘with the name’ of Mrs Dalloway, but with her role in Richard’s fantasy.

Richard, then, is portrayed as an author who uses the medium of writing to evaluate those in his life, and is often brutal in his assessment of their performances (killing his mother in the book and not acknowledging his sibling or ex-lover Louis at all). Louis comments that he ‘thought you were meant to do more than just change people’s names.’ Clarissa replies that ‘you know how Richard is, it’s a fantasy,’ and this captures Clarissa’s sense of her fixed role in his eyes.

After this scene, we cut back to Laura, and see her surveying her domestic space for what she believes will be the final time. The shot is perfectly composed and the house is immaculate, setting a flawless stage for the performance of a role Laura is no longer able to act (Fig. 50).



Figure 50. *The Hours*

She then takes Richie to a babysitter despite his pleas that he does not want to go and his screaming at her as she drives away. She tells him that ‘I have to do something’ and it is as if her child recognises what is at stake if he abandons his role as her carer,

saying ‘Mommy I don’t wanna go.’ As they leave the house, a family are shown moving in on the street, entering into a life that Laura is afraid she will never escape.

Richie tells Laura, ‘Mommy, I don’t wanna do this,’ and she tells him he has ‘to be brave now,’ tears streaming down her face as she walks away. It is clear that he has a keen sense of his mother’s internal angst and is aware of the threat she poses to herself, as the camera slowly zooms in on the sharp blue eyes that gaze questioningly down the road. He is very much in the role of Leonard in this vignette, and yet is utterly powerless to help his mother or prevent her from harming herself. Intensifying music, with heavy piano chords and swelling string instrumentation, plays as she drives to the hotel after leaving Richie. This is intercut with scenes of Richie building a house out of toy bricks and then smashing it, demonstrating his keen sense that something could be destroyed while his mother is away and that his suburban home and family unit is in fact an incredibly fragile construction. Laura goes to a hotel room with a plan to kill herself and falls asleep reading *Mrs Dalloway* and the lines ‘did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely? All this must go on without her. Did she resent it, or did it console her to know that ended absolutely? It is possible to die. It is possible to die.’⁶⁴

What adds nuance to this contemplation of death is the way in which the scene is intercut with a parallel scene in which Virginia sits with her sister and her sister’s children. Virginia stares vacantly and as Nessa asks her what she is thinking about, we cut to a shot of the pages Laura is reading. We then cut back to Nessa asking ‘Are you still with us?’ and see Angelica, Nessa’s little girl, offer her a

⁶⁴ Cunningham describes this moment as follows: ‘It is possible to die. Laura thinks, suddenly, of how she – how anyone – can make a choice like that. It is a reckless, vertiginous thought, slightly disembodied – it announces itself inside her head, faintly but distinctly, like a voice crackling from a distant radio station.’ *The Hours*, p. 151. Her abstract subjective thought process is understood through a simile involving a channel of communication that is external.

biscuit, which Virginia places down (again, there is no attempt like that we observe in *A Single Man* to seek connection to life via the material). Isolation is also a crucial element of the film's communication of depression. Vanessa explains to her daughter that Virginia 'has the life she's leading, and also the book she's writing. This makes her very fortunate indeed.' Virginia's mental focus is communicated as being incredibly divided. Angelica asks her 'What were you thinking about?' and we cut back to Laura's hotel room, connecting the two women and their mental situation visually as they coexist in each other's minds, creating an impossible refraction of interiority that streams from mind to page to mind to page.

The camera is positioned above Laura's bed as she sleeps, and suddenly water surges from beneath the bed and rushes over her (Fig. 51), accompanied by increasingly high pitched string music. The water is full of pond weed, visually tying Laura to Virginia via Virginia's vivid suicide at the film's beginning.



Figure 51. *The Hours*

The fact that the water has entered the safe space of the hotel room makes it all the more terrifying, and the way in which it comes from beneath the bed makes it appear like a monster that has consumed her. Her pregnant stomach is clearly on show,

highlighting her vulnerability. We cut to Virginia confiding in Angelica that she was ‘going to kill [her] heroine, but [she has] changed her mind,’ and then see Laura wake up from this imagining with a gasp and the realisation that she cannot kill herself. It is the gasp of air that fills her lungs that is seen to renew and bring life – submersion is death, and she must come to the surface to survive (just as George emerges from the water at the end of *A Single Man*).

Sitting on the hotel bed after deciding not to end her life, Laura’s complete despair is communicated by her hugging her pregnant stomach and rocking back and forth, whilst crying ‘I can’t’ (Fig. 52). She is shown to be completely alone, and the physical gesture of hugging her stomach is an attempt to reach out for help not only from within herself but also from her unborn child. Laura’s maternal body is centred in the frame, and her emotional collapse illustrates her complete dismay at her simultaneous inability to stay in this role and her inability to escape from it. She feels utterly trapped. Indeed, her only escape, as we later discover, is really no escape at all, as she enters another kind of entrapment by being cast as a ‘monster’ in the eyes of society by abandoning her children.



Figure 52. *The Hours*

Virginia feels similarly trapped in her life in isolated Richmond. When her sister leaves, Virginia forcefully kisses her repeatedly, taking hold of her face in both hands as if to force some sort of physical (and thus mental) connection with her (Fig. 53). Virginia's sense of imprisonment is heightened by her asking Vanessa if she thinks 'one day [she] may escape.' This behaviour clearly scares and upsets Vanessa, who quickly retreats to the car and hugs her daughter protectively, telling her to 'stay close.' Tears fall down Virginia's face as they leave, demonstrating her acute emotional pain at the isolation she experiences after her attempt at connecting with Vanessa fails.



Figure 53. *The Hours*

In her heartbreaking conversation with Leonard at the railway station, Woolf describes how her life has been stolen from her. Leonard protests that it is not her voice speaking, and she screams at him 'It is my voice. It is mine. I'm dying in this town!' Even language has become a compromised channel for communication as she must convince those around her that her words belong to her and not to the voices that harass her. She stresses that 'I am attended by doctors, everywhere, attended by doctors who inform me of my own interests...they do not speak for my own interest.' Leonard asserts that the printing press was set up as 'a ready source of

absorption and a remedy,' to which she replies 'like needle work?' Leonard breaks down at this point, yelling that 'it was done for you! It was done out of love!' Here we see a breakdown of Leonard's calm and collected façade as he forgets his manners and shouts at Virginia in the station. This moment echoes Clarissa's breakdown in front of Louis, again playing on the dynamic between carer and cared for. Virginia expresses that she feels her 'life has been stolen from' her, and that 'even the lowliest patient should have a say in 'the matter of her own prescription...thereby she defines her humanity,' addressing again the issue of treatment and the boundaries of responsibility of those around her.

As they join the commuters, visually re-immersing themselves with society, Virginia concludes that 'You cannot find peace by avoiding life, Leonard.' The thesis about the nature of genius thus differs greatly from *A Beautiful Mind*, in which Nash combats the illness that takes over his life. Here, Woolf seeks to return to London even though Leonard reminds her that it was London that triggered her initial breakdown. There is a sense in which the characters succumb to the mental illness that seems innately linked with their genius or artistic sensibility, and indeed, this 'succumbing' is presented as the inevitable price they pay for their talents.

What follows is a navigation between Richard's flat, Virginia's study, and Laura Brown's home, all of which serve to play out the connection between the characters and encourage us to conclude that the deaths of Richard and Virginia were somehow inevitable and even logical consequences (or even, controversially, solutions) to their mental distress.

Richard's depression is perhaps most characterised by his physical isolation, as he is almost entirely housebound due to his illness (a more extreme alienation than Virginia's retreat to Richmond). He looks through the window of his apartment and

the world is separated by the sheet of glass, which reflects prison-like bars onto his image (Fig. 54). The division between him and the rest of the world is invisible but solid (it is perhaps significant that he commits suicide by jumping out of the window, as if the only way to propel himself into the world is to end his life). The shot of Richard gazing out of the window then cuts to himself as a child screaming and pounding against the glass as his mother, Laura, drives away (Fig. 55). The child Richard thus physically expresses the grief and pain that Richard now feels as an adult but keeps internalised, isolated and disconnected by his mental illness.



Figure 54. *The Hours*



Figure 55. *The Hours*

The theme of abandonment and alienation is thus brought to the fore, and his status as a visionary is intimately linked to his depression. After the shot of himself as a child, we then cut back to a close-up of Richard as tears fall from his eyes and work their way through the grooves in his face (Fig. 56). The music heightens and adds poignancy to this intense moment, serving also to tie the images together and make the sirens that echo from outside Richard's apartment all the more intrusive. In addition to creating aural disruption, the sirens serve to signal the urgent nature of Richard's mental disintegration, as he is also in need of immediate attention.



Figure 56. *The Hours*

Virginia's earlier statement that 'the visionary' must die encapsulates the theme behind the film's communication of depression, that mental distress is fuelled by attempts to hold on to impossibly idealised moments and inhabit roles that cause a disjunction between external ideals and the reality of internal experience. It is also clear that Richard's idea of himself as 'abandoned' is constructed via his 'fantasy' and the complete exclusion of his sibling from his narrative of loss. We know that Laura had another child, and yet Laura is the only person who mentions her. We also know that Richie would have been older when Laura actually left the family, so connecting the image of himself as a younger child to his experience of

abandonment further implies the extent to which he has constructed and manipulated the story in his mind.

Both films make a clear connection between the creative and poetic personalities of their protagonists and the experience of depression. Cunningham expresses the way in which Virginia thinks of it as it as a good day if she can write, and that such a day needs ‘to be treated carefully.’⁶⁵ Virginia describes the character of the poet as ‘someone who is, technically speaking, insane, because that person sees meaning everywhere, knows that trees are sentient beings and sparrows sing in Greek,’⁶⁶ a peculiarity she herself experienced.

The film links Virginia to Richard visually and with their dialogue. They are shot in similar ways in their homes, Virginia surrounded by her papers and pencils, Richard by his medication (Figs. 57 and 58), linking the act of writing to imagination and possible delusion.

⁶⁵ Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.



Figure 57. *The Hours*



Figure 58. *The Hours*

When asked by her husband Leonard why someone must die in her story, Virginia says that ‘Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more.’ She explains that this will be the poet, the ‘visionary.’ We then cut to a close-up of little Richie in bed, his life already mapped out by his tendency to view the world as Woolf does. Richard and Virginia both ultimately commit suicide, each saying to their partners that ‘I don’t think two people could have been happier than we’ve been’ (Richard quotes this line from Virginia Woolf’s suicide note to Leonard). The

film presents us with many different varieties of depression and explores the wider impact on those affected by it.

But Laura Brown, distinctly identified as experiencing depression, does not end her life, and it is via her character that we understand the centrality of idealisation and fantasy in the communication of Richard's, Clarissa's, and Virginia's depression. As we cut to Laura's sitting room, a stale beige picture of the 1950s family unit, we hear her husband Dan describe his dreamlike fantasy of marrying Laura and 'bringing her to a house, to a life, pretty much like this.' He says that he 'had an idea of our happiness,' and again the unattainable is used to describe a comparably sterile reality (from ours and Laura's perspective, emphasised by the sparse room, the fact that there are only three of them present, and the silence – the image is seemingly devoid of life). As Laura later speaks to her husband from the bathroom, her voice sounds normal, but we can see that she is in deep emotional distress as tears roll down her face and she struggles to speak and hide her grief from her husband. Commenting on this scene, Cunningham says that such an opposition is impossible to do with words. The element of performance and the system of meaning that surrounds that performance is a channel completely inaccessible to the written word, and the film utilises this channel to articulate a painful dissonance between the internal and external experience of the characters.

After scraping away the party food, Clarissa answers the door to an elderly woman and asserts 'You're Laura Brown' (her daughter, Julia (Claire Danes), takes note of the woman and comments 'So that's the monster'). Laura's arrival is presented like an opportunity to see the mysterious actor behind a great player in Richard's life, for all any of them know of her is through Richard's words. Laura says to Clarissa that:

He had me die in the novel. I know why he did that. I left both my children. I abandoned them. They say it's the worst thing a mother can do. There are times when you don't belong. And you think you're going to kill yourself. The plan was I would leave my family when my second child was born. And that's what I did. It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean ... what would it mean to regret when you have no choice. It's what you can bear. It was death. I chose life.

The apparent *lack* of choice and sense of entrapment are what seem to echo out from Laura's words, and this mirrors Clarissa's enslavement to Richard's ideal of who she once was to him when they were teenagers on that perfect summer's morning. In a way, both women have been unable to live up to Richard's fantasies of them (Laura doubly, being neither the instinctive mother nor the monster Richard has painted her to be). The inherent association of the medium of film with idealisation facilitates the presentation of this claustrophobic experience in *The Hours*, and allows for a nuanced interplay between the ideal experience and the reality in terms of relationships, selves, and the presentation of life in its entirety.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of *The Hours* is the way in which, in the framework of subjectivity and meaning it constructs, death is presented as a viable option to those dealing with mental distress. White comments that, by ending as the film began (with Virginia's death and her words of love to Leonard), '*The Hours* makes too much of suicide':

In the novel the meeting between Laura and Clarissa becomes a plaintive celebration. 'It is, in fact, a party after all. It is a party for the not-yet-dead; for the relatively undamaged; for those who for mysterious reasons have the fortune to be alive.' By signing off with suicide, *The Hours* settles for the certainty of death and bereavement not the more elaborate, poignant puzzle posed by the women who, in spite of everything, whatever the cost in abandonment, refuse to die.⁶⁷

In his evaluation, White fails to appreciate the extent to which *The Hours* operates as an ensemble piece. The devastating implications of suicide for those left behind is

⁶⁷ Rob White, 'The Hours,' *Sight & Sound*, XIII: 3, March 2003, p. 45.

explored by *The Hours* so that suicide is not valorised or presented as a ‘certain’ or obvious choice. The fact that we are not immersed in the subjectivity of the protagonist as we have been in the previous case studies also means that we are not a part of their experience to the same extent. Instead, we witness the effects of their choice and are left to reflect on the tragic consequences of their decision. Still, it is the case that where *A Single Man* finds a certain beauty and hope in the inability to capture completely life’s fleeting moments, *The Hours* offers the more sombre instruction ‘to look life in the face, always to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is. At last, to know it, to love it for what it is, and then, to put it away.’ There is a sense in which life is turned away from as opposed to embraced, making the presentation of depression and grief in *The Hours* very different to that we encounter in *A Single Man*.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to draw out the ways in which the subtleties of the experience of depression are communicated in *The Hours* and *A Single Man* in a way specific to the medium, and has drawn us back to the word/image debate I engaged with in my opening chapters. Both films engage with questions of ‘natural’ roles and the resulting dissonance or emotional distress from a failure to meet these expectations. They also address the issue of idealisation and reality, though *A Single Man* deals with this far more playfully and invites us to assess our evaluation of what is real and authentic. Though the images are superficial and constructed, we are simultaneously able to conceive of them as profound, overturning the framework that equates the superficial and heightened with the artificial and shallow.

In my analysis of *A Single Man*, I have demonstrated that the depersonalisation and disengagement symptomatic of depression is conveyed by the contrasting moments in which beauty or connection provides an escape from the dulling anaesthetic of depression's grip. The experience of depression is characterised as isolating and lonely, and the longing for connection with others prevalent in both films highlights this aspect of the illness. In *The Hours*, however, we are presented with the idea that life is less than its idealisation, and that ideal moments are uncapturable and cannot be repeated (which is why Clarissa and Richard remain 'stuck' in a moment in the past). In contrast, *A Single Man* offers in the cinematic moments of richness and happiness that – paradoxically – are the height of both artifice and authenticity. *The Hours* references fine art and constantly refers to death as opposed to life, whereas *A Single Man* finds hope in the immortality of the medium of film. The stagnancy of the visually still (painting and writing) in *The Hours* can be juxtaposed with the visually alive and fluid form of cinema in *A Single Man*, which essentially mimics the movement of life and offers hope in the face of death.

The way in which sound operates in both of the films is to unnerve the viewer and add another form of consciousness to generate a distinctive conveyance of unsettled subjectivity (though this is truer of *The Hours*). The visual and aural capacities of the medium are thus absolutely pivotal to the communication of the mental states we encounter in *The Hours* and *A Single Man*, and demonstrate that the medium is capable of communicating depression in a way that is appropriate to its form. In both of the films, depression is presented as an awareness of performing the act of living as opposed to the experience of it, and of the disjunction between perfect moments and the seemingly muted and imperfect reality of everyday life. In

A Single Man, we are given moments when George is able to connect with those around him and the perfect cinematic image reflects an interior rush of joy. In *The Hours*, we are denied these moments, and are left with just the imperfect and incomplete hours in which the characters lived. Both films employ a very similar vocabulary to convey mental illness, but this vocabulary is then nuanced by the context and deployed in different ways to create specific constructions of subjectivity.

The Hours is very different to the films in which I have analysed the construction of the perspective of a single protagonist, as we do not experience the symptoms alongside the characters but rather are shown a shifting framework of emotional and relational dynamics between people experiencing varying degrees of mental suffering. Despite this shift in approach, the depiction of depression in *The Hours* still relies on the medium's ability to create a system of meaning regarding subjective experience. I will offer some final thoughts on this ability in the conclusion that follows.

Conclusion

This thesis began by examining the long standing assumption in medium specificity theory that film is less able to deal with interiority than the written word. I have robustly challenged this conceptualisation of the medium and offered an account of the form that highlights its ability to communicate complex interiorities that are compromised by mental health conditions. An analysis of the devices utilised by the form has entailed an exploration of the visual and aural vocabulary that can be found in a variety of media communicating disordered subjectivities. I have demonstrated the depth and range of this vocabulary and argued that, rather than being specific to the medium, the visual strategies utilised by my case studies are comparable with other media and draw on an ever evolving tradition of images, symbols, and metaphors regarding subjective emotions and mental experiences.

My case studies have been crucial to proving that the way in which these films operate, though appearing simple and ‘obvious,’ is actually incredibly complex. The speed with which we read certain mechanisms, symbols, and conventions within these films belies the density of their content. The majority of the films I have chosen to examine have been mainstream contemporary Hollywood films, and my analyses have revealed the intricacy of the framework they construct to communicate interior mental processes. *Secret Window*, for example, offers a standard ‘horror movie’ format adapted from a Steven King novel. It draws on traditional metaphors for inner turmoil (shattered glass, crashing waves, broken mirrors) and also uses flashback and voiceover to communicate mental processes. That these apparently ‘simple’ devices communicate interiority so effectively illustrates how densely packed with meaning they are, and this density demonstrates

the ‘hieroglyphic’ compression described by Warner. That we are instantly able to reconfigure the narrative of the film as soon as we view Mort’s flashback reveals an astounding ability to respond to the text as a constantly shifting framework of meaning. The multitrack nature of the medium generates multiple ways in which this framework can be manipulated, facilitating a sophisticated communication of an abstract experience that is complex despite its accessibility.

When reviewing my textual analyses, I was interested to discover whether there was a connection between specific filmic devices and the mental disorder they were being used to convey. I wanted to determine whether film makers appealed to different methods to communicate different abstract experiences, and whether it was possible to group specific devices with certain disorders. My research has revealed that, rather than there being an established link between the mental disorder and the devices used to convey it, similar techniques, devices, motifs and symbols are being drawn on to communicate a wide array of interiorities. The interesting discovery made by this project is the elucidation of the way in which these elements are given nuance by the framework within which they operate.

It is not, for example, the use of rotoscoping alone that communicates the disintegration of Arctor’s psyche in *A Scanner Darkly*. The subtleties of the animation are intertwined with other key elements of the film, such as the graphic novel stylistic devices, the complex star persona of Reeves, and the use of the aural channel to communicate ‘cross-chatter’ and mental disturbance. All of these components are dependent on one another to create a precise conveyance of Arctor’s subjectivity, and it is this interdependence that demonstrates the importance of the multiform character of film in its ability to convey interiority.

The context of the visual and aural symbolism we encounter in the films is essential to the nuanced construction of subjectivity, and the importance of this context is apparent when we appreciate the similarity of the vocabulary they each draw on. For example, imagery associated with the breaking down of boundaries can be found in both *Secret Window* and *The Hours*, even though they communicate very different mental experiences and are worlds apart tonally. This is because, although they each utilise broad symbols that could be applicable to a wide range of mental experiences, these symbols gain precision through the framework of meaning of which they form a part. In *Secret Window*, for instance, the glass half full of water positioned precariously on the side of the counter symbolises Mort's mental instability and functions as part of a shifting motif that occurs throughout the film regarding the shattering of glass and the threat of contents overflowing or spilling out, echoing Mort's battle to contain his alter identity. In *The Hours*, the cracking of the egg echoes this idea of a precarious boundary and overspill, but within this context it symbolises the fragile boundary between an exterior self presented to the world and an internal reality. The symbolism of the egg is also nuanced by the associations with femininity and the threat to the figure of woman, who in this case is bound by the constraints of a role society has forced upon her.

In addition to demonstrating the range and subtlety of the symbolism drawn upon to communicate subjectivity, I have also examined the way in which filmmakers utilise the technical properties of the medium to communicate specific mental processes. Out of all of the films I have analysed, I encountered the most self-reflexive use of the medium in *Fight Club*. The film creates a system of meaning which pushes metaphors such as 'flashbacks' to the extreme by drawing our attention to the way in which mental processes are often understood *through* the

mechanisms of cinema. The film demonstrates that appealing to film metaphors is often the primary way in which we describe or conceptualise certain abstract interior experiences. By creating a layered framework of subjectivity via reference to digital, analogue, and film reel images, we are invited to reflect on the complexity of the associations we make with each of these forms, and are ultimately presented with an overarching metaphor of the mind as a film reel or digital file that can be tampered with, corrupted, and manipulated.

Throughout my analyses, I have redressed the gap in psychological readings of these films by interrogating the significance of performance as a key element in the framework we encounter. Rather than isolating the performance or the physicality of an actor by examining these aspects only within the given film text, I have demonstrated how we read certain actors in terms of other roles they have played and also in terms of their star personas. Again, contained within the image of an actor, which we respond to almost instantaneously, is an extremely complex set of associations. This thesis has unpacked the way in which we read an actor's image and performance and has shown that this element plays a crucial part in the communication of subjectivity.

My film readings have repeatedly demonstrated that the relationships between the multiple channels of the form and across the text can create complex and subtle conveyances of abstract experiences. Rather than identifying patterns between particular devices and the disorders/mental states they communicate, I have shown that these devices move fluidly across the films and it is the context and assemblage of these devices within the text as a whole that allow them to accrue meaning. Therefore, it can be concluded that although the films utilise similar techniques, they are employed to different ends, just as the films also deploy a

similar vocabulary that shifts and augments depending on its visual, aural, and verbal context.

With mental illness becoming an ever more pressing issue (the mental health charity Mind discusses the fact that ‘1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem in any given year’),¹ it is understandable that the majority of literature on these films thus far has been written by psychologists aiming to teach students or by sociologists aiming to explore the cultural impact of these films on public conceptions of mental illness. However, much insight can be gained from examining exactly *how* and *why* film as a medium can communicate interior mental states so effectively, and this area of research has been almost entirely neglected. By asking these questions, I have highlighted how distinctive the filmic form is in its ability to communicate otherwise inaccessible states, and have elucidated the particular way in which the medium utilises the relationship between the moving image and sound (incorporating the verbal) to create a representation of disordered interiority. My research has also proposed that the medium may be particularly suitable for communicating mental experiences because of the fact that those experiences themselves are often visual, verbal and audio in their nature. The way in which the visual and audio channels can constantly shift and augment meaning in relation to one another mimics the fluidity of mental experience and the blurred line between reality and delusion.

This thesis has made an original contribution to knowledge not only by challenging traditional notions about medium specificity and generating new film readings, but also by illuminating the capacity of film to communicate complex experiences that could otherwise be impenetrable. *Clean, Shaven*, for example, is

¹ This statistic is discussed at: http://www.mind.org.uk/help/research_and_policy/statistics_1_how_common_is_mental_distress >, accessed 15th November, 2012.

motivated by a desire to grant access to the disordered subjectivity of its protagonist and increase viewers' understanding of the experience of mental illness. The film attempts to explore the symptoms of schizophrenia very much from the perspective of the person experiencing them – not relying on external manifestations, but creating a whole world of meaning which can be interpreted by the viewer. This thesis has presented an account of how film has the capacity to construct this mental experience, and I hope that it will spark a more thorough exploration of this quality of film by film theorists.²

² With the Mental Health Foundation's upcoming festival in 2014 (entitled 'Anxiety 2014: Art and Mental Health Festival'), it is clear that those in the field of mental health are beginning to appreciate the value of artistic representations of mental illness. The festival will be running a film programme that aims to explore the issue of representations of anxiety, and the research within this project aims to be of value to those interested in this intersection between film and psychology.

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Video essay written and narrated by Michael Atkinson

A Beautiful Mind DVD (Dreamworks Home Entertainment, 2006), Special Features:
Feature commentary with screenwriter Akiva Goldsman, Feature commentary with
director Ron Howard

'The Weight of the Line: Animation Tales,' Special Features, *A Scanner Darkly*
DVD, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2006.

Commentary by Keanu Reeves, Writer/Director Richard Linklater, Producer Tommy
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Radio Programme:

'Munch and The Scream', Broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Thursday 18th March 2010.
Discussion between Melvyn Bragg and guests David Jackson, Dorothy Rowe and
Alastair Wright.

Interview

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Edward Scissorhands (dir. Tim Burton, prod. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1990)

Fight Club (dir. David Fincher, prod. Fox 2000 Pictures, 1999)

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