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IN SEARCH OF THE FEMALE GAZE

THE EVOLVING POSSIBILITIES OF POSTFEMINIST AESTHETICS
IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND LITERATURE



BY ALYCE CORBETT

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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INTRODUCTION



THE FEMALE GAZE

INTRODUCTION THE FEMALE GAZE

“And we have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze.
About the scorch of it, with the eyes staying in the head.”

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (2009)

Literary chameleon Maggie Nelson seems to say it best in her short novel *Bluets* (2009) when she depicts the female gaze in these incendiary and pressing terms. Here, she speaks to what I see as an unarguable truth: that the female gaze, and thus female perception, experience and creation, has remained an enigmatic and shadowy thing, a critically and commercially marginalised space. Nelson, on the other hand, in her evocative and aesthetically hybridized prose poetry collection gives significant consideration to the female gaze, to its nature, quality and aesthetic power. An unparalleled aesthete amongst contemporary authors, Nelson’s *Bluets*, searches the depths of her own sight and seems to arrive at a conception of the female gaze as a primordial force, a strong, sexual, contradictory, frank, hungry, emotional thing which “like(s) to look” (2009: 23) as much as men may.

Above all, Nelson’s writings establish the female gaze as an unflinchingly honest thing, which sees the world, the body, the inner self in its unvarnished and truest light, and moreover finds beauty and glory there. Using William Gass’ *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1975) as her counter emblem, she asserts that unlike the male gaze, which predicates itself on honesty but ultimately refuses to look “under” the metaphorical “skirt” (Gass 1991: 84 in Nelson 2009: 24), because it prefers what is “artificial” (Gass 1991: 85), the female gaze recognises the importance of seeing all, candidly and with clear eyes. Where Gass “counsels

his readers” (Nelson 2009: 24) to “give up the blue things of this world in favour of the words that say them” (Gass 1991: 89-90)—a line that seems to position our aesthetic and sensorial perception and our gaze as something intangible, and lesser—he therefore resigns himself to ordered language as a concrete and discrete source of meaning. However, words may both cloak and confine what can be sensed and embodied and seen, and Nelson impels her readers to do the opposite, suggesting that should you follow his words “you might as well be heating up the poker and readying your eyes for the altar” (2009: 24-25).¹ While the unique and specific features of Nelson’s gaze could be a subject of a much more extended discussion, what is so critical here, and of such interest to me as I begin my investigation, is how her work showcases the importance of the gaze itself, how integral it is to both our lived experiences and to the experiences that are then manifested in artistic works. Moreover, it attests to the deliberateness of the gazes which are constructed in texts, and the centrality of these gaze to the meaning and affect of these texts.

Through these symbolic “eyes staying in the head” (2009: 23), Nelson not only steps inside her own female gaze, but begins to build parameters for its scope of vision, its very way of seeing, and *Bluets* can perhaps be best distilled as an emotive enquiry into the interrelationship between the physical or tangible features of an aesthetic world and an alternate world of feeling and meaning. As she says so poetically elsewhere in the book:

When I talk about colour and hope, or colour and despair, I am not talking about the red of a stoplight, a periwinkle line on the white felt oval of a pregnancy test, or a black sail

¹ Gass’ book is a drifting and capacious philosophical exploration of the colour blue that considers its emotional and erotic potentiality, the depth of feeling it contains and the language we use to encase it. It is a poetic study that artfully captures the complexity of the aesthetic experience and our relationship to it. This, like Nelson’s response, establishes the interrelationship of our aesthetic, emotional, phenomenological and linguistic worlds, an intertwinement that will underscore my dissertation. However, as Nelson’s writings attest, it is an inquiry into colour that openly embodies a very male or masculine framework and way of seeing. Gass’ “wide blue eye”, and the way he uses it to consider the terms of “interior life”, is in fact rather narrow, because it is preoccupied with what is manly and, even more so, what is “macho” (1991: 90, 76, 50). His is a “blueness” that “penetrates” (84), a loaded word that signals much that has been established about the act of gazing and its relationship to gender.

strung from a ship's mast. I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me apart from meaning. (2009: 156)

Although her central tenet here is colour, specifically the colour blue—which is just one dimension of the aesthetically rich and varied world we occupy—the way that Nelson uses a distinct aesthetic feature to both organise and understand her own experiences and writing sends a powerful message. Lasky, who in the same paper commends Nelson for her use of colour as her primary vehicle of expression in *Bluets*, claims that “colour is a malleable thing”, which has “a kind of bi-directional meaning making” (2014: 359). That is, colour, as a distinct aesthetic device, has a way of shaping us, as much as we shape it, a reminder of the importance of aesthetics in not only informing our experience of our world but our renderings of it. Calling upon famed theorists and authors like Goethe and Merleau-Ponty to consider the relationship between words, phenomena and meaning, Nelson reflexively questions her blue gaze, what it means and what it tells. And thus, her entire work can stand as a testament to both the distinctive nature of Nelson's own personal and artistic sight and her quest to find the literary aesthetic or feature which can best render her way of seeing and experiencing the world, especially as a woman.

Therefore, I believe Nelson proves an artful dual frame as I begin to establish my purpose here, my line of inquiry. In this thesis, I endeavour to give greater critical space to the female gaze; to make, as Nelson would say, enough heard about it. More specifically, I seek to understand the nature and quality of these female ‘eyes’, and to consider in a contemporary epoch what it means to *see* as a female artist and what that sight looks like. A term which has garnered increasing, though still arguably insufficient, critical attention, ‘the female gaze’—which at its core represents an interest in the intersection between the creator of a text, the text's subject and its audience—speaks to the way in which females, in texts they author, can respond to the inherently objectifying gaze of men. However, in this thesis, I will seek to explore how the female gaze has developed in a postfeminist and, arguably, aesthetically

obsessed age (Postrel 2004). Whilst acknowledging its roots, which are clearly evident in many 21st century texts, I plan to move beyond strict ideas of hegemony and scopophilia to consider in a new light how female artists see their world, their sex and themselves, and how they represent that sight. That is, I want to understand how the female gaze in contemporary texts can be understood as an aesthetic vision, or a smorgasbord of diverse aesthetic visions, that offer new ways of seeing the female self, gender, society, and art itself. Whilst the terminology of the gaze and gazing has become dominant in discussion of cinema and visual mediums, I believe that it also works as a suitable catchall term, which similarly encompasses the sense of voice, and the imagery expressed in any written text; something Nelson's visually and sensorially vivid writings make testament to.

In this process of making enough heard about the female gaze, I plan to explore more fully, not only its artistic and textual possibilities, but the term and tenet itself. In doing so, I intend to explore a range of aesthetic modes, genres, and styles, utilising loose partnerships across the mediums of both film and cinema to further study how the possibilities of these modes are opened up in unique and shared ways by female artists. Thus, I endeavour for my work to move from Greta Gerwig's mumblecore and the millennial fiction of Sally Rooney, to the playful self-referentiality and quirk of Miranda July's cinema and the post-postmodern lyrical play of Ali Smith, to Sofia Coppola's dreamscape and Rachel Cusk's motionless novels of introspection, and beyond. By selecting female artists who, across a body of work, some smaller and others larger, have carved a strong and definable aesthetic of their own—but who have been mostly hitherto academically unexamined, or only studied in isolation—I hope to prove testament to their aesthetic pioneering. In extension, by embracing a broad scope of female artists and aesthetics I hope to innovatively illuminate the possibilities of female expression in a postfeminist epoch in such a way that moves beyond specific ideologies, feminist or otherwise, to affirm the potential and power of form and aesthetics themselves; to

uphold the notion of style *as* substance. Without losing sight of content, gender politics, nor the full aesthetic expanses of the oeuvres of my selected female writers and directors, I will work in search of a definition that captures the quality and characteristics of the contemporary female gaze, and the way this gaze is transmitted to contemporary audiences.

Therefore, in this thesis, I want to firstly understand the unique aesthetic qualities of landmark texts by female artists, and how these can further our understanding of the rich complexity of the female voice and gaze. Likewise, I want to uncover the unifying aesthetic qualities of landmark texts by female artists, and how these can further our understanding of the female voice and gaze, as possibly distinct from their male counterparts. Finally, I hope to evaluate the aesthetic parallels between contemporary literature and cinema, and how these parallels can further our understanding of the importance of aesthetics as a gendered tool of meaning making. As I begin this undertaking, I contend that female authors and auteurs have, in the last twenty-odd years, both reimagined existing styles and genres and pioneered new aesthetic forms in the mediums of cinema and the novel. Moreover, I propose, that in exploring the aesthetic quality of these recent landmark texts I can evaluate the nature of the female gaze in a predominantly postfeminist epoch, further determining the relationship between gender, aesthetics and meaning in contemporary society. In this way perhaps, I also seek to affirm the value of aesthetic formalism in a 21st century paradigm and more broadly, the value and substance of style, rejecting the gendered conception that often abounds about style and aesthetics as superficial frivolities. Attuning myself to, what Feat terms, the “politics of frivolity” and the corresponding critiques which have been “levelled at women writers” since the 17th century, I hope to follow the legacy of female artists and aesthetic pioneers who have both subverted and championed such labels, and as such, continue their work in “redefining the terms of aesthetic value” (2012: 218).

Before I begin this thesis in earnest then, it seems fitting to return briefly to *Bluets*—a work which truly redefines aesthetic value—and Nelson’s penultimate sentence, which reads “All right then, let me try to rephrase” (2009: 95). This word ‘rephrase’ strikes me particularly because—beyond this display of authorial self-awareness so characteristic to Nelson’s gaze, and which will be seen across many of the works of female composers selected here—it seems to speak to this process of rewriting or re-authoring that which has previously been written; the process from which the female gaze was in a sense born and can continue to be understood. Particularly for its distinctly aesthetic implication, the quest for a different stylistic encasing to reconvey what has previously been related, ‘rephrase’ gives me a way into understanding the evolution of the female gaze. It helps to establish its core progression from something reactionary to something entirely novel, as I will endeavour to chart in this introduction.

TRACKING THE CONCEPT: FROM GAZED UPON TO GAZERS

Significantly before ideas about the female gaze, before Nelson’s *Bluets* and feminist literary criticism and this very dissertation, was Jean Paul Sartre and his seminal text *Being and Nothingness* (1943), in which he officially conceived of ‘le regard’ or ‘the gaze’. One of the most important texts of Western existential philosophy, phenomenology and ontology, Sartre’s analysis introduces the concept of ‘the look’ primarily on transcendental or esoteric terms as a phenomenon simultaneously capable of a kind of affirmation or abnegation of the thetic conscious self. While this thesis is not designed to plunge the same metaphysical depths, Sartre’s initial explorations are still the most natural starting place for any critical discussion of the notion of the gaze. And though his musings are often existential, they still have clear concrete and socio-political applications, and establish a number of points of interest necessary

to developing a more specific framework of the female gaze as a literal, artistic and critical phenomenon; that which I seek to build in this introduction and beyond. Thus, although Sartre's work is a rich and complex object, for the purpose of this investigation, his conceptualisation of the gaze can and by necessity must be split into two key dimensions: the act of looking and the act of being looked at.

In the context of looking, Sartre foregrounds a number of fascinating ideas about its role in perception and construction, of both the self and broader realities. He exhibits an almost solipsistic tendency at the outset of his discussion of 'the look', emphasising that in seeing we make the world real. However, he also recognizes the subjective limits of our own gaze and acknowledges that the gaze of another will remain irreconcilably different and unknowable to us—something which he describes as a “disintegration” in our formation of our own universe (1993: 255). This idea is particularly valuable in a study of the evolution of critical theory pertaining to the gaze. Sartre's vivid and poetic description of the “deep, raw green” grass which the other man sees and which “exists” only for this man, because “this green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me” (255), and which therefore remains fundamentally inapprehensible to Sartre, reveals the tension between the centralising force of the gaze. It is the gaze that makes us subject and the Other object, but it is also the power of the existence and gaze of the Other which reminds us both of “a certain objective structure of the world” (260) and of the immutable fact that we can never see this world exactly how another does. Beyond this more ontological paradigm, the idea of Sartre and this anonymous Other gazing upon the same grass from their inescapably personal perspectives and seeing it in different ways—or the idea that ‘that grass’ cannot be ‘his grass’, despite being physically the same—provides a suggestion of how we may begin to imagine the wild differences that occur in sight when we, as fully personified and distinct figures, turn our gazes upon objects, ideas and phenomena much more complex than patches of lawn.

Likewise valuable, are Sartre's meditations on what it is to be looked at, or what it is to be a "being-as-object for the Other" (256). For Sartre, the act of being gazed upon is nothing short of transcendental, something which paradoxically represents both the "solidification and alienation of (ones) own possibilities" (263). It is something which irrevocably alters our relationship to ourselves, to others and to our world, and alters our way of seeing all of these things. As he summarises: "to apprehend myself as seen is, in fact, to apprehend myself as seen *in the world* and from the standpoint of the world" (263, original italics). The shift from being the one who gazes to the one who is gazed at is a kind of seismic thing, not only a "transformation" of the self but a "metamorphosis of the world" (269), one which forces the gazer to reevaluate their position, not as central to the universe, but only in relation to other objects. Sartre paints the picture of a world full of looking, and of looking being at the heart of knowing and feeling, and even more grandly, of 'being and nothingness', the central tenets of his entire examination. This is a captivating impression that ascribes immense power not only to the gaze itself, but to the gazes of others, a power that we will see later taken up—and in turn subverted—by feminist artists and theorists. It is interesting for example, that unlike Maggie Nelson's female eyes, which were characterised by their fixity "in the head" (2009: 23), or by their acutely self-reflexive and self-aware gaze, here Sartre subscribes more to a kind of negation of the self as gazer, where it is seemingly "impossible" for one to look upon one's self (1993: 263) until one is forced to confront the gaze of the Other: "the being *through whom*" one gains their "objectiveness" (270, original italics). This is a particularly illuminating idea, one which is arguably borne of Sartre's own maleness, and which suggests much about the connection between gender and looking.

In this vein, beyond his more theoretical discussions of looking as a function of self-awareness and beyond these more nebulous visions of the subject-object relationship, Sartre also makes explicit connections between gazing, sex and power, correlations which demand

mention here. As established, Sartre attaches huge significance to the act of looking and the way it structures our entire experiential universe. Thus, it is of key import that as he seeks to define himself he contends that “original presence can have meaning only as a being-looked-at or as a being-looking-at” (279-280); or in accordance as to whether you objectify the Other, or whether the Other objectifies you. For me, it is here, where he begins to discuss the notion of being-for-others—a phenomenon which the look makes indubitable—that his more existential ideas really begin to crystallise in the context of this discussion. In Sartrean terms there is intense danger and fear to be found in the gaze of the Other, it has the explosive ability to cause “the flight of the world away from (you) and the alienation of (your) being” (297). As such, much of his theory explores the limits of our control over another’s way of looking. However, Sartre also affirms the power of the look, which allows the Other to become a being one “possess(es)” (380). Consequently, it is the links he makes between the look and its stated potential for control and possession with sex that have become central to subsequent critical responses. Sartre’s ruminations on this connection between the look and desire—which are all inevitably written in highly gendered terms; with flourishes of “tumescence” (384) and “turgescence” (387) and “half exposed breast(s)” (385)—can perhaps be best summarised by his argument that our “attempt to get hold of the Other’s free subjectivity through his objectivity-for-me is *sexual desire*” (382, original italics). This is an almost violent image, predicated on the idea of the look as control, and, moreover, as domination. Much like the look functions existentially as an agent of phenomenological agency and control, the look as a gendered, sexual, desirous thing is built on intense relations of power and tension and is inextricably bound up in otherness.

THE GAZE BECOMES THE MALE GAZE: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE MASCULINE LOOK FROM SARTRE TO MULVEY

Sartre's conception of the look or the gaze, particularly these more frankly gendered notions, would go on to be challenged and redefined, in particular by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."² Most simply, I would assert that when Sartre moves from the theoretical plane to the literal, it is men who are looking, and thus by extension creating and shaping their conscious reality, and women who are being looked at. This is certainly what Mulvey implies. As she pronounces so adroitly, the woman is relegated to being only "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (1999: 834). Beyond her astute observations on this relationship between gender and looking, most useful here of course is the way in which Mulvey translates Sartre's very phenomenological and experiential conception of the gaze into its application in a textual sense. Chiefly she draws upon the psychoanalytical work of Freud, and his principles of scopophilia³ and voyeurism, in an attempt to unpack the basic pleasure of looking and the way this had become manifest in the cinema of Hollywood's golden era and beyond. Particularly, she suggests that film, perhaps inevitably, indulged in these qualities to such an extent that it reinforced the position of men as active lookers and of women as the passive, in many cases highly fetishized, Other.

Utilising the language of Sartre, Mulvey states that the social and cinematic equation has become "woman as image" and "man as bearer of the look", and therefore in response she modifies Sartre's neutral terminology, rebranding 'the gaze' as the "male gaze" (837). Within

² When we consider some of the less sterling moments of Sartre's analysis, like his postulation that should "any man consult his own experience" he would know how his "consciousness is clogged" by "sexual desire"—a sort of rehashing of the age old sentiment on the insidiousness of female sexuality, whereby males' desire for women pollutes or "compromises" them (388)—it seems unsurprising that his work would go on to draw feminist ire and commentary.

³ Freud uses the term scopophilia to describe the "pleasure of looking" in his frequently cited essays on sexuality (1981: 157). In the same essays, he describes "visual impressions" as "the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (156), making clear that the pleasure of scopophilia is a sexual one.

the world of film, she expresses that this male gaze “projects its fantasy” upon women, whose sole design and purpose within the cinematic diegesis is to exhibit “to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). Critically, she also articulates that the gaze of the film itself emulates or mirrors the gaze of the film’s male characters and in this way film—with its predication on “the so-called natural conditions of perception” (838)—reproduces and thus further naturalises the centrality of the male gaze within society, including to the extent that it eradicates the potential for the spectator, especially the female spectator, to freely construct or create their own gaze (844). This is an important assertion that reinforces the potency of the gaze, one which hearkens back to Lasky’s vision of the ‘bi-directional meaning making’ of aesthetic phenomenon like colour (2014). Mulvey likewise presents a vision of the gaze as something that we construct and shape, but which also constructs us.

Mulvey’s interest in screen aesthetics, or her translation of theory into cinematic practice is also important. She suggests, for instance, that the male gaze turns a woman’s body into a thing made “stylised and fragmented by close ups”, made one-dimensional through deliberate minimisation of screen depth, or made erotic through the employment of a “subjective camera” (1999: 841-842). As well as being important to the evolution of the gaze theory that I will touch upon here, this idea also gives testament to my own impression that aesthetic study is key to a more comprehensively understanding the nature and significance of the gaze and its affect as a textual tool. It is also worth noting here that the formal evaluation of cinematic language as gendered, and the standard visual reduction of a woman’s depth and inner life on screen—that phenomenon which Mulvey first reckoned with—continues to be used in the analysis of contemporary films. In particular, Menkes’ very recent docu-essay *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* (2022), reviews 175 distinct clips from the last 50 years of cinema to unpack the various tools that visually position women as subjects; that make them often appear quite literally flat, inert and out of space. Although Menkes’ desire to prove her

thesis, in my opinion, occasionally eclipses nuance, as Bradshaw articulates perfectly in his review, it forces us to reckon with “the duality of subject and object; male desirer (...) and the female desiree” (2022: online).⁴ As he describes, “this is the anode and cathode of the male gaze, the male gaze’s voltage and electromotive force”, but yet it still goes mostly unexamined (online). Though Menkes follows Mulvey’s work, it showcases her originary text’s enduring value and application. As Mulvey went on to say in her concluding notes, the look “defines cinema” (1999: 843), and her development of the concept of the male gaze represents the first major steppingstone towards the female gaze that will occupy the heart of this thesis.

It is, I would suggest, not a surprise that such a response was issued at this time. Within her paper Mulvey substantiates her ideas with examples from films which are ripe for analysis of the male gaze. Ergo, any of those featuring famed screen siren Marilyn Monroe and Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), a film based on the concept of voyeurism. But we need only turn to the cinematic landscape of the late 60s and early 70s to see the standard fare of the time. In drama, 1967 saw the critically maligned but highly bankable *Valley of the Dolls* directed by Mark Robson hit screens, giving us, what critic Roger Ebert—who would pen the satirical response *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970)—would call “a pantheon of fallen women” (1967, online), transforming Jaqueline Susann’s novel of the same title into something akin to soft porn. In science fiction, the now cult classic *Barbarella* (1968) directed by Roger Vadim, devoted 98 minutes of screen time to objectifying Jane Fonda as the sexy, shiny, predominately semi-naked, titillating, and titular humanoid. In horror, in the same year, Roman Polanski—

⁴ Menkes identifies female filmmakers that I have chosen to highlight in this thesis as exemplars of new female aesthetics—including Sofia Coppola, Kathryn Bigelow and Julia Ducournau—citing them as examples of women who uncritically adhere to and re-enact/re-create the male gaze in their films; and therefore fail to locate and render the inner life of their female characters. While she makes a valid case on her own terms for such an assertion, our divergent interpretations of the work of these female auteurs, emphasises that, the Kantian ‘supersensible’ aside, an assessment of a film’s visual grammar, and more experientially its style and gaze is a subjective and knotty subject matter. As it will become evident across the course of my research, this tension between what may be considered objective and what is undoubtedly subjective, certainly applies to an assessment of a novel’s visual grammar and aesthetics.

who has been perennially dogged by severe sexual abuse and assault scandals against women, including minors—directed *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Although admittedly a more artistically credible film, it still revolves around the physicality of the stunning Mia Farrow and presents an inherently male vision—in turns fearful and punitive—of female hysteria and later, motherhood.⁵

THE ORIGINS OF THE FEMALE GAZE: THE RATIONALE AND EARLY EVOLUTIONS OF A DEFIANTLY OTHER GAZE

In the wake of Mulvey's insights and with the immutable tides of cultural transformation, her definition of the male gaze was thus, in time, echoed in the proclamation of the female gaze. A term with less clearly defined origins, and which has received less concerted and cohesive critical attention since its inception, it could be argued that the female gaze at its simplest represents a desire to gaze back. Or, to put it bluntly, it represents women's desire to no longer gaze upon themselves incarnated as sexy but utterly flawed Hollywood housewives, or sexy intergalactic humanoids or distinctly un-sexy vehicles for the devil. Although her writings predate Mulvey's it would be impossible to discuss the female gaze further without first

⁵ Maybe, as with Mulvey, you could excuse me of cherry-picking examples here, and as with any critical analysis there is often a discernible bias to be found in text selection. Nevertheless, if I turn to, for instance, the 1974 Academy Awards—the year prior to the publication of Mulvey's essay—we unsurprisingly see five males nominated in the category of Best Director. Best Picture winner and American classic *The Sting* (1973), is easily categorised as a quintessential caper film, one which has little time for women aside from them being domestic or sexual objects; especially of the femme fatale variety. Fellow nominee *American Graffiti* (1973), is certainly more preoccupied with women, though its treatment of them can perhaps best be encapsulated by the characterisation of the mystery, never named 'The Blonde', who alternately may be a trophy wife, or a prostitute, but solely exists solely as a projection of protagonist Curt's late pubescent fantasies. Interesting here is also director George Lucas' choice of a nostalgic 62' aesthetic, a throwback to a time of even more profound gendered difference. One film nominated in the 46th Academy Awards, *The Exorcist* (1973), directed by William Friedkin, was certainly more focused upon the experiences of women. However, if this film—which at its most essential can be read as a recreation of the longstanding tradition of staged exorcisms showcasing the "mastery of the male exorcist" over the Devil and by extension over "women's bodies" (Marshall 2020: 72)—says anything about women, it depicts overwhelmingly a fear of female sexuality and maturation, or perhaps even worse, female ugliness.

returning to Simone de Beauvoir and arguably the most famed feminist text of the 20th century, *The Second Sex* (1949). Particularly enlightening here is her discussion of myth and narrative, and her assertion that the earliest monomyths of human existence worked to establish, what was not biological, but rather constructed, so that women “emerged as the inessential who never returned to the essential, as the absolute Other, without reciprocity” (2011: 358). As she attests, Eve, the ‘original woman’, was literally made from Adam’s flesh and then given to him by God. It is hard to think of a more apt symbol or image of women as the second sex.

As de Beauvoir points out, beyond these creation myths and earlier manifestations of gender, more contemporary literature worked similarly to reinforce the position of women as the Other and she explicitly considers the “stylised images” (361) which came to express gender, drawing specifically on the aesthetic devices utilised by male authors which made this othering inextricable from their texts. For instance, she examines famed modernist D. H. Lawrence’s literal and symbolic phallic preoccupation and his deprecating depictions of modern women who hold to their own consciousness as “celluloid and rubber creatures” (513). Likewise, she evaluates equally famed surrealist Breton’s poetic analogies, which represent women in alternately quotidian or mystifying and transcendental terms as the “equivocal objects loved by the surrealists” (541) and create women who, while occupying the ‘exalted’ position of being both beauty and poetry itself, remain ever one of these objects. In short, in Breton’s poetic world, a woman can never be “poetry for herself” (547). De Beauvoir’s analysis of these authors, among others, clearly reinforces the fact that, in her time at least, women had “not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects; they ha(d) neither religion nor poetry that belongs to them alone: they still dream(t) through men’s dreams” (361). That is, women had not yet developed the terms of their own gaze.

However, her analysis of these thematic and aesthetic features of myths and texts authored by men—when they coalesced with Mulvey’s own influential ideas—would come to

play a critical role in the burgeoning development of the female gaze as a social and artistic phenomenon. Equally key, were the collected writings of Tillie Olsen in *Silences* (1978) and her quest to reimagine the literary canon giving greater recognition to those voices—and gazes—which had been marginalised, particularly those of women. Her impassioned exploration of the “unnatural” silences that had diminished women’s creative work for centuries and her denouncement of the immense web of social, political, and familial circumstances that denied women time, agency and more critically the “totality of self” needed to construct their own artistic voice (2003: 6-16) stood as especially influential. Her arguments helped to contribute to the broader development of female voices, and gazes, and to the transformation of the structural forces necessary for critical recognition of this broadening. Mary Eagleton articulated it succinctly when she stated that at the heart of Olsen’s writings—as with those of her 1970s feminist contemporaries—was the “wish to manifest ‘what it is to be female’, to declare the experiences and perceptions that ha(d) been unheard” (2011:1). This idea of discovering and then artistically—and authentically—manifesting what it means to be female is perhaps the clearest underpinning of the female gaze which existed at the time of its inception.

Thus, even in its nascency, the female gaze could be seen as a rallying cry to redefine taste, and to affirm the value of what had previously been maligned as “too subjective, too raw, too emotional” (Battersby 1989: 103). That is, as too female. Perhaps, it also sought to avow what had previously been discredited on the grounds of it merely being, in some tangible or intangible way, female at all. In *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Christine Battersby underscores that an almost unbridgeable conflict was central to the manner in which the female gaze—as well as the critical discussions that surrounded it—developed. This conflict was that which exists between a female artist’s need to find her own creative instincts and aesthetics—those which can truly render her own experiences and perceptions—

and her crushingly counter need to “assess (rationally and consciously) the likely reaction to a *female* voice” (104, original italics). Battersby also touches upon something important in outlining the connection between the construct of genius ushered in during the Romantic age and maleness, tapping into the perception, which in many instances persists to this day, that “the genius was male—full of ‘virile’ energy” and that creativity was “male sexuality sublime” (3). This is a definition which excluded—and arguably continues to exclude—women’s creativity on, not only a biological, but a fundamental, near unopposable level and speaks to the intensely gendered nature of artistic construction and its critical appreciation and canonisation.

Therefore, in this centuries-long cemented culture, the female authors and filmmakers who followed Mulvey and Olsen *et al.*, often faced two antithetical ways of attempting to forge their own gaze and artistic space, either through attempting to primarily subscribe to, or even mimic male patterns of aesthetic creation or through an absolute polemic rejection and reversal of the male gaze.⁶ I would suggest that Battersby’s critique of the notion of male creative genius and the various male aesthetics that it has worked to idolize—these aesthetics which female creators and critics from the Romantic era till the late 20th century have had to adhere to, attempt to dismantle in subtle ways, or chose to more radically rally against—also speaks more

⁶ Film especially, at this introductory stage of my thesis, serves as a quick barometer to demonstrate how—even at this critical moment, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the female gaze was explicitly beginning to hold cinema’s “‘being-there-to-be-looked-at’ quality” to account (Gordon 1985: 189)—female directors alternately produced mainstream texts that tempered their female voice against male expectations, or, occupied a realm of radical and independent filmmaking in order to invert them. A representative example of the mainstream approach would be Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), which mostly plays to male teen comedy tropes and objectifies its ‘girl next door’ on demand, with only subtle traces of the feminine eye behind the camera; mostly to be located in a counter reading. And, a very openly divergent example would be Bette Gordon’s 1983 *Variety*, a controversial film which worked aesthetically like a neo-noir, *Taxi Driver* inversion and made a brazen attack upon the male driven voyeurism of cinema by making its protagonist Christine, “a viewer of men” who experiences pornography and her own sexuality “for herself” (Gordon 1985: 197).

broadly to the centrality of a gendered gaze to a work's meaning, intention, affect and style.⁷ At its core, this kind of critique also recognises that the gaze of a text is inextricable from its broader aesthetic and thus recognisable worth.

This sentiment is furthered by and neatly encapsulated in the opening words of John Berger's influential *Ways of Seeing* (1972), where he states that "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it speaks" (2008: 7). This is a kind of phenomenological argument, which validates the import of the gaze on the grounds of the Merleau-Ponty principle that "I do not think the world in the act of perception: it organizes itself in front of me" (1991: 51), that is, our experience begins primarily as a visual thing. This returns us neatly back to the commencement of this introduction and to Sartre's writings, which affirm sight as crucial to the self and experience. Tellingly, as with Sartre and most of the critics I have introduced here, Berger—as this advocate of the importance of seeing and gazing—also accedes that sociocultural forces dictate that "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (2008: 69). While much has changed since his words were published in 1972, the essential point remains true, that all works of art are constructed on the basis of looking and that the dominant gaze in art is still male.

⁷ I will not attempt to transcribe a history of every major literary and aesthetic movement here, but as will be expounded upon in this introduction and in my proceeding chapters this inquiry into female gazing and aesthetics is undoubtedly part of a broader and ongoing conversation about female/feminine and male/masculine form and language. As Kuhn summarises, the dominant or 'masculine' system of language "embodies a hierarchy of meanings and implies a subjection to, a completion and closure of, meaning" in the same way that "closure" has become a dominant principle of "textual organisation, such as that of 'classic' narratives" (1994: 16-17). For a more recent perspective (although it is film-centric) Bruzzi's *Men's Cinema - Masculinity and Mise en Scène in Hollywood* (2013)—and her central tenet that there is a masculine aesthetic that "is not limited by genre" (2013: 15)—forms an indispensable counterpoint for my development of the contours of female aesthetics in the 21st century. As Bruzzi articulates: the development of a masculine aesthetic goes beyond "the deployment of stylistic elements to express masculinity; it is a language, a set of underlying principles, a mode of communication and a series of signs, tropes and aesthetic features that collectively assists an understanding of 'masculinity' in cinema" (94), which can, for now, be distilled back to a way of seeing and a way of manifesting that sight.

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE GAZE THROUGH FORM: ESTABLISHING LOOKING AS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND AESTHETICALLY EVALUABLE PHENOMENON

I contend that this rendering of ‘looking’ is likewise apparent in image and word-based mediums because, as Merleau-Ponty hypothesises, sight is perception, but perception is also more than strictly sight. Looking is an act of immediacy indissolubly bound up in our broader sensory experiences. Much as Nelson sought to render the meaning of blue ‘apart from meaning’ (2009), as Merleau-Ponty proposes in his discussion of the synesthetic nature of perception, people “speak of hot, cold, shrill, or hard colours, of sounds that are clear, sharp, brilliant, rough, or mellow” because our perception is “not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens” but rather, that “we perceive in a total way” with our “whole being”, with all “senses at once” (1991: 50). Here, Merleau-Ponty touches on something Sartrean and something of the Berger school as well; and something which I wish to extrapolate further upon. Aside from Nelson’s stirring call to action in *Bluets*, the reader could be left wondering about the value of a gaze-based investigation; if it isn’t both too narrow and too vague, at once too specific and too diffuse. And it is, because ‘the gaze’ is and can be almost everything. Thus, here, I wish to synthesise Sartre, Berger and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological visions of the gaze and its centrality to perception—and to our objectification of the world beyond one’s own self—with the equal immediacy of art, which must inherently represent the perceptual reality of its composer, whether deliberately or innately, whether amplified or in some way denied. It is in this sense that I see the gaze as being fundamental to a text. That is, I see a text’s aesthetics as being its composer’s gaze manifest (or manifest gaze). Without, as I declared earlier, plunging too far into murky metaphysical depths, in this thesis I will be guided by a conception of the gaze as both the composer’s perceptual experience, which I see as being rendered through aesthetic devices and embedded into the very form of a text, as well as the aesthetic world which is in turn perceived by a text’s audience.

In this sense, this dissertation can be read as an inquiry into form. The importance of form has been well established, perhaps most acutely in the work of Marshall McLuhan. His seminal *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) became what Lapham called in his introduction to the MIT edition: the “foremost oracle of the age” (1994: ix). What most concerns me here of this wide-ranging text is his popular aphorism “the medium is the message” (1994: 7), a sentiment which ensured that the postmodern sphere became not only preoccupied with the content of texts, but the form which encased that content. His observations on the development of cinema are particularly useful here. As he states, “the movie, by sheer speeding up the mechanical, carried us from the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative” (12), that is to say, the cinematic structure itself carries a message, a message of equal import to its content, because the “‘content’ of any medium is always” and only ever “another medium” (8). And—along with other artistic movements, and broader social and technological transformations—the cinema, with its transformation “of lineal connections to configurations” (12), its construction of a formic gestalt, also heralded the undeniable awareness of this significance of form. As McLuhan contests, before the modern age:

The message, it seemed, was the ‘content’, as people used to ask what a painting was *about*. Yet they never thought to ask what a melody was about, nor what a house or a dress was about. In such matters, people retained some sense of the whole pattern, of form and function as a unity. But in the electric age this integral idea of structure and configuration has become so prevalent that educational theory has taken up the matter. (13, original italics)

As McLuhan proposes, I likewise plan to place the melody, the house, the dress, the cinematic structure; that is, the aesthetic form, at the centre of my analysis and to recognise that form is inseparable from what a text is ‘about’.

McLuhan’s meditations on the kind of ethereal “magic of the media” and their “subliminal charge” (20) are also significant to this dissertation, because it must be recognised that there is something intangible or indefinable about the interrelationship between the form

and aesthetics of texts, and the meanings they construct and disseminate. Particularly, given my gendered and gaze-centred line of inquiry, I am interested in the way in which form may, either inescapably and/or deliberately, become reflective of gendered perception and expression. And, consequentially, I am likewise interested in how a greater gendered affinity or affect may emerge amongst those who engage with texts which exhibit this gendered management or manipulation of form. Again, McLuhan offers a jumping off point in the concluding lines of his opening chapter with his suggestion that “our human senses, of which all media are extensions, are also fixed charges on our personal energies” and that both our senses and the media which manifest them “configure the awareness and experience of each one of us” (21).

Given that artists have arguably been manipulating and challenging form and medium since the dawn of art itself, and philosophers and academics have likewise analysed mediums of expression—and their significance to experience and the rendering of experience—since the dawn of intellectual thinking, McLuhan’s studies don’t necessarily represent a stridently new or unique way to analyse texts, and perhaps today they may even appear dated. However, I would conversely attest that his writings take on an increasing relevance here, in the 2020s, in a society which is typified by a more rampant proliferation of media forms, content and styles than ever. Thus, I will transpose McLuhan’s thoughts on the importance of the medium, or the mechanism by which artistic content is delivered—one which I would suggest is undeniable in contemporary society—to a consideration of two mediums that have been the mainstay of the modern age: novels and films. In this way, I hope to understand the continued evolution of the distinct aesthetic qualities of these mediums, especially as a function of the gendered gaze of the creators working in these mediums, and the role their different aesthetics play in meaning making.

As to the matter of medium selection, I have selected cinema and the novel not just for their prevalence but also for their comparability. There are many theorists who support the translatable qualities of films and novels in the modern age. Cohen for instance, posits that a kind of “mutation” has occurred between the two mediums and Bazin, in his formative essay *In Defence of Mixed Cinema* (1952), likewise testifies to “a certain aesthetic convergence” between these two forms (2005: 63). Historically speaking, it is also relevant to consider that contemporary cinema as we know it was principally born of the novel. As Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s highly influential study of montage theory suggested, the New American Cinema film form—the form which cannot be denied as being the most influential upon contemporary cinema regardless of genre, language or distribution model—developed as a direct manifestation of the Charles Dickens’ novel and perhaps most importantly, his “visual images”, which Eisenstein suggested prefigured that which is most central to cinematic expression: the montage (1977: 208-212). This is to say that, in essence, in its nascency mainstream cinema replicated the conventions of mainstream literature, and it is evident that the two mediums have remained intertwined.

Many theorists like Kellman also recognise that the process has reversed, and as film has grown in “aesthetic sophistication” it has influenced the cinematic novels of the present day (1987: 471), guiding the two modes even closer to synchronicity. However, while I reject the more simplistic antithetical binary of “word against image” (Cohen 1979: 3)—and in the case of this dissertation, the binary of ‘voice against gaze’—and believe, as Merleau-Ponty does, that fundamentally the director simply “handles cinematographic language as a man (sic) manipulates syntax” (1991: 55), I do not seek to deny that the mediums do still differ in nuanced ways. Therefore, I believe that a concomitant study of cinema and literature will actually allow me to better understand and distinguish the notions of voice and gaze as both linked and discrete phenomenon, and in doing so allow me to draw a wider scope of aesthetic

conventions. In essence, I hope that this dual comparison will provide more fertile ground for understanding both the unique and unifying features of the female gaze, and the aesthetic features which express it.

A RETURN TO AESTHETIC STUDY: DEFINING THE TERMS OF A 21ST CENTURY FORAY INTO FORMALISM

While the aesthetic field of study is certainly not a new or novel one and, in this sense, there are many precedents which more broadly study the relationship between form, aesthetic, meaning and affect, as Kivy attests in *Once Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (2011), literary aesthetics have become an academically “neglected subjected” (2011: 12). Although the term aesthetics, in the sense that we understand it today, was not coined till 1735 with the work of German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, the valuation of both the aesthetics of the real and of the artistically or textually imagined has been on our collective mind since Plato first suggested that beauty was not without measure or, depending on your translation, “never disproportionate” (Cornford 1997: 349). I adhere to Cornford here, although the sentiment is rather the same: that beauty has evaluable properties.

Thus, it would be foolhardy—as Kivy likewise recognises—to suggest that the appreciation of beauty and aesthetic qualities has been unilaterally abandoned in critical thought. Instead, when he asserts that the field has become neglected, he means that recent criticism has suffered from the conflation of ‘aesthetic’ with ‘artistic’, to the point where the two concepts have become “synonymous” (2011: 14). Thus, he posits a new framework for reasserting the aesthetic frame as an independent field of study, one which I intend to follow in this dissertation. Central to his vision is a reaffirmation of the distinction between form and content and of the uniqueness of the discipline of aesthetics. Kivy’s is an articulate definition which perceives speaking on aesthetic terms to:

refer to the sensuous, phenomenological, structural, and (perhaps) emotive properties of artworks, in contrast to their narrative and other content. It is an approximation, as I see it, of the old and, in my view, unjustifiably discredited distinction between form (aesthetic art-relevant properties) and content (non-aesthetic art-relevant ones). (14)

This separation of aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts or features will be crucial to my own discussion.

The distinction can be traced back to Frank Sibley's much-discussed 1959 essay *Aesthetic Concepts*. Sibley, to my mind, veers too far into subjective questions of taste and the aesthetic intelligence or sensitivity of the art critic in making his distinctions between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties, subjectivities which, as his contemporary Broiles averred, cross into a kind of quagmire of ethical intuitionism (1964: 219), one that I wish to mostly avoid here. Nevertheless, as Kivy also notes, those contemporary critics who uphold the aesthetic frame—such as myself—owe much to him, not the least for the way he so concisely establishes the value of an aesthetic study and the ineffable space in which tangible aesthetic features move into the realm of affect and feeling, where:

We also say that a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving; that a picture lacks balance, or has a certain serenity and repose, or that the grouping of figures sets up an exciting tension; that the characters in a novel never really come to life, or that a certain episode strikes a false note. (Sibley 2006: 1)

In this way, despite the more contestable aspects of his analysis, Sibley's corpus places aesthetics, perhaps instead of content, as the defining dimension of a text's "unity, completeness, complexity, intensity, and pleasure" (2006: 114). It is an idea that carries much weight here.

This is not to say, that I wish to denigrate the contributions or continued cultural and literary significance of feminist literary criticism. A work like this would not be possible without the key contributions of aforementioned writers like de Beauvoir, Battersby, Eagleton, Mulvey and Olsen. Moreover, the meteoric rise of feminist literary criticism that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century—and the abundance of politically and sociologically charged analysis of the works of key female authors and filmmakers it ushered in—undoubtedly

contributed to the significant rise in and proliferation of both novels and feature films authored by women. Such analyses not only paved the way for research like this but also redefined the parameters of taste in such a way that allowed the female gaze in art to flourish. As such, I intend to build a mixed analytical framework, seeking to synthesise the ideological thrust of feminist literary criticism with the structural focus of formalism, and likewise adapt and temper the aestheticism envisioned by contemporary critics like Harold Bloom with greater socio-political awareness. Perhaps then a close model for my work is Adorno's posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) which builds an incredibly nuanced picture of aesthetic study that constantly mediates these dialectics between form and content, and between artworks as complex internalised objects and sociohistorical products, advocating always against "rigid antithes(e)s" (2002: 356).

While aesthetic formalism has experienced a kind of critical banishment in recent years, my approach therefore seeks to rediscover the value in a critical approach which does not purely adulate content and social commentary. While many have, and can easily take aim at Bloom, frequently hailed "the most notorious literary critic in America" (Smith 2019: online), I cannot help but love his opening words in *The Western Canon* (1994):

'Aesthetic value' is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant's rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading. Things have however fallen apart, the centre has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called the 'learned world'. (1)

It is spectacularly dramatic, and while I plan on avoiding Bloom's "culture war" (1) against contemporary schools of literary theory and his dogged brand of polemics, it is hard to find a better recent champion of the aesthetic, when there is no shortage of those who argue for the opposite, and for strictly identity politics driven textual readings. In part, like Bloom, I want to reclaim 'aesthetic value', by taking a leaf out of the now outdated books of New Criticism. Although critics universally acclaim that New Criticism is dead, I think it still is of value to this dissertation. In fact, even those such critics such as Lentricchia, who confidently conclude

that “in an official sense” the movement is long dead and buried, still leave the door open a crack, stating that it’s “dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead” (1981: xiii). Jancovich picks up on this strand in a way that I think is worthy of mention here. Seeing New Criticism essentially as a shift in “the emphasis from historical scholarship and source hunting to a concentration upon the forms of language and style within the text” he articulates that, rather than deceased, New Criticism has become integrated into literary theory to the point of neutrality, where it is simply ‘criticism’, given that practices such as close reading have now become so closely ingrained in academic culture (1993: 138).

The voices of New Criticism past and present tend to be dominantly male—a phenomenon which could be the study of a very different dissertation—thus I owe a particular debt to Susan Sontag and her *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966), which brings an innately female perspective to the privileging of the aesthetic frame over a strictly theoretically laden literary analysis. Although her ‘today’, is now bygone, I believe her words and her intention endure:

What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today? For I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place? What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of *form* would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. (2013: 278-279, original italics)

Therefore, broadly, my purpose here in constructing a mixed formalist and feminist framework (or rather postfeminist, as I will elaborate upon shortly) harkens from John Crowe Ransom’s originary 1941 text, *The New Criticism* and his vision of a text or work of art as something which could be understood best by its unity, in which the semantic structure marries with the aesthetic structure. Ransom describes art as a “single event” that gains its meaning and affect through its wholeness, through its unifying of disparate ontological strands (330). “It is a case”,

he explains, “of bringing into experience both a denser and more contingent world, and commanding a discourse in more dimensions” (330).

Ransom, and his New Criticism contemporaries, were not just interested in understanding this wholeness of a text, but understanding its aesthetic beauty and the connection of its beauty to its “texture” and its completeness, both in terms of its standalone textual integrity, and as a work received and processed by an audience (55). In this way, I believe that my study of the gaze can be justified on these aesthetic grounds, as more broadly a continuation of studies in *beauty*: this space where form and content meet to produce affect. Thus, I also place my work in the legacy of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790), as well as in accord with more contemporary studies like Zangwill’s *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (2001) and Eco’s *On Beauty* (2004). Bloom, as above, mentioned Kant explicitly, and it would be impossible for any new aesthetic critic to neglect his influence on this sphere. While the purpose of this dissertation is not to chart the evolution of the study of beauty, as I believe beauty provides another helpful secondary frame to my analysis, I do want to briefly foreground his particularly influential understanding that beauty is not understood or felt based on “a cognitive judgement, and so (is) not logical, but is aesthetic—which means that it is one whose determining ground *cannot be other than subjective*” (2007: 35, original italics).

Although this initially appears contrary to critics already cited like Sibley, Kivy, and even Bloom himself, my study must inevitably delve into the subjective, and so I use Kant here, as a kind of armour to remind my readers of the dialectic of aesthetic judgement, and his theory that this subjectivity of taste, or of an individual’s felt response to beauty—or more specifically in my case, to the aesthetic features of a text—does not in fact preclude the existence of a “judgement of taste” which can claim “universal validity” (167). So I use beauty here, as both a conceptual frame to my study and as a precedent in art and literary criticism as a space in which the “unity of the supersensible” is made obvious (12), allowing me, at least

in part, to claim subjective descriptions of aesthetic forms in the name of a kind of universal communicability.

TOWARDS A FEMALE AESTHETIC AND A FEMALE UNDERSTANDING OF AESTHETIC: CHASING FELSKI'S CHIMERA AND CHARTING CRITICAL SHIFTS IN FEMINIST AND FEMALE AESTHETICS

This brings me more concretely to the feminist (or postfeminist), or rather for now, female part of my mixed analytical framework. To pull back slightly beyond my 21st century focus, it is worth sketching out the, at times contradictory, theoretical evolutions of feminism in the final third of the 20th century—more precisely, from the 1970s onward at the midpoint of second wave feminism—beyond those names which I have briefly touched upon. This period witnessed, both socially and critically speaking, definitions of feminism, gender and sexuality changing and opening up in an array of new ways.

As I observed earlier, of key interest in this dissertation is the way in which the female gaze finds its aesthetic encasing, including its expression through language, both visual and written. As such, in the context of this research, the gaze will be considered as something discrete, distinct and vital—as it deserves—but also an experiential phenomenon by which we can understand the development of a female literary and cinematic form and style. Therefore, the work of the veritable trinity of French feminism—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva—must be integrated here and is particularly necessary to the female understanding of female aesthetics that I seek to develop and discern. Although they are often set in a kind of opposition to the feminist writers that have hitherto been mentioned in brief in these introductory notes (and that will be mentioned subsequently), because they privilege the female body as the source of a kind of pure or natural femininity, I do not find that they do so in an axiomatic way that also negates the role of social construction of gender. Without seeking to reduce their vast oeuvres, these three influential women took up Lacan's ideas about

jouissance, and women's exclusion from the male Symbolic, to establish that the phenomenological experience of women, including their sensual and sexual experience, cannot be rendered through masculine forms of language and expression. In doing so, they established *écriture féminine*. As defined by Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), *écriture féminine* was to be the first "writing that inscribes femininity" (1976: 878). It was—or, rather, was to be—an overflowing, profuse and plural form of writing that exists in a "moving, open, transitional space" (893). For Cixous it would also be a radical, bodily, sexual and subversive endeavour. As she impels: "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse" (886).⁸

In *This Sex Which is Not One* (1979), when Irigaray writes about the necessity and possibilities of this female language or feminine discourse she also posits it as something which is at once deeply self-evident and yet to be fully manifested or realised. Despite the passage of time, this sort of wavering between what is concrete or actual and what is ventured and possible, will also be reflected in the female aesthetics I contemplate in this thesis. As Cixous concluded, "it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (1976: 883, original italics). Yet, despite their joint admission of *écriture féminine* as a textual and linguistic form in a process of constant becoming, they still touch upon singular stylistic elements that are illuminative here. Thus, amongst Irigaray's valuable and deliberately diffuse thoughts—diffuseness, in her conception, being a key aspect of a feminine discourse—I want to highlight the following passage:

Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. (...)

⁸ This notion of writing through the body (although it predates her writing) certainly coheres with the images I drew upon from Nelson's *Bluets*, and the sense of a female gaze she evoked, where female eyes were very much attached to their bodily realities.

She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an “*other meaning*” always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become congealed in them. (1985: 29, original second elision and italics)

I choose this passage in particular, not just for its characteristic metaphorical beauty, and for how it advances Cixous’ ideas about plurality and rich personal subjectivity, but for the image of stepping aside, which, like Nelson’s ‘rephrasing’, is a way to understanding the genres and forms I have selected here and how they may be considered as divergent from what both preceding and coeval male creators are crating. Whilst mine is not a poststructuralist or linguistic inquiry in Cixous’ and Irigaray’s vein, these conceptions of *écriture féminine* set the scene for my own contemporary analysis of the connection between form and gender.

Before moving on, I would be remiss to overlook their contemporary, Kristeva, whose form of psychoanalytical linguistics and semanalysis allowed her to consider how the feminine pre-Symbolic and the feminine material body—in particular, the maternal body—may be interpolated into (and also, considering texts as heteroglossia/polylogue, already located within) a masculine system of meaning.⁹ While her work tends towards the inscrutable, much more so than this dissertation will, her inquiry into the divide between the poetic (feminine) and rational (masculine) in language and her sense that the feminine is located at the point of language’s unrepresentable materiality have shaped both feminist thought, discourse and art in a way that continues to resonate. Moreover, in the context of this thesis it is worth observing

⁹ Kristeva’s vision of semanalysis is picked up on most successfully in Becker-Leckrone’s *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory* (2005), a superdisciplinary study which uses Kristeva’s theories, in particular about subjectivity, signification and *signifiance*, as a way to experience both distinct works of literature and Kristeva’s own writings. To, as Becker-Leckrone effectively summarises her own intention, “not just understand Kristeva’s work, but get it, feel it, understand how and why it unfolds so strangely only once you read it for yourself” (2005: xiii). Considered through a formal lens, Becker-Leckrone’s analytical approach and this specific sentiment further upholds the worth of a study which can be based upon both rigorous analysis and the less tangible but no less valuable realm of feeling, and, as such, it expresses something of which I hope to create here.

that, much more so than their male contemporaries, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva all express these philosophically and ideologically dense subjects in personal, confessional, poetic and intimate ways, synthesising the critical and lyrical form.¹⁰ Across the Atlantic, American poet and feminist critic Rachel Blau du Plessis picked up on the same structural threads as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva in a coeval period. She draws on similar notions to those which have begun to be curated here, when she proposes that women's writing does exist as a distinct form, and, when taken together, contains overarching similarities. Most notably for my discussion, the features she ascribes include: "inwardness, illumination in the here and now", "the foregrounding of material"—as in the material textures of being—as well as "muted, multiple or absent telos", "a fascination with process" and "a horizontal world" (1980: 151); aesthetic features which she, nor I, take as being enclosed or coded, but which will make themselves apparent across many of the modes and genres examined in the coming chapters.

As a school of feminism bound up in ideas about the maternal body and *jouissance*, the French school now appears to us as somewhat dated. Therefore, in my own research this sense of an embodied and bodily *écriture féminine* will be tempered with the ideas expounded in—what Leitch *et al.* term "the most influential theoretical text of the 1990s" (2001: 2485) and undoubtedly one of the most important works of contemporary feminist theory—Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler's preface is grounded in gaze theory, beginning with an exceptionally tidy discussion of the look, one which—as I have done—connects de Beauvoir's equation of femaleness with unknowability, and to Sartre's equation of desire with trouble. Likewise, Butler pithily articulates that for the masculine subject "the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the

¹⁰ As a kind of addendum to my previous footnote, this dissertation will not attempt the same spirited and graceful prose that Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva model. However, in the context of an aesthetics focused inquiry it is worth emphasising that all three critics, through their way of writing, sought to find a new aesthetic space—a feminine space—in the field of academic criticism, a fact that underscores the power of style, both in connection to and beyond content.

glance” or, “reverses” it can “contest the place and authority of the masculine position” (1999: xxvii-xxviii), in what appears to be an unarguable affirmation of the most salient, and sustained, function of the female gaze.

It is critical, however, that Butler immediately deconstructs the simplicity of such an inverse relationship and ontologically questions the binary of man versus woman that underpins such ideas about gaze theory. Thus, while the text exhibits an intense interest in ideas of cultural reproduction and the performance of gender—in reality and in textual terms—Butler’s fundamental idea is that, as Leitch *et al.* say most straightforwardly, “feminism has been hurt by its attempt to find an identity that would designate something common to everyone in the movement” (2001: 2487); likewise, her rejection of limiting definitions of gender and sexuality work to complicate the idea and existence of both a coherent male and female gaze. They also complicate the bodily and, to an extent, ‘essential’ vision of the female/feminine evoked by the French school. This is not a notion that I wish to deny, in fact it is central to my interpretation of the gaze, one which moves beyond a conception of the female gaze as a mere reply to the male gaze, or which posits it as existing in total opposition to its male counterpart. It is also key to a much more nuanced discussion of gender and its relationship to art and aesthetics beyond a position that reinforces “the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine” and therefore “forecloses” both the convergences between them and the subversive positions within them (Butler 1999: 84).

However, in broad strokes it appears that in this increasingly extensive, and especially increasingly diffuse, field of Butler-esque feminist study that specific analysis of the gaze has ultimately become both more open ended and attenuated. It is illuminating to observe for instance, that even in very recently authored texts, explicitly devoted to the subject, such as Alicia Malone’s, *The Female Gaze: Essential Movies Made by Women* (2018), she still addresses the female gaze as an entirely inchoate thing and concedes that it may, in fact, not

even exist.¹¹ This sentiment, this basic uncertainty, is further evidenced in the questions her brief introduction poses. These are interesting questions, similar in many ways to my own, but they attest even more acutely to the dearth of basic understanding about the phenomenon of the female gaze. Malone, for instance, asks:

What happens, for example, when we look at the world from a female point of view? How do women see themselves? How do women see other women? What makes a movie essentially feminine? What can audiences of any gender identification gain by looking at film through a female lens? (13)

Lamentably, while Malone has written one of a very few full-length analyses devoted to the concept, and has created a work which is, in its own rights an aesthetic creation, it must be relegated to the world of pop criticism. Although it presents an enjoyable kind of love song to women's cinema it fails to evolve into meaningful critical analysis of the aesthetics of the cinematic creations of female composers, or to answer in more certain terms the questions that she proposed at the outset.

Till now there still exists no one singular vision or definition of the female gaze in art, nor, I would argue—as Nelson would also—a sufficient body of research solely dedicated to understanding it. Perhaps this is simply because while the male gaze can be easily visualized as your standard issue Playboy magazine cover—or, as is more of the times, Playboy Instagram post—where the female gaze cannot be so neatly categorised as a kind of *Magic Mike* (2012) vision, despite male director Steven Soderbergh's best efforts. Or perhaps, it is because—especially in a postfeminist context—there simply is no unified female gaze. Aesthetic theoretical giant Rita Felski may agree with that sentiment. Her *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*

¹¹ Interestingly, Malone proposes this 'inchoateness' not because she deconstructs the concept of femaleness. Primarily, in fact, her discussion avoids complex questions of gender construction and proceeds without a definition of who is a woman, with no mention made of transgender women—although she does state that she does “not intend to imply a narrow view of gender or an ignorance of the structure of our world” (2018: 12). Rather, she questions whether an equivalent female gaze to the male gaze can still exist—even now in the 21st century—because society is simply “not set up that way” (12); that is, it is still too fundamentally imbalanced on the grounds of gender. It should be elaborated here that, hitherto, my analysis has (similarly to Malone's) implicitly adopted a cisgender definition of women, but the complexities of gender are concerns I do not wish to deny or ignore, as a subsequent section of this introduction will elucidate.

(1989) occupies a position decidedly beyond essentialist feminism, one which aligns in many senses with Butler's coeval text and seems to similarly precipitate and predict the postfeminist era. Yet although she concludes her work with the sentiment that a feminist aesthetic is a "chimera" (181)—an evocative analogy that appears to leave little room for cross-readings—her work is undoubtedly one of the greatest precedents for my own.

Felski considers a number of aesthetic features embodied in recent female-authored texts. Most notably, the features she distils include the utilisation of formally experimental and symbolic structures, privileging viewing pleasure over cognitive value, rejecting the quintessentially masculine 'goal-oriented' form of narrative, and dealing explicitly and often self-reflexively with the question of female identity (19-50). These qualities have provided an early shape to the modes and texts I have selected to be considered in this dissertation. I actually find that she opens up the question of gender and aesthetics rather than closing it through her conclusions—to use her work slightly to my own ends—by dismantling "the question of a feminist aesthetics, defined as a theory which would subordinate all aesthetic categories to the interests of feminist ideology" (181). For me, her work is situated at a turning point, one which augurs a freer time in which a feminist, or, as I will come to explain, a female or feminine aesthetic, need neither to redirect or dismantle a male and therefore popularly/critically dominant one. That is, a time in which aesthetic exploration may simply be feminist, female and/or feminine in and of itself.

As I will further expand upon in the following section of this introduction, this dissertation occupies a milieu in which any essential conceptions of femaleness and femininity are now considered to be, to some extent, spurious; including those espoused by the figures of the French poststructuralist feminist school like Cixous. I propose, however, that it does not necessarily follow that nothing female or feminine can be discerned from a text. Although now perhaps also a dated text, Ecker's collected work *Feminist Aesthetics* (1985) is particularly

valuable on these terms. As she proposes, when mediating essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives of gender and aesthetics, it is “necessary to bring out the full ambivalence of these questions rather than aim at a harmonising but obscuring solution” (1986: 16); which forms a neat precis of my intention here, to ponder rather than to rigidly propose or prescribe. As she evaluates, “the search for femininity” and the quest to define the indefinable difference of the “sensitivity at work in women’s art” remains valuable, because the “myth of gender-neutrality in art” is just that, a myth. One which makes what is male the default centre, and minimises female subjectivity (19-22).

In the same collection, Bovenschen asks the question Cixous *et al.* also asked—this question which is essential to this dissertation—of whether there is in fact a feminine aesthetic, and she broadly affirms that there is. As she proposes, the history of the marginalisation of women in art, and their exclusion from the myth of creative genius—which I have transcribed in brief terms earlier in this introduction—may go to show that “the masculine realm of artistic production, and often the artistic products themselves, are not only inaccessible to women, but are also fundamentally foreign to us” (1986: 27). In this light, she explains, if

women have different assumptions with regard to their sensory approach, their relationship to matter and material, their perception, their experience, their means of processing tactile, visual and acoustic stimuli, their spatial orientation and temporal rhythm—and all these things are what aesthetics meant at one time, according to its original definition as a theory of sensory perception—then one could logically expect to find these things expressed in special forms of mimetic transformation. (48)

In an evocative metaphor which gives great credence to what I attempt to produce here, Bovenschen also suggests that “women artists waft through history as mere shadows, separated from each other” (31), tapping into a similar sentiment to that which has underscored my desire to collate and connect the work of contemporary female film directors and authors in order to conceive of them in new and meaningful ways.¹²

¹² It should be noted that Bovenschen equally cautions against “over-extend(ing) the concept of aesthetics” and concludes that as to gain any meaningful understanding a feminist or feminine aesthetic,

This sense of unity, or the value of approaching the texts of women in collective ways, is also picked up on by Alison Butler in *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (2002), which—in addition to some valuable insights on the female gaze in relatively contemporary female authored cinema—suggests that the work of female creators is “unified in diversity” (110), because it is “always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions” (22), an observation equally extrapolatable to literature. Of course, this collating or gathering is not meant to deny the richly personal aesthetic style that course through each of the texts that I will discuss. In this way, I also take inspiration from the model Chiara Bottici provides in *A Feminist Mythology* (2021). Hers is both a far more elegiac and rhapsodic work of creative criticism than mine, but taking up de Beauvoir’s formative notions of myth and gender, she reveals—through her process of retelling male myths and making them female—that “the only way to be a woman is by telling stories about womanhood” (2021: 2), and thereby draws rich collective connections that affirm the inextricable ties between gender and creating and responding to texts. However, the way she does so is by “travel(ling)” within “plurality”, in a style that mediates and traverses “the hyper-cold to the hyper-hot” because “today’s women clearly cannot afford any single linear story” (2021: 2-4).

Speaking of plurality and ways of retelling male stories returns us briefly to Kristeva. As Becker-Leckrone’s work attests, there is a strong interrelationship between Kristeva’s writings and her mentor Barthes, as both prompt us to recognise that “asking how one speaks to literature means simultaneously asking how literature speaks to us” (Becker-Leckrone 2005: 10). This is a valuable dyad that underscores the rationale for Bottici’s incendiary text and that is also reflected in my intention to grapple with the concept female aesthetic through an openly

we would simply need to “take a look at what (women) are doing” (50). Whilst a more colloquial sentiment it does make for a pithy precis of my own investigation.

female lens. As Kristeva frames it, given that texts and language possess a “sentential, biological, corporeal, and trans-familial rhythm” they need a “reader who matches (their) rhythm” (1980: 207). Moreover, to telescope a complex issue, inherent to Kristeva’s fundamental conception of women’s writing, or what she calls the ‘poetic’, is that it disrupts the dominant/masculine process of signification and interpolates the reader-subject (1984); two valuable and integral aesthetic functions this thesis will explore in depth.

Thus, although Barthes and Kristeva overlap when it comes to a recognition of a text’s plurality and the value they both stress in readership to the process of writing—an undeniability in any aesthetic study—I must warn that Barthes’ *The Death of the Author* (1967), despite its far reaching influence, is somewhat problematic here. As Battersby most effectively counters, “for an author to die, he must first have lived” and, as she explains, the female author has not yet lived (1990: 146). At least up to the period of Battersby’s writing, the canonical valuation of male texts and the postmodern/poststructuralist uncoupling of text and author only further entrenched the critical disadvantages faced by female authors, and likewise female creators in all mediums. Despite my overall adherence to a ‘less feminist’ postfeminist frame, Battersby’s words strike me as being still abundantly true. As such, it will quickly become apparent to the reader that my textual analysis in this dissertation frequently asserts its relationship to its author. So too will my own presence as a female critic become apparent—if it isn’t already—a choice spurred on by Ecker’s words that we must “analyse *as women*, with our specific concerns and our skills” (1986: 22); something I feel we must do in a kind of harmony with the female creators whose texts we study if we are to fully feel, express and evaluate their construction, style and affect.

THE QUESTION OF THE FEMININE: SHIFTING FROM A FEMINIST INQUIRY TO A 21ST CENTURY INQUIRY INTO THE FEMININE

As a preface to the section of this introduction that is to follow, regarding my selection of a postfeminist framework, I seek to further clarify that which I have begun to allude to above, that the pursuit of a feminist aesthetic may limit a consideration of a female aesthetic, which may also be different to a feminine aesthetic. Kuhn defines the essence of this question best in the opening pages of *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982):

how might a 'feminine' text be defined, and if 'the feminine' can be considered a principle of textual organisation, an attribute of the text itself, what is the connection between such a principle and 'woman': what possible link can there be between an attribute which informs the structure and organisation of texts, and gender? Even to suggest the possibility of a relationship between feminine-as-text and 'woman' is to pose some kind of connection between 'woman' and representation which, at least initially, side-steps the whole issue of feminism. What is at stake here then is the possibility of a feminine text as opposed to a feminist one: that is, that representations might be considered as either 'feminine' or 'masculine'. (1994: 10-11)

Ecker and Bovenschen, among others, also grappled with the feminist/female/feminine triad. And although Ecker lands on the search for a feminist aesthetic as being the more tangible route, which now in a postfeminist epoch invariably feels slightly dated, Bovenschen alternately chooses to pursue a feminine aesthetic, or more precisely, multiple feminine aesthetics, in the context of feminine being a "criterion of substance" and "an ontological entity" (1986: 30).

Bottici, despite her interest in defining a 21st century feminist mythology, also separates the feminine when she evaluates her "untrappable, transindividual" conception of the self as "a performance of a lack in some moment, and the performance of an excessive plenitude in others" (2021: 11). Although, she chooses not to close the boundaries of either, rather summarising that:

Questions are not meant to be answered once for all, as there are no definitive answers, but states of bodies, housed in language. In other words, the reader will find here less scriptures, more *écriture*, obviously more feminist than Dante or Kafka and certainly very *feminine*. Can we see this as a strength, this suppleness, or at least a difference from the deadpan cogitations of the masculine trope. (12, original italics)

Her reference to Cixous is obvious, and she manifests much of what Cixous sensed about feminine writing. However, Bottici's intertwining of the two concepts leaves the feminine and the feminist as mutual corollaries of the other, which is not an unhelpful starting point for resolving, and, to an extent, dissolving the distinction. In Kuhn's own investigation, she begins to answer her thoughts vis-à-vis Irigaray's conception of the gendered nature of language, where masculine language operates on "linear and instrumental syntax" whereas feminine language, or a feminine relation to language, as a subversive discourse poses "plurality over unity, multitudes of meaning as against single, fixed meanings, diffuseness as against instrumentality" and "puts its reader-subjects into process" (1994: 11-12), a now relatively familiar notion. However, while she accepts these features as being ontologically feminine, her analysis ultimately relegates them as something which is bound up in a feminist text—and this is primarily what she explores, feminist films; in response to, what she calls, dominant cinema. What these changing border lines reveal is that the feminine may be all of these things, a discrete ontological phenomenon, a transindividual experience helped made expressible by feminism, and a kind of subsidiary facet of feminist thought and articulation.¹³

In my research then, it is a feminine more than a feminist aesthetic that I seek to uncover. As such, to hold with cinema for a moment, Bainbridge picks up on Kuhn's study but she decisively holds closer to an Irigarayan form of analysis in *A Feminine Cinematics* (2008), and her analysis of a suite of films made by women throughout the 1990s is driven by an acknowledgment of a "feminine subjectivity" beyond feminism, one which "finds new avenues

¹³ At the time of publication, Kuhn's inquiry into feminist aesthetics was likely the more fitting choice, and her writing is deeply incisive when it reflects on "the centrality of the look in the cinematic apparatus" and explores how dominant cinema is "distinguished by an address" that "advances masculine subjectivity", considering what this means for female spectators and feminist counter readings (1994: 62-3). However, despite the insightful quality of her analysis, her work seems to affirm to me that a search for the elusive 'feminine' over what may be feminist both requires and frees us to go beyond seeing a female aesthetic, gaze or text as something oppositional or ideologically grounded.

of expression and reception” through these films (2008: 2). Though a study only of film, and of works that are now relegated to the distance of the 20th rather than the 21st Century, Bainbridge extrapolates a selection of key dimensions that, to her, best summarise this contemporary feminine subjectivity in a suite of texts which are close cousins to those selected for this dissertation. Firstly, in an *écriture féminine* vein, she expresses that in a feminine text, “there is a play with film form and plot structure” that highlights “how traditional cinematic strategies of film language contain the feminine, or structure it only according to dominant ideological paradigms” (184). In this light, Bainbridge also makes a more distinct juxtaposition between the flatness of masculinist cinema and the “filmic depth and multi-layeredness” inherent to any feminine representation (195). Although she proposes that the construction of such feminine enunciative structures reveals “the cultural framework of the role of gender in the formation of subjectivity” and “open(s) up spaces for thinking through the implications of difference” (185), this is not their ideological purpose because these texts are feminine, not feminist first, a vital point of difference for my analysis.

Bainbridge’s analysis also moves us helpfully forward to my postfeminist context. Through this lens, Gill and Scharff’s *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011) evolves the notion of feminine beyond its distinction from feminism in a 21st century context although as a collected work it must be taken more tangentially. As they state in their introduction, the concept of new femininities “seeks to open up questions about the ways in which gender is lived, experienced and represented. For us, speaking of ‘femininities’ is a way of highlighting *the social production and construction of gender* and avoiding essentialism” (2011: 2, original italics). This is an interesting perspective given the more deeply biologically rooted origins of *écriture féminine*, and interestingly it also exists in a tension with—as they concur—femininity’s increasing figuration “as a bodily property” in

the postfeminist sensibility (4).¹⁴ What this work does best is that in plural times—while evoking unified textual features such as those that have now been foregrounded—it also takes femininity as a plural, as something both bodily yet not bodily, biological yet not biological, constructed yet not constructed, and as something which is both interconnected yet deeply individual.

What the reader may sense here, is that I have also yet to plunge into the female/feminine dyad, which is arguably much more difficult to parse, especially given my overall framework of the gaze, ergo, what is the female gaze, and how is it different from a feminine gaze, especially in a moment of new femininities. Although one can propose that female could refer to what is biological and feminine to what is constructed, as Gill and Scharff's collection reflects, that distinction negates how much the two are bound up with each other, and how, in the current cultural moment, neither is really enough to understand gender as a multifaceted and evolving thing. As such, I will use these terms, not interchangeably, but often in tandem in order to depict a nuanced and fluid space in which the two as separate and intertwined concepts may be a part of a text's fabric and may determine its gaze and stylistic features. In short, these distinctions cannot be fully resolved here, nor will they be resolved in the course of this dissertation, but an awareness of these subtle and changing visions of what may be feminist, female and feminine, will be explored in various ways through my postfeminist framework.

¹⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of my discussion here, interestingly, one reason they give for grounding identity and femininity in the body is because the individualisation of our epoch has consequently eroded traditional social structures, which were typically a source of a stable sense of self, an observation which also connects with the gender instability of the milieu, something I will explore in due course.

THE POSTFEMINIST FEMALE GAZE: BEYOND THE GAZED UPON/GAZER DYAD

To briefly re-tread some conceptual ground, as I have attested this is to be primarily an aesthetic, or formalist study, one which therefore may be, in part, at odds with the *raison d'être* of a study with a more singularly feminist framework. However, as I hope it has begun to become clear, a postfeminist—in counter to an ideologically driven feminist frame—invites a certain openness, both in terms of text selection and the analysis of those texts, one which I hope will allow for the study of the female gaze beyond the paradigm or preconceptions of more distinctly feminist literature. Although she ostensibly hated the word, to ‘re’-interpret Sontag’s writings, I believe that my quest here is akin to hers, to elevate the “sensory experience of the work of art” (2013: 296) by finding a balance between blindly ignoring the assimilation of “art into culture”—which is an unarguable reality established by years of interpretative art study—and alternately, blindly furthering the impenetrable hold of culture over art. In other words, to acknowledge the cultural omnipresence of feminism (and postfeminism) within and around the texts I have elected to study here, without losing the experience of “the luminousness of the thing in itself” (291).

Phoca and Wright postulate that postfeminism originated on International Women’s Day, 8 March 1968 when the *Po et Psych*¹⁵ marched through Paris branding placards reading ‘Down with Feminism’ (1999: 4), and that this moment represented a kind of seismic shift away from essentialist understandings of gender, gender difference and sexuality. Maybe this was indeed the spark. Certainly, postfeminism represents a shift away from the monomythic

¹⁵ The *Po et Psych* was formed in 1968 and was led principally by psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque. They were a part of the broader *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF). As Phoca and Wright explain, the *Po et Psych* was a movement with “two orientations, one towards *equality*, one towards *identity*” (1999: 6, original italics), that is the movement’s conception of womanhood championed uniqueness over sameness.

feminist figure and the male female binary, but here in the 2020s—another 20 years after Phoca and Wright—when the study of this field is still so nascent, postfeminism feels like something much more complex, rich and evolving than that. Particularly, as Genz and Brabon articulate in *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009), postfeminism is a movement of “interpretative potential and flexibility”, of “contradictory meanings and pluralistic outlook”, of “multiplicity” (1-2). A movement, not born of the death of feminism, nor a straightforward repudiation of it—because it is hard to argue that it is a definite epistemological or even contextual phenomenon. Rather, postfeminism emerges in the “intersections and hybridisation of mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism” (5) in a constantly mutable era. To try and put it into more heuristic terms, postfeminism is a predominately 21st century social, cultural, political, artistic and media movement that has, as McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009) best describes, taken elements of feminism into account.

Much as Gill and Scharff venture with their new *femininities*, Rivers plural labelling of postfeminism(s) in *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (2017), gives the movement a name which deliberately embraces heterogeneity. She affirms that postfeminism is a concept best understood, as Gill proposes in *Gender and the Media* (2007), as a ‘sensibility’ because “postfeminism as a sensibility is not fixed or reliant on a singular understanding of the term” (Rivers 2017: 16), and as such can welcome the “contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill 2007: 149). As Rivers thus does in her investigation of the relationship between postfeminism(s) and the even more nascent fourth wave feminism which she proposes, I will use this notion of postfeminism as a sensibility to guide my analysis, whereby this entanglement of conventionally feminist and anti-feminist dictates will quickly become apparent.

In short, though this list is not exhaustive, Gill indicates that to see postfeminism as a sensibility is to recognise that although it is not a static element, as a media and artistic phenomenon it does contain certain stable or recurrent paradigms, including:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sex difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (2007: 255)

As she further expanded upon in her work with Scharff, it is a heady combination that prompts an open frame of critical investigation. Although she predates here the phraseology of postfeminism, Butler yet again serves, succinctly capturing the value of a more plural framework:

The proliferation of gender style and identity, if that word still makes sense, implicitly contests the always already political binary distinction between genders that is often taken for granted. The loss of that reification of gender relations ought not to be lamented as the failure of a feminist political theory, but, rather, affirmed as the promise of the possibility of complex and generative subject-positions as well as coalitional strategies that neither presuppose nor fix their constitutive subjects in their place. (1990: 339)

Just as I have begun to establish, in navigating the distinctions between feminism, femaleness and femininity—and in coalescing and mediating essentialist or bodily visions of the female gendered experience with both culturally attuned and more non-binary and deconstructive ones—my analysis will embody a postfeminist framework in all of its complexities and paradoxes. In doing so, I hope that I will be able to see more clearly both the unifying and unique features of the texts at hand, and thereby to understand whether there is an inherent difference between the male and female gaze and the feminine aesthetics that construct it, even now, in a time that is moving beyond reified and traditional gender relations.

This serves to underscore that despite the commonalities that have begun to be documented in this introduction, there is not one set or finite prescriptive technique for feminine expression, just as there is no one way to be feminine, nor female. And yet, as Mulvey—who like Gill and Scharff has also moved towards the pluralised form of

‘feminisms’—states in the foreword of one of her more recent edited collections, feminisms can be “united” whilst working “in multiple and complex ways within modes of representation and expression” (Mulvey and Backman Rogers 2014: 11). In this united plurality, the postfeminist gaze—as a distinct phenomenon but also akin to postfeminism as a sensibility—can be understood as something which reflects the traces of its earlier predecessors, both those gazes of more acutely early feminist texts and of those female-authored texts that mediated the male gaze. I therefore propose that by seeing the female gaze on postfeminist terms, I can search more flexibly for a way of looking that eclipses the requirements of the diametrically opposed and empathically gendered gaze, such that has typically defined strictly feminist works. I can also search for texts that likewise eclipse the thematic content and aesthetic housing that typically corresponds to that gaze.¹⁶

Interestingly, Felski may also suggest that a postfeminist and less binary reframing of the gaze allows female writers and directors to move beyond the ‘anxiety of influence’, which Bloom suggests affects “every major aesthetic consciousness” (1997: 6), but which Felski herself states has arguably disproportionately affected female artists. As she explains, given the fact that “the ideal of an autonomous women’s language and aesthetic”—such as that posited by Cixous *et al.*, and that which I have also elevated here as I begin to define a more contemporary female/feminine approach to style—is presupposed to exist completely “outside existing literary and linguistic systems” (Felski 1989: 43) it forces female creators into radically oppositional or avant-garde positions. This may in fact stifle their natural or chosen form of expression. Alternately, the postfeminist gaze can occupy the past, present and future by assimilating a whole range of aesthetic and formal practices. It can also represent female/feminine positions through aesthetics that simultaneously recognise the legacy of

¹⁶ I deliberately use the word search here, not just to return us to the title of this dissertation, but because this is what I will endeavour to do across this thesis, seek to understand, rather than to rigidly prove.

feminine verse masculine artmaking while rejecting essentialist and binary gendered understandings of language or structural forms. That is, it can fuse the traditionally masculine and the traditionally feminine to arrive at an array of new aesthetics and ways of seeing that do not need to define themselves on the terms of disavowing what is masculine or dominant.

In the previous section of this introduction, I also introduced prior studies in beauty as another kind of tenet for this dissertation. Beauty, as a catchall for aesthetics, taste and artistic unity, is also an important dimension in this study because it is, and has been, the subject of a distinctly gendered discourse. It is likely self-evident to most readers that women are and have been the subject of beauty as a social, cultural and artistic phenomenon to an extent and in ways that men have not been. As such many writings on beauty are polemical, either employing an unapologetically male gaze, or as has become more common, a reactionary “feminist standpoint”, which Peg Zeglin Brand in *Beauty Unlimited* (2013) describes as an invocation of critics “experiences *as women* to assess female beauty within patriarchal cultural contexts that consistently devalue women (and women’s pleasure)” (6, original italics). Yet, she herself, in her collection aims to study beauty, aesthetics and femininity in a more balanced manner which adheres to a postfeminist perception of these concepts, not on moral terms, as something which is either good or bad for women, but instead as a tool to invoke “an invigorated dialectic of aesthetics and politics that does not become dominated by politics” (7), something I intend to replicate here in my own discussion.

Postfeminism, in this broad (and yet also unstable) rejection of essentialism, gender politics and singularity evidently takes much from its similarly prefixed postmodernism, and although it is not my intention to summarise in full either movement, it is a connection worthy of pulling apart here, at least summarily. As Nicholson establishes in *Feminism / Postmodernism* (1990) there has long been a significant overlap between feminism and postmodernism as ideologies. For instance, they both challenge the neutrality of the post-

Enlightenment academy and the ideals like objectivity and reason which underpin its purported universality, when they are—and have always been—male visions and values situated within a particular historical locus (5). As such, Rivers succinctly states that postfeminism then is, at least in part, a result of feminism “engaging with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism” (2017: 16). Yet, she also astutely recognises that to claim postfeminism as a purely academic by-product of feminism intersecting with postmodernism (or any of the other posts, for that matter) misses the critical fact that postfeminism, especially as a sensibility, exists primarily in media and popular culture; it is not a deeply deconstructive force or movement, at least not that would be understood on postmodern terms.

To pick up further on this thread, especially as it pertains to the postfeminist conversation, the old binary “between discussions taking place inside and outside academia is being steadily eroded” (Rivers 2017: 16)—in line with a broader postfeminist (and more generally epochal) shift towards verbose think pieces about the movement’s constantly shifting ground. Taking this into account, it is my hope throughout this study to balance the rich complexities of academic theory, which I have foregrounded throughout this introduction, with the conversations around and about these texts and artists that are happening in praxis because it seems that in the intense proliferation of digital communication they are, on occasion, the more robust.

What these reams of eliding and dividing discourse both also showcase and reflect is what can be problematized about postfeminism and, likewise, a postfeminist method of study. In the critical sphere, Tasker and Negra do it best in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007). In particular they abjure the emphatic individualism, consumerism and affluent elitism which they perceive as being at the heart of the sensibility. Rather than a cogent ideology or logical political structure they also articulate that postfeminism is, at its heart, an empty phenomenon. For Tasker and Negra, it is simply a

discursive system which is only the sum of “forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms” that gains strength “from a rhetorical field that produces buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic personal empowerment” (2-3).¹⁷ There is a thoughtful and indicting critique. One which I have no wish to deny. In fact, the instability of a postfeminist framework, given the movement’s own elisions and inconsistencies will become apparent at times across this thesis, despite my confidence that it still remains unarguably the best and most contextually relevant basis for this analysis.

NAVIGATING A POSTFEMINIST FRAMEWORK:

THE BOUNDARIES AND SCOPE OF MY RESEARCH

As I define and expand upon the concept of the female gaze here, it is necessary that—beyond this acutely contemporary timeframe—I bring further limitations and parameters to my field of research. Despite it being an incredibly worthy field of inquiry—and despite my fear that works such as mine may perpetuate the hegemonic position of the academically privileged, white, heterosexual cisgender female critic—I have elected to select the texts of this dissertation primarily on the basis of their perceived aesthetic worth to the aesthetic or stylistic categories and genres to which they belong. In doing this—rather than focusing purely on a text’s social or political merit, or deliberately curating my text selection to ensure a repertoire of intersectional voices—I accept that I can be critiqued for my disproportionate analysis of texts by women of white and various other types of privilege over definitively queer voices, post-colonial voices and the voices of women of colour. This, as I am all too deeply aware, mirrors the continued systemic disadvantage faced by marginalised and minority groups of women in all fields of the arts. Perhaps I also risk missing the diversity which has so

¹⁷ Aphoristic phrases like ‘girl power’ or the more millennial ‘GRL PWR’, ‘the future is female’, ‘girl boss’ and, the queer-adopted ‘yass queen’ are a good guide to what Tasker and Negra mean here.

underpinned the conception of femininity in contemporary praxis, falling trap to the same hypocrisies that postfeminism as a sensibility and movement arguably has, whereby its purported glow of empowerment and openness is undercut by its “stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability” (Gill 2007: 255).¹⁸

There are other significant caveats to the work I am doing here, which I want to foreground now, but which will be opened up throughout my research, and which I will return to and expand upon in my conclusion. Not explicitly labelled by Gill above, but also deeply relevant to any question of what is female or feminine in the 21st century is the consideration of transgender women (it feels right to include both biological men who have become women and biological women who have become men here) and non-binary, gender fluid and gender non-conforming (but biologically female born) individuals. Despite the fact that transgender and non-binary literature and artmaking as emerging modes offers exceptionally compelling thematic and aesthetic research possibilities, they too will not be the focus of my analysis.¹⁹ I

¹⁸ As a further addendum to this, I must also make space to refer briefly to the influential work of bell hooks, especially in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), and her conception of the oppositional gaze, which she describes as a force of resistance, a witnessing look and a “space of agency” for black people “wherein (they) can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what (they) see” (2014: 116). Lamentably, despite the potential the oppositional gaze offered for pleasure in the context of film and television, a place “where looking was also about contestation and confrontation” (117), as hooks explains, the gradual social and artistic shifts that in time grew to allow a black gaze to only replicate the gendered patterns of their epoch, representing “black women in their films as objects of male gaze” (118). Therefore, she reveals the struggle of Black women to speak back and look or see back, one that is still ongoing. It has no doubt become obvious from my writing that I have presupposed the postfeminist gaze to be something beyond an ‘oppositional’ framework—in the sense that it is not predicated on strictly dismantling the terms of the male gaze or the aesthetic forms that have been used to encase it. Although this is critical to the openness with which I seek to analyse the texts of this thesis, my sentiments here in no way serve to discredit the continued validity of an oppositional gaze and the difficulty with which Black women and women of colour (and women who live other intersectional realities) have, within still hegemonic literary and filmic systems, to create and release works that embody an oppositional gaze on sterling and defiant terms.

¹⁹ Any astute reader will understand that transgender and gender non-conforming identities by their very nature can be considered as a phenomenological complication of the very notion of a gendered gaze and aesthetic that I seek to understand here (of course, in very different and even conflicting ways), but this is not the reason for their relative exclusion. As identities still very much in a moment of social

recognise these very valuable gaps that will therefore inform any reading of my dissertation, as much as anything has been written, and that my work may now be a rather late entry into the world of *female* literary and filmic studies.

This brings me to the undeniable reality that attending to present day cinema and fiction can always be read as premature because in ten, twenty or more years from now, invariably several of the novels and films that may seem highly relevant today will have faded into obscurity, as, in this case, may have the principles of gender theory and gender studies as they currently stand. This is something that O’Gorman and Eaglestone also grapple with in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (2019). In this text, which in fact is a suitable companion to my own, they balance desire to map “a twenty-first century literary constellation”—especially in a contemporary epoch which defines itself on the terms of being *contemporary*, and in which artists themselves reflexively and aesthetically strive to “sketch out the contours of our time”—with the recognition that these, more than ever, are rapidly changing times and, as such, “the fictional trends identified in this volume will solidify as others erode, and critical directions and interests will shift” (2019: 1-5).

Nevertheless, in a not dissimilar way to O’Gorman and Eaglestone, who principally track the evolutions of the 21st century novel through the category of form—as I foregrounded briefly at the very beginning of this introduction—I will be using the lens of mode and genre as the

reckoning, they intersect with a level of politicisation and gender theory that is greater in scope than this dissertation can encompass. As will shortly become even clearer, they also expand beyond the genre-driven approach I will utilise to confine my research. However, I do not wish to minimise the value of the growing field of trans and non-binary art, nor dismiss it out of hand. Particularly, if the latest figures from Pew Research Center, one of the most renowned and expansive think tanks in America, in collaboration with Vice, are taken into account, 41% of Gen Z individuals studied said they identify as neutral on the spectrum of masculinity and femininity (2020: online). With these figures what they are there is no doubt that within ten years, and likely less, we will see an immense flourishing of non-binary literature and film driven by Gen Z authors and filmmakers that will undoubtedly lead to new gazes, new aesthetic forms, new genres and new spectator relationships. It is interesting but even further beyond my scope to consider how—when this generation enters maturity and a world that is still unarguably gendered and structured on gendered terms—this neutrality may hold, deepen further, or shift, and how this will also impact art and aesthetics.

primary stratifying feature of this thesis. Although, as established, her conception of the feminist aesthetic as a chimera feels like a point of renunciation, Felski suggests that if a satisfactory understanding of the feminist (or postfeminist, female or feminine) aesthetic is to be gleaned, then the question of genre and what such structures reveal about contemporary representations of women's experiences must be asked (1989: 49). In this way, my work also owes much to Altman and his overarching sense that "patterns of generic change—genre origins, genre redefinition and genre repurposing" exist in a constant dialectic with "generic stability and structure" (1999: 208). This is the root from which much of my analysis will grow, which will approach genre as a structuring principle but with a view to its paradoxically entrenched and ephemeral nature.

With this in mind, I turn to Bourdieu's theory of the artistic field, and the idea that innovation can only arise within a system or structure of already realised possibilities. As he explains in more detail:

Thus the heritage accumulated by collective work presents itself to each agent as a space of possibles, that is, as an ensemble of probable *constraints* which are the condition and the counterpart of a set of *possible uses*. Those who think in simple alternatives need to be reminded that in these matters absolute freedom, exalted by the defenders of creative spontaneity, belongs only to the naive and the ignorant. It is one and the same thing to enter into a field of cultural production, by settling an entrance fee which consists essentially of the acquisition of a *specific code* of conduct and expression, and to discover the finite universe of *freedom under constraints* and *objective potentialities* which it offers: problems to resolve, stylistic or thematic possibilities to exploit, contradictions to overcome, even revolutionary ruptures to effect. (1996: 235, original italics)

This is a well-known and influential passage. Guided by Bourdieu's understanding of the fields of cultural production, this thesis will thus explore both novel genres like millennial fiction, which have seen women dominantly at the artistic helm, as well as those genres which have been the mainstay of the world of film and literature such as horror, but which are, I suggest, being reimagined artistically by contemporary female authors and auteurs.²⁰ Bourdieu's work

²⁰ Again, it is a process of selection and omission, and there are many more genres, both novel and established, that could have been the subject of this dissertation, as I will continue to highlight.

on cultural fields, which both is and is not coterminous to genre, also prompts a consideration of mode, a deeply intertwined yet distinct phenomenon which will also frame my analysis. Generally accepted as a kind of narrative method which may move beyond the boundaries of genre, mode is also a suitable framework for the categories I develop in this dissertation.²¹ As Bruzzi proposed in her study of men's cinema and masculine aesthetics (2013), this maleness exist both within, beyond and across gender lines. Although an established distinction, the boundaries of genre and mode are also nebulous, especially as it pertains to newly formed and forming genres. However, again I hope that viewing these important concepts in less prescriptive terms will allow me to understand these new and reimagined aesthetics in more meaningful terms, finding both the overlaps and the nuances. Despite these caveats and these various intricacies, to—as Bloom (and Yeats) said—let my centre hold, I continue on with my at once specific and diffuse postfeminist cross formalist frame, and my narrowed aesthetically-driven morphological genre/mode choices.

As such, this dissertation will begin with new genres and aesthetic modes which have become characteristic of the 21st century. Specifically, in my first chapter I will commence with the realm of millennial-authored and occupied texts, a realm acutely of this contemporary moment, and I will undertake a close analysis of Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). My second chapter will include a study of works of metamodernism or post-postmodernism, that is, texts which capture a synthesis between modern and postmodern aesthetics, and between the surreal and the real, like Miranda July's *Kajillionaire* (2020) and Ali Smith's *How to be Both* (2014). My investigation will then move

²¹ Mode is also useful because it can both be approached as something which sits epistemologically above and below genre in the hierarchy of text's nature and construction. The former is what Todorov proposes, when he places modes in the category of "general poetics", which also includes register, style, form and manner (2014: 571). However, mode can also be affiliated with something more specific—as a mode of affect and a mood—that is not exclusive to a genre and can conceivably belong to several genres, but that is still dictated, to an extent, by genre.

to the field of anti-narrative that I am terming still life, to those works which privilege aesthetic and mood over plot, in the vein of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) and Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014). At this point, my line of research will shift and my fourth and fifth chapters will focus on reimagined longstanding genres, beginning with a study of the thriller genre in the style of Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). Finally, I will conclude this dissertation by attempting to unravel horror, a genre with problematically misogynistic and violent roots, with a study of Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (2018) and Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017). As I have foregrounded—and even welcomed to the heart of this investigation—aesthetics as a philosophy and as a textual phenomenon embodies complex dialectics, as does my chosen critical framework. Yet, as Adorno best synthesises, “as a protest against abstracting and classifying procedures, aesthetics all the same requires abstractions and indeed has as its object the classificatory genres” (2002: 358). In this way, I hope to marry both the conceptually abstract and subjective with the concrete through these genre and text choices.

Moreover, through the study of these diverse range of texts across this diverse range of modes, I hope to not only understand both the nature of the female gaze in the 21st century by examining unifying and unique aesthetic features of texts by contemporary female artists, but to—as I foregrounded in the very first part of this introduction—uphold the significance of aesthetics and style to our critical and emotional appreciation of texts. In an indisputably aesthetic world, I believe that aesthetics offer an increasingly rich way to understand ourselves, our subjectivities, our gazes and the artmaking which expresses these. For instance, as much as Tasker and Negra denounce the postfeminist theory that I am grounding my work in, they also recognise that as a movement, postfeminism is “highly compatible with the hyperaestheticization of everyday life” (2007: 7) that theorists such as Postrel sees as characteristic of early 21st century culture. Although Postrel's is a wider reaching sociological

investigation, she too considers the relationship between style and substance, or as she specifically labels it in one of her chapters, ‘surface and substance’ and decrees that surface, or aesthetics, can certainly “take on” the meaning of substance, but it also “has a value all its own” (2004: 92). So, I enter this discussion with a desire to discover this value ‘all its own’ of aesthetics in shaping the gendered dynamic of a text. Therefore, I also propose that the female gaze in a postfeminist epoch is an aesthetic gaze, a gaze which, if nothing else, may well be unified and produced by the shared understanding and appreciation of its composers that style *is* substance.

Before I move onto my first nascent genre, it should also be stated that my work, comes as a response of sorts to Genz and Brabon’s call to continue exploring the—as I have also termed it—*possibilities* of postfeminism. As they close their book, they explain that:

postfeminism is best understood as a site of interrogation (...) that provides an opportunity to practise conflict constructively and challenges us to broaden our interpretative frameworks and accommodate the complicated entanglements that characterise gender, culture, theory and politics in late modernity. We hope that this enquiry will lead others to cultivate the still relatively uncharted postfeminist terrain. (2009: 179)

In this work, I certainly take up their mantle and I also hope to speak back to, or, better, speak with Maggie Nelson, and answer her call to make enough said about the female gaze.

MILLENNIAL SPEAK



THE POSTFEMINIST PROJECT OF THE SELF

MILLENNIAL SPEAK THE POSTFEMINIST PROJECT OF THE SELF

“We’re all flawed, and we all make mistakes, and we all have weaknesses. And those are the kind of people I want to see onscreen, the ones that feel like real flesh-and-blood human beings and not the weird, whitewashed, Hollywood stand-ins for people with the rough edges sanded off. ”

Lynn Shelton in “A Conversation with Lynn Shelton” (2012)

I am beginning this dissertation in earnest with the world of millennial speak, a collocation I am utilising to unify a banner of modes and genres known loosely and in varying turns as millennial fiction, new adult fiction, the contemporary Bildungsroman, neo-neorealism, the Indie Rom-Com, post-mumblecore and Indiewood. These are disparate labels that have been used predominately in the realms of in-praxis online conversation and which are not innately gendered although several of these labels, including millennial fiction, are applied almost exclusively to texts by women. As this chapter will reveal, this is both a reflection of the way women’s works are often neglected from the canonical process of categorising genres and labelling aesthetics, and thus are pigeonholed into niche ones, but also a fitting reflection of the fact that these new, interconnected, hybridised yet alike forms of expression seem to lack a male-authored equivalent.

I have coined the term millennial speak to use as my framing phraseology for this chapter most simply because these texts may be characterised fundamentally as stories in which their characters talk a lot. This strikes me as particularly apt for a generation that is maligned for talking too much, for its vocal fry, its text idioms and even for saying “I feel like” too much (Worthen 2016: online), that is, for its propensity for hedging. This unification is not borne of

a desire to bulldoze nuance because I recognise, as Badley *et al.* do (2016), that while these sub-genres collectively reflect a governing contemporary female sensibility that is “a realistic, low-key aesthetic focused on characterisation and relationships” (431), the female artists working in this sphere of millennial speak still “transform and hybridise” these nascent modalities—and reappropriate the forms and features of existing and more established genres—to their own individual ends.

Given that I have just asserted that this dissertation will be structured on the premise of genre and mode it may seem incongruous to begin on this shifting and ill-defined ground here. Yet, although the works that will be discussed in this first chapter are new, I believe that the correlations and connections I am drawing between these loose collectives and ill-defined movements under the banner of millennial speak work to showcase the nature of the process of gentrification. As Altman proposes, “gentrification” is a “never-ceasing process” and therefore genre is not just a post facto label but part of what he sees as a constantly evolving “category-splitting/category-creating dialectic” (2000: 64-65). As such, although my chosen collocation is unlikely to become universal, even within the short timeframe in which this dissertation has been produced, what I have defined as millennial speak has flourished across mediums and its characteristics have become more clearly defined, particularly within the sphere of popular commentary. When I commenced this thesis in late 2020, I envisioned that a clearer and perhaps more singular theoretical vision of these interconnected modes would have become apparent and now here, at the start of 2023, just three years on, the millennial realm appears to have already reached an archetypal zenith of sorts.

UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIAL SPEAK: STARTING POINTS FOR THE MODE AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

I used a quote from the late Lynn Shelton—who passed away prematurely in 2020 at around the time in which this thesis was conceived—as an epigraph for this chapter because as one of the female directors who pioneered the first wave of cinematic mumblecore she helped to establish a women’s cinema of naturalism and authenticity in the 21st century, or as she lyrically described it, a “chamber piece, bare-bones, little microcosmic paradigm for film” (in Anderson 2012: online). Within a Shelton filmic microcosm one readily finds both the “distinctive mumblecore tendencies towards ‘in-between’ periods of down-time and lengthy, inchoate conversations”, as well as what Perkins identifies as a female hybridity that charges her works with “a blunt and funny perspective on female subjectivity, relationships, desires and ambitions” (2016: 3398-3408). This is particularly evident in films like *Your Sister’s Sister* (2011), a touching yet acutely funny film about the conversations that two young(ish) half-sisters who are in an oscillating romantic triangle with the same man have about it, more than about the triangle itself. *Your Sister’s Sister* was shot in one principal location and was both directed and written by Shelton; however, it makes significant use of improvised dialogue to balance its emotional directness with its deliberate incompleteness. This is another emblematic feature of the hybridity in a Shelton film: it embodies a blend of improvisation and scripting, and of tones, particularly comedy and drama. This means that structurally, her films have an understated and deliberately unformed focus on the minutiae of the oft mundane moments of life of complex and flawed people, typically women. In this way, the Shelton microcosm proves an excellent starting point for understanding the aesthetic that has come to define much of the millennial female artmaking sensibility of the 21st century.

I have also started with Shelton because of her affiliation with mumblecore, an independent filmmaking movement that began in the early to mid-2000s, characterised by

deliberately low-budget production values, a thematic preoccupation with young adulthood and its itinerant relationships, and by naturalistic and often improvised dialogue—the name mumblecore derives from these films’ way of speaking, which is so stylistically unformed and idiosyncratic that it is, by filmic standards, often unintelligible. Dennis Lin described for *The New York Times* in one of the first published pieces on mumblecore how these films understand “that the tentative drift of the in-between years masks quietly seismic shifts that are apparent only in hindsight” (2007: online); a key characteristic of mumblecore is its drifting and blurred focus on the here and now of the characters’ lives, even if that here and now feels unsubstantial or unimportant. These features will become obvious as antecedents for the aesthetic that defines millennial speak, but what makes mumblecore interesting here is that although it began and existed as a “loose” movement (Martin 2013: 20), which, from a gendered perspective, developed in a more or less coeval manner, it has still been popularly canonised in a way that cements the aesthetics of male auteurs like Andrew Bujalski, Mark and Jay Duplass, and Joe Swanberg at the exclusion of female practitioners like Shelton herself and So Yong Kim.²² Perkins attests that although women are a distinct and unique force within this overall canon, the work of female mumblecore filmmakers, given their inherent hybridisation, has broadly failed to be “readily absorbed into any pre-existing categories” (2016: 3363). Although the first early 2000s wave of mumblecore has already tapered away—as its leading school of filmmakers have diverged into new styles or become more mainstream filmmakers—I propose that the work of its female directors helped to crystallise the millennial sensibility I will explore

²² Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), a film about a group of young people in their twenties confronting and rejecting the responsibilities of adulthood, is generally accepted as the first mumblecore film of significance, with other notable works including Mark and Jay Duplass’s *The Puffy Chair* (2005) and Joe Swanberg’s *LOL* (2006), which stars the featured director of this chapter, Greta Gerwig. All of these films are comedy-dramas that, in various ways, centre around post-college individuals in a stage of protracted adolescence who are trapped in cycles of career, social and romantic failures, and they deserve their acclaim as some of the movement’s most significant entries. However, they tend to focus on male characters and perspectives, and create more deeply low-res aesthetics than their female contemporaries, distinctions I will continue to discuss in this chapter.

in this chapter and create the aesthetic conditions that the first famous millennial texts would be born from.

Perkins, in one of very few academic pieces on the movement, describes mumblecore on female terms, stating that women's mumblecore is a reframing of "the dominant tone and sensibility of mumblecore" (2016: 3372-3382). This reframing adapts the movement's "neorealist drive to capture life 'as it is'" and its focus on "'in-betweenness' and the 'tipping points' of interpersonal relationships", and removes them from the paradigm of white, cis-gender maleness, instead mediating them through a range of intersectional "racial, cultural and queer female subjectivities" (3372-3382). Capitalising on her line of inquiry, and given my plan to draw out the similarities across what I see as a fundamentally unified filmic and literary phenomenon, bigger than just 'women's mumblecore' (and also more recent), I want to expand on Perkins' definition here. Particularly salient to this burgeoning mode of—as I've termed it—millennial speak is, as Perkins cites, a neo-realist aesthetic, or a desire to broadly shed the artifice and cloyingly formulaic codes of the popularly dominant 'chick lit' and 'chick flick' modes, and replace it with a vision of female romance and interpersonal relationships, particularly within a coming-of-age or this 'in-between' framework, which embraces ephemerality, liminality, complexity and authenticity.²³

In a way that makes its connection with women's mumblecore clear, in millennial speak texts what shapes this in-between framework and drifting narrative form is typically the loquacious editorialising of its leading ladies. I began this chapter with mention of the fact that a central characteristic of this mode is its verbose nature; this comprises films and novels that are rich with dialogue that embodies the messiness, subtexts and discursiveness of real speech. To stay with film—although this fact highlights much broader social truths—in a cultural

²³ There is more complexity to this distinction between the world of 'chick' fiction and millennial fiction, and in fact more interconnectedness, which I will elaborate upon in a subsequent section.

landscape in which only just over 50% of some 8000 films examined under the now famous Bechdel Test can pass those most basic criteria of having at least two (named) women, who talk to each other about something besides a man (2021: online) it seems no small distinction that the women in these texts talk a lot. Talk as an artistic component also seems to speak to a fundamentally gendered dimension of the way in which texts are structured. Many millennial speak works, as it will become evident, can be considered almost as 21st century epistolary texts. They make use not of letters, but of emails, substantial text exchanges, voice notes, Twitter feeds, and numerous other digital communication channels; besides, they turn their narrative attention to the intricacies of these mediums, the tone, the phraseology, the punctuation, what is said and unsaid, the time taken between replies, and messages ‘seen’ or left ‘unseen’.

This proliferation of multi-platform talk, in addition to their fundamental oral verbosity places millennial speak texts in a much longer legacy than female mumblecore, and marks them as the inheritors of the traditions of female letter and diary writing. As Bovenschen, in her discussion of the feminine aesthetic stated, male writers and critics traditionally did not consider “conversation”, which was “another feminine domain in literature”, to be “aesthetic activity” (1986: 47). Yet this was a craft which women had honed and in which they proved—at least to each other—that it offered immense possibility for the construction of an authentic personal voice, rich in tone and character and buoyed by living, feeling, close descriptions.²⁴ This, as Kozloff explains in her rich and interesting study of film dialogue, likely derives from a long-standing cultural denigration of speech and conversation because “talkativeness has traditionally been allied with femininity, terse action with masculinity” (2000: 11). Moreover,

²⁴ Bovenschen’s commentary on the letters of German intellectual Caroline Schlegel—that they are “true masterpieces of mixed aesthetic form: wardrobe descriptions alternate with philosophical discourses, gossip with literary quotations, allusions and criticism” (1986: 47)—sound almost like they could be a review of a Sally Rooney novel.

as Kozloff expands, when speech is given social or public value it tends to become masculine, whereas the speech of women tends to be relegated to the status of inconsequential chatter. This gendered approach to speech, which has far more extensive roots than just Kozloff's study—and which has been interrogated by a number of feminist critics (Parker 1987, Meyer Spacks 2012)²⁵—has also created a culture where texts “that are ‘talky’ come with the connotations ‘trivial’ and ‘idle’ and, ultimately, ‘female’” (13), and where the time-honoured storytelling mantra of ‘showing rather than telling’ has advocated for minimal dialogue narratives as being of better and more ‘literary’ or ‘intellectual’ aesthetic taste.

Although the very nature of Kozloff's study suggests that dialogue is worth talking about, she still establishes a broad framework in order to understand the general purpose of film dialogue, which, in short, she describes as: “anchorage of the diegesis and characters, communication of narrative causality, enactment of narrative events, character revelation, adherence to the code of realism and control of viewer evaluation and emotions” (33). It is this part of her analysis which I want to focus on, firstly, because it is, generally, a very accurate assessment, and secondly, because it showcases that the terms of literary dialogue are very much the same as those of film dialogue (and the dialogue of other comparable creative mediums): dialogue is a tool to further plot, action and character development. While—as it will become clear—millennial speak texts are not aesthetically radical, and as such, they use dialogue in ways that fundamentally accord with these quasi-universal tenets, they also use it to break generally inherited rules—like “dialogue should be kept to a minimum”, “should be subtle”, “should never convey expositional information”, and “should never be repetitious”

²⁵ Meyer Spacks' definition of gossip—as a female aligned discursive and literary mode—characterised by its frivolity, idleness and “aesthetic of self-containment, concentration on surface, valorising of story” (2012: 40), and yet in possession of value and substance, was a particularly formative early resource in the formulation of this chapter and my focus not just on millennialism but millennial discourse.

(28)—by having their characters talk *a lot*, often (and very deliberately) about nothing, or alternately about exactly what the text’s action is already displaying.²⁶

ON BEING MILLENNIAL:

REIMAGINING REALISM IN A MILLENNIAL WORLD

I have yet to fully address the ‘millennial’ quotient of my millennial speak collocation, but it is the millennial experience of a post-millennium world that is intrinsic to the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations of these works, including their verbosity. Born, according to most standards, between 1981 and 1996, millennials are ascribed with many traits, especially depending upon who’s asking. Conventionally accepted however, at least according to Berger (2018), is that millennials embrace diversity, are socially engaged, are dreamers, wanderers and trailblazers, but equally are narcissistic and self-entitled, obsessed with status, afraid of emotional involvement and commitment (a key factor in the millennial breakdown of romantic relationships), and rather riddled with anxiety. If, as Worthen suggested (2016: online), millennials say they ‘feel like’ too much it is because they really do feel *a lot*, and they certainly feel the fundamental uncertainty of their time. These millennial #feels are central to not only the genre I propose here, but to the broader cultural legacy left upon art making by this generation.

Although these generational demarcations can be seen as arbitrary and may flatten a rather lengthy period of time, as the Pew Research Center—already cited as one of the USA’s most renowned and influential think tanks—states, generational labels provide a framework

²⁶ At this early stage of my dissertation, it is worth stating that the aesthetic preoccupation with talking of millennial speak texts also serves to underscore that the ineluctable association of films with the image and novels with the word minimises the role of the audience of both text types as listeners or overhearers of conversations. Although mine is not such a phenomenological inquiry, this does reflect the value of a more multi-sensory Merleau-Ponty-inspired conception of a text’s gaze and affect, as I proposed in my introduction.

for understanding “how different formative experiences (such as world events and technological, economic and social shifts) interact with the life-cycle and aging process to shape people’s views of the world” (Dimock 2019: online). While, as with many think pieces, Dimock’s writing for Pew is America-centric he touches upon some of these key political, social and technological shifts and arrives at two key components that can undoubtedly be seen as considerable influences to the aesthetics and thematic interests of millennial speak texts. Principally, millennials both came of age and entered the workforce en masse at the height of an economic recession, and as Dimock describes, this resulted in a systemic “slow start” for the generation (online), one reflected in millennials’ interest in interrogating the (often protracted) post-college phase of life in the texts they construct. They also came of age “during the internet explosion” (online), a factor that has shaped their relationships, ways of self-narrativizing and, as I will expand upon, their digitalised visual conceptions of intimacy and digitalised way of seeing and capturing the world.

Somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter although useful for contextualisation, Kimak and Nikiel (2017) write that the post-millennium world has become characterized by anxiety and that correspondingly filmmakers and novelists have exhibited a “proclivity to address in their works issues of oppression, trauma, sexual liminality, economic instability, surveillance and control, political repression and persecution” (7). They also suggest that in response to the repressive heaviness of the age, artists have pioneered “various novel modes of expression, both on the level of content and form” and particularly those which intersect text and image (7). Although the texts I will be discussing here tend to only plunder the political as it relates to the personal, the liminality and instability Kimak and Nikiel speak of will certainly be on show (as well as this interest in the overlaps between text and image). In fact, authors like Perkins (2016) and Alberti (2013) identify mumblecore and neo-neorealism—two of the key movements relevant to my discussion here—as artistic manifestations of a distinctly

modern crisis of masculinity and as expressions of masculine anxiety in the 21st century, particularly as it pertains to identity, romance, status and gender itself.²⁷

With this in mind, it is also interesting to consider the historical roots of this millennial brand of realism. John Dudley (2004) charts the development of the naturalist fiction novel in the United States from the 1890s onwards. In his understanding, naturalism was an anti-aesthetic sensibility that evolved in response to a feminisation and commercialisation of literature and the perceived frivolity of style ushered in by this feminisation (although this was probably, in fact, best encapsulated at that time by men like Oscar Wilde.) This school of naturalism, devoted to plainly capturing life in the moment, capturing spontaneity, men's impulsivity and a Darwinian sense of things, evident in the writings of authors like Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Jack London, was then an antithesis to the flowery sentimentality of women.²⁸ But it was an antithesis that, as Dudley notes, was always unstable, because its desire to actively engage in life over literature, carried "concomitant anxieties about the possibility of such involvement" (14), and perhaps because the whole thing wasn't as manly as they hoped. While the French had already set literary realism in motion by this point, Dudley evokes such a pithy picture of the originary naturalist movement as an anti-aesthetic movement borne of male anxiety and a repudiation of style over substance that it is hard to ignore here.

To carry this movement forward, although neorealism is typically a term used exclusively in consideration of cinema, the movement, which began in the 1930s—almost exclusively male-led—reflects that, aside from some more avant-garde modern and postmodern flourishes, realism was the defining aesthetic of the 20th century, and arguably

²⁷ I find this to be an interesting observation. As I will expand upon, anxiety is a defining feature of millennial speak texts, and this deep-seated cultural and personal anxiety seems to be felt with equal weight by both young men and women in the 21st century, though it finds different thematic outlets and aesthetic encasings.

²⁸ This is, as my introduction alluded to, a time-old critique that is levelled at women's writing, and one which will come to the fore in my fourth chapter on still life texts.

remains so for the 21st century. Bazin, who I cited in my introduction as a proponent of the converges between the film and novel form again serves here when he broadly attests that neorealism was the most significant development in sound cinema's history. He refers to Vittorio De Sica and his touchstone film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), but, for the sake of clarity, I will not delve too deeply here into the broader realism/Italian neorealism nuances; suffice to say that a desire to represent life as it is was inherent to both, and still is. As Bazin explains, realism, or neorealism, is “primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of film-making”, which means that stylistically it is “essentially a form of self-effacement before reality” (2005: 29). This, to my mind, reflects his central premise that cinema can be understood as a language,²⁹ and one which operates on similar terms to the novel; given that “the director writes in film” as “the equal of the novelist” (39-40). Taken in this way, Bazin's words act as a reminder of Ian Watt's, in his classic study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). As he argues, the “application of the realist point of view in language and prose structure” involves the “forfeit” of other literary values because it demands “unadorned realistic description” in order to give “a full and authentic report of human experience” (Watt 2000: 28-32).

This may feel like a slight digression. However, there are two things to be gained from very briefly unpacking the shared connections between naturalism/realism in these two dominant artistic mediums, which are also my chosen mediums in this dissertation. Firstly, in both cinema and the novel, realism arguably took root because of its swift evolution to social realism, whereby an effaced style seemed harmonious with the accords of making texts centred on social and political commentary. Secondly, given that I began this thesis with the intention of upholding style it is worthy to consider the counter notion that style may detract from serious

²⁹ It is a simplification but, seeing this as Andrew does, as “the ability to carve stories out of complex space” (2005: xxi), draws the equation between cinema and language nicely—and as Bazin observes, it is cinema's “realist impulse” (xxi) that reveals it as a language.

substance, or that the best style is one which is invisible or indiscernible from real life. To return briefly to mumblecore, this is something that filmmakers like Bujalski, Swanberg and the Duplass brothers seem to embody fully in their entirely lo-fi aesthetic choices and their sense that a form of cinematic no-style is the most direct and sincere way to represent their late Gen X (1965-80) male anxieties. Male anxiety thus appears to have remained in the 21st century, both in content and in form, as reflected in the adoption of an anti-aesthetic of which mumblecore is just one example.³⁰ However, the aversion to aesthetics that male mumblecore filmmakers emblemised, is a sentiment their female counterparts like also Shelton also responded to. Therefore, considering female mumblecore filmmakers, as well as the newer generation of female millennial speak filmmakers and writers, as the inheritors of a realist tradition allows us to ask how the naturalist gaze and aesthetic of female artists looks now. And, how it differs from that of male artists. It is a question that has mostly gone unasked.

It must be said that there is a thriving world of contemporary women's naturalism in a vein more reminiscent of the Jack London school of naturalists and of the originary cinematic neorealists like De Sica. Cinema provides a quick barometer here to illustrate the difference. The raw and moving working-class cinema of Andrea Arnold, as epitomised in 2009's *Fish Tank* denotes, almost archetypally, the 21st century evolution of neo-realism. As does the quiet tragedy of a Kelly Reichardt film like *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), the poignancy and understated sorrow of teen abortion drama *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) by Eliza Hittman, and the runaway realist success story of the 2021 awards season, Chloé Zhao's touching *Nomadland* (2020). These are achingly beautiful and profoundly truthful pieces distinguished

³⁰ I call these texts anti-aesthetic in the sense that they are predicated on a firm disavowal of disingenuous commercialised aesthetics and valorise an obviously microbudget independent no-frills mise-en-scène. Whether they evolved so consciously in the gendered 'style is a girly superficiality' sense of the early male naturalists seems to me, less likely, as theirs was a more openly 'style is a Hollywood superficiality' anti-aesthetic. Although, this pervasive aesthetic division remains culturally and artistically influential (as per my previous footnote) and therefore may also be considered at least as a subconscious influence.

by their use of non-actors, natural lighting, handheld camerawork and diegetic soundscapes, works that are sensitive, intimate and striking in their heavy verisimilitude. Aside from the way they conform to neorealistic expectations, to my mind, there is undoubtedly still a distinctly female quality to these works, one which distinguishes them from their male social realist contemporaries, like Ken Loach or Ramin Bahrani, and one which is not limited to their thematic concerns or choice of protagonists although all of the above works are centred on the experiences of girls or women. However, despite a personal pull to devote a chapter to waxing lyrical about this more strictly neo-realist world, these films embody a timeless quality and an indisputable socio-political awareness that marks them as distinct from the acutely millennial movement I seek to define here. Contemporaneous, influential and aesthetically comparable certainly, but distinct.

As Christian states, this world of millennial speak is a “distinct form of realism” that privileges an intense kind of 21st century intimacy and constructs it through an aesthetic born of the visual and media cultures of the epoch (2011: 118). In my introduction I propounded that the 21st century was an aesthetically obsessed age, and, in particular, it has been defined by a broader millennial aesthetic. This aesthetic has emerged most specifically in the course of the 2010s, to capture a new market of new adults desiring products that totemise their experience of new adulthood. *The New Yorker* describes the millennial aesthetic as “a serene new world of pastel colors, clean shapes, and sans-serif typefaces” and as “a self-conscious pursuit of comfort for a generation striving for bourgeois stability” (Chayka 2022: online). While graphic and product design is not the same as the formal textures of books and novels, millennial speak texts are undoubtedly influenced by these broad and pervasive aesthetic trends, and, unlike more timeless works of social realism, they—in both prose and cinematic form—emulate the artfully minimal yet self-evidently designed world that they occupy. They

do so through an aesthetic which is not an anti-aesthetic, but rather something understated, yet also orchestrated.

Even more pervasive than the millennial aesthetic is perhaps the colour of millennial pink. First coined by *The Cut* contributor Veronique Hyland in a now viral essay from 2016 the pink, or rather spectrum of pinks, has become associated with “a generational mood of ambivalent girliness” (Hyland 2022: online), the muted palette a “non-colour that doesn’t commit, whose semi-ugliness is proof of its sophistication” (Hyland 2016: online). As a columnist for *The Guardian* wrote, millennial pink “represents a kind of ironic prettiness, or post-prettiness. It’s a way to be pretty while retaining your intellectual detachment. It’s a wish that prettiness could de-problematised” (2017: online). As I begin to parse what makes millennial speak different from a more dominant and timeless form of social realism it is worthy to briefly unpack this phenomenon of millennial pink because the colour is a conundrum. It is, at once, a pleasingly more gender fluid and androgynous version of millennium pink, the symbol of a problematic postfeminist moment in which traditional femininity is being “repackaged as cool, as chill, as woke” (Hyland 2022: online), a co-opted neoliberal totem branded on everything from rosé bottles to Instagram ads and millennial speak film posters and book covers—Stephanie Danler’s 2016 *Sweetbitter* is a particularly perfect example—and an encapsulation of the dichotomously earnest ironist aesthetic of a generation. In other words, the colour is a mess. As is, arguably, the cultural moment that millennial female authors and auteurs are occupying.

I do not bring up millennial pink because the films and books of the millennial mode are so drenched in it, although the colour is certainly a part of the way they are marketed. I bring it up because it speaks to the ways in which aesthetics can be both intangibly but also very tangibly tied to generation. Although touted as a gender neutral shade (for a pink), millennial pink was arguably constructed and consumed principally by young women, which

feels interesting given that millennial speak also lacks a particularly evident male equivalent. The ‘ambivalent girliness’ and self-conscious ‘semi-ugliness’ of the colour, plus its semiotic messiness, speak to the kind of experiences that are central to this mode and the nature of the young women who occupy millennial texts. The cultural dialogue around millennial pink also helps to distinguish millennial speak from more conventional neo-realism. Apart from a general lack of political commentary there is also, I would suggest a sense of levity to works of millennial speak, a kind of self-awareness that, despite their personal anxieties, the experiences of its protagonists are painfully normal and in most instances, not all that bad. Rather than railing against systemic failings, typically the protagonists in these works, and their own ‘semi-ugliness’, makes them their own worst enemy.

To begin moving towards filmic and literary aesthetic specifics, what I have termed millennial speak is arguably ushered in by one central figure, Lena Dunham, firstly with her debut film *Tiny Furniture* (2010) and then more prominently with her zeitgeist-making series *Girls* (2012-2017). Also with Hannah Horvath, her protagonist in *Girls*, and a prime example of a polarising ‘own worst enemy’ anxious yet privileged young millennial woman. *Girls* has already been cemented as an epochal text (Watson *et al.* 2015, Nash and Whelehan 2017) and it emblemises a young female-led form of art making with roots in realism but which uniquely blends drama and comedy, sincerity and insincerity, hopefulness and hopelessness, and prettiness and ugliness as it follows its young adult women, or ‘girls’, on their messy journey towards adulthood.³¹ What Dunham’s texts display, overarchingly, is that key to this mode is its naturalist or pared back aesthetic, one which makes its characters and their relationships, just as often romantic as not, its centrepiece. And in this centrality these characters become full

³¹ As a tie in, the original poster for *Girls* series one emblemizes exactly the sans serif, hopeful pastel and millennial pink wash of the millennial aesthetic, and its tagline, ‘almost kind of getting it together’, speaks volumes about the fundamental premise that underscores most works in this mode.

and flawed, the narcissistic and self-indulgent figures we recognise from a Lena Dunham work, the stunted adolescents of a Lynn Shelton film, the disaffected, self-loathing women of an Ottessa Moshfegh novel or the chronic bad decision-makers of a Phoebe Waller-Bridge series; all displayed candidly and frankly by an aesthetic that embraces its characters strengths as much as their shortcomings, and places the trivial and existential on equal footing in a quest to capture real modern women navigating the real modern world.

THE MILLENNIAL SPEAK AESTHETIC IN FILM:

THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW FEMALE STYLE

In film, the conflict between “female aspirations and insecurities” in the world of false starts and all manner of floundering which “twenty-something millennials” endure (Badley *et al.*, 2016: 440-450) fuelled the work of early female mumblecore filmmakers like Lynn Shelton and So Yong Kim, and continues to be congenial to the work of millennial-aged practitioners like Greta Gerwig. This conflict is present in Gillian Robespierre’s *Obvious Child* (2014), which she wrote and directed and which channels the combined comedic power, earnestness and rapid-fire dialogue of its star actress/comedian, Jenny Slate. It is also visible in Lulu Wang films, like *The Farewell* (2019), which she wrote and directed, a film that centres its frank bittersweetness on the charismatic power and wounded vulnerability of millennial icon Awkwafina. Likewise, this floundering finds rich footing in the collaborative work of Hannah Pearl Utt and Jen Tullock and the complicated women they embody in *Before You Know It* (2019), a film which Michelle Satter, the founding director of Sundance’s feature film program, claimed to love for “the female gaze of the(ir) script” (in Baldwin 2019: online).

Oria (2018) compiled a perceptive list of features in her exploration of, what she terms, the new contemporary Indie rom-com—citing female-directed films like Gerwig’s, Shelton’s and Robespierre’s—which overlaps strongly here. She describes films which partner love and

relationships with ‘uncomfortable’ topics like abortion and mental illness, which feature ordinary-looking actors (or made-to-look-ordinary actors) leading ordinary lives and which feature anti-climactic, open or ambiguous endings. These films explore the transitory nature of love and the fundamental instability of relationships and the self, particularly by eschewing the meet-cute to happy ending formula to instead focus on the mechanisms of the relationship itself; something which the protagonists also tend to obsess over and over-analyse. They also depict sex forthrightly, and seek to find idiosyncratic nuances in character and gender and which embody a conversational style where characters talk a lot. They also embrace authenticity and realism, both thematically and aesthetically, through what she terms their self-conscious formalism (151-158).³²

Put simply, these are films which subvert the typical Hollywood rom-com or romance paradigms on a cellular level. Films like Emma Seligman’s *Shiva Baby* (2020), which she wrote and directed, about a young quippish and chaotic bisexual Jewish woman, whose romantic and sexual entanglements are as messy as her other relationships, serves to illustrate the tendencies Oria observed and defies clear romantic closure in a very millennial speak vein. Lucy Coleman’s caustic and candid comedy-drama *Hot Mess* (2018), which she also wrote and directed, about a 25 year old aspiring yet self-sabotaging playwright in the midst of a quarter-life crisis also compares, albeit on a lower budget. Writer-director Léonor Serraille’s *Jeune Femme* (2017), led by an all-female key crew (Kermode 2018: online), is a French language film that demonstrates the same understated-curated aesthetic and the same brand of millennial tragicomedy as the English language works I have mentioned. At its centre is also a similarly unabashedly antiheroic and adrift protagonist in Parisian Paula and, in this way, the film points

³² Self-conscious formalism seems a particularly apt way of understanding the understated yet deeply curated aesthetic of millennial authored texts by women, and the way they reimagine naturalism and realism according to the aesthetic textures of the 2010s and 2020s.

to a cross-language and cultural experience of millennial womanhood, at least in the global West.³³ Desiree Akhavan's oeuvre also stands as a salient example of the millennial speak aesthetic. In particular, her breakthrough film as both a writer and director, *Appropriate Behaviour* (2014) and her protagonist Shirin—who Akhavan also plays—models the kind of smart, wordy and candidly dry, yet flippant, periodically judgemental, juvenile and directionless twenty-something woman who is archetypal of this new mode. In fact, the film was described (complimentarily) by Ehrlich as “*Annie Hall* if Woody Allen were a bisexual Persian girl” (2014: online). Alongside the aforementioned male mumblecore auteurs, Woody Allen can be considered here as a kind of progenitor of repartee-driven cinema and nervous romance, and the influence of the nervous romance can be traced through these works.

Allen also serves perhaps as the prototype of artistic awkwardness, which Kostko (2010) in his fascinating critical study suggests has become the dominant aesthetic category of a post 2001 epoch—9/11 oft being cited as the moment in which the age of irony ended.³⁴ Konstantinou calls this metamodern phenomenon relational art, one of a handful of forms of postirony art, an increasingly dominant aesthetic he identifies across all media modes. For him, relational art, which can be located in all of these millennial speak works, is a mode which uses “realist, minimalist (and) middlebrow forms to depict postmodern reality” and to construct a

³³ This is not the only example, Carolina Cavalli's very recent Italian language tragicomedy *Amanda* (2022), about an economically privileged young woman in her mid-twenties who has no job, no friends and no boyfriend, is also defined by an aesthetic of talk. Bradshaw describes the titular Amanda as “a character whose dramatic existence is located in the snappy dialogue she exchanges” (2022: online). The possibilities for cross-lingual, cultural and national similarities are something I will continue to examine and question in greater depth in my proceeding chapters.

³⁴ Some may disagree with Kostko and propose that the age of irony continues till today. It is certainly true that irony is not dead and buried, and even in this specific millennial speak mode its traces can be found alongside their more dominant and powerful tone of awkwardness. However, it arguably was initiated in and held its social, political and artistic zenith alongside high postmodernism. As Colebrook helpfully proposes, “one could see postmodernity as the impossibility of overcoming irony” (2003: 161). The legacy of the age of irony will be reflected more concertedly in my subsequent chapter on metamodernism, which contains texts that more clearly inflect the ironic mode (and equally reflect its limitations).

“powerful aesthetic of awkwardness” (2017: 256). Specifically, Konstantinou describes characteristic features as including “flatness of tone, rambling plots, autobiographical content” (257), which embody into the very fabric of the text the fundamental awkwardness and unquietness of our time. This is a mode he associates with filmmakers like Miranda July, who I will be addressing in the following chapter and who I would suggest tends to push these devices, amongst others, to the nth degree in pursuit of more deliberately post-postmodernist ends. However, he also sees this tonally flat, rambling and autobiographical aesthetic as encapsulated in the work of the simultaneously most lauded and maligned female figure of millennial speak art, Lena Dunham—who, as I contend, sparked the millennial speak mode’s evolution—and of novelists like Sheila Heti in *How Should A Person Be?* (2010).

THE MILLENNIAL SPEAK AESTHETIC IN LITERATURE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MILLENNIAL TEXTS

Although film appears to predate literature a little in this millennial frame—at least if we are to go from the generally accepted demarcation that Sally Rooney became the first millennial novelist or great millennial writer with *Conversations with Friends* in 2017 (Athitakis 2019: online)³⁵—Sheila Heti’s *How Should A Person Be?* serves as a nice segue into the evolution of millennial speak in literature. And although Heti herself, born in 1976, predates the official millennial window a little, her memoir come fiction come philosophy novel feels acutely millennial for its focus on the trite and frequently trivial concerns of Heti’s own twenty-something life. Specifically, her graphically messy sex life, and her life as a writer, and the striking difference between what she believes constitutes art, and what her male

³⁵ There are other similar novels which appear before this demarcation, Stephanie Danler’s already cited *Sweetbitter* amongst them. Yet, as Lena Dunham did with *Tiny Furniture* and *Girls*, Rooney creates an aesthetic and thematic model which has flourished since *Conversation with Friends* was published.

contemporaries, who are “so serious”, who want to tell ‘real’ stories and who “lecture” her about her “lack of morality” believe (2012: 218). From the book within a book, and the hand-held mirror on that book’s cover which adorns it, at least in my 2012 Anansi Press edition of the novel, Heti unapologetically claims her self-obsessed navel gazing, championing that art can be “humiliating, banal, low” (Thomas 2013: online), and self-indulgent. And, that it can mediate a space between real life and fiction without needing to be edifying nor universal.³⁶

As with film, there is an intensely personal gaze and frequently autobiographical dimension to these works of millennial fiction, a sense of women looking at themselves in such intimate detail that they are both paradoxically narcissistic and candid to the point of spurring all ego. It is useful here I think to briefly ponder Lacan’s mirror stage. As Lacan states, upon first seeing oneself in totality in a mirror, “the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” and thus “the agency of the ego” is situated (1980: 503, original italics). And, as Leitch *et al.* comment on Lacan’s theory, “the human self thus comes into being through a fundamentally aesthetic recognition” (2001: 1281). In contrast to the “fragmented” female bodies that Mulvey identified as being part and parcel of the male gaze (1999: 841) Lacan notes that the mirror shifts a “fragmented body” and “fragmented body-image” to “a form of its totality” (1980: 506) and so when writers like Heti brandish their mirrors, both literal and figurative—a postfeminist trait often derided as shallow, vain or insecure (Genz and Brabon 2009: 86)—their act of self-looking instead arguably becomes a postfeminist act of identity restoration. In this way, Lacan’s mirror, and the literal mirror itself, proves a fitting metaphor, evoking an image of millennial speak composers gazing

³⁶ Rooney’s most recent text, *Beautiful World Where Are You* (2021) also reaffirms a Heti-esque view of literature in which realism is not tethered to edification. Through her surrogate narratorial self, successful writer Alice, Rooney asks “Do you think the problem of the contemporary novel is simply the problem of contemporary life? (...) it seems vulgar, decadent (...) to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilisation is facing collapse” (Rooney 2021: 111). Yet, Rooney’s Alice ultimately recognises that there is no extrication from the so-called trivialities of sex and friendship, just as the complications and complexities sex and friendship form the heart of the novel.

intently at themselves and their female peers, and seeking to see and aesthetically represent them in their totality, and not just in a dialectical position to their other, men.

Heti's aesthetic also serves as a starting point to illuminate the world of millennial fiction with its text speak pastiche of emails, recorded conversations and prose. Also important is her love of the dramatic italic and exclamation, the inner monologues within inner monologues and the way she constantly elides the sincere with the ironic, the existential, the mundane, the self-aware, the crass, the painful, the comic, the glib. As quickly shifting as from one clause to the next, she uses this multilayeredness to construct a spectacularly rich vision of her inner life even as outwardly all that happens is—as her chapter titles indicate—that “Sheila Goes to The Salon” or “Sheila Wanders in New York”:

We are all specks of dirt, all on this earth at the same time. I look at all the people who are alive today and think, *These are my contemporaries. These are my fucking contemporaries!* We live in an age of some really great blow-job artists. Every era has its art form. The nineteenth century, I know, was tops for the novel. (2012: 11, original italics)

There is an unfiltered, unflinching honesty at work here, delivered in a kind of inchoate qualia aesthetic which almost seems to belong to the stream of consciousness canon but which, in millennial speak works, has typically become manifest in its characteristically verbose dialogue. Heti's line of influence is also traceable to a contemporary proliferation of millennial memoirs, perhaps best exemplified by Dolly Alderton's *Everything I Know About Love* (2018), or as the cover displays it, *everything I know about parties, dates, friends, jobs, life, love*. Alderton's tender yet deeply funny take on millennial womanhood sees her partner intimate text transcripts, drunk food recipes, shopping lists, imagined lines of communication, frank pared-back mundanities and sparkling poetic prose with unparalleled candour.

Heti and Alderton's work offers a lens into the non-fiction world of millennial speak that is both an adjunct of and influence upon the millennial novel, a mode which, as with

millennial speak films, is not strictly, but often can be categorised as autofiction.³⁷ There is also a connection here to what Wood at the start of the century notably dubbed Hysterical Realism, a new genre he associated primarily with Zadie Smith's debut *White Teeth* (2000). He argued, in alternately denunciatory and complimentary terms, that hysterical realism, and specifically Smith's writing, represented a new brand of realism that is "ashamed of silence" and congested with minutiae, that "formally" lacks "moral seriousness", that "squanders itself in a mixture of banality and crudity" and that as "realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as cartoon, it is too realistic" (2000: online). Yet he concedes that the genre and Smith's own novel is built on a "bonhomous" spirit, with details that are "often instantly convincing, both funny and moving", prose that exhibits skilful appropriation of interior monologue and free indirect speech and characters full of "glittering liveliness" (online). In sum total, Wood describes Smith's novel as "a curious shuffle of sympathy and distance, affiliation and divorce, brilliance and cartoonishness, astonishing maturity and ordinary puerility" (online), a tangle of juxtapositions that I would suggest are also readily embraced by today's millennial speak creators.

As the evolution of this genre outsteps the critical literature which must inevitably follow somewhat belatedly, I offer the very-millennial Olivia Sudjic's retrospective for *The Guardian* as one of the most cohesive analyses of the written world of millennial speak. Acclaimed as the author of the "first great Instagram novel" for her 2017 debut *Sympathy*

³⁷ Given that millennial speak can be seen to borrow not only from realism but from the conventions on autobiography, it is also worth briefly drawing out another connection, that between millennial speak and reality television. Klein (2021) describes millennials as the reality TV generation, responsible for the rise of scripted and identity-focused reality shows and, in parallel, to the culture of self-surveillance and self-construction normalised by social media. In her discussion of the evolution of millennial taste and reality programming on the hallmark of youth culture, MTV—which was once the domain of the music video—she speaks of 21st century programs that illuminate the quest for individualism, identity politics in the modern age, millennials' desire to see themselves on screen, the importance of and validation that comes from looking, and the tension between what is real and what is constructed.

(Livingstone 2017: online), and the smart but amoral protagonist Alice's image-driven life which propels it, Sudjic's article charts a new frame of realist literature dedicated to a self-aware process of "self-definition" through art (2019: online). She speaks of course of Rooney and of Moshfegh, who Lahsaiezadeh in her more colloquial but very catchy discussion of millennial writers also mentions, labelling them respectively as the masters of the "morally grey millennial protagonist" and the "mean-lennial anti-hero" (2019: online).

Sudjic also speaks of writers and novels like Halle Butler's acerbically dark yet sympathetic office novel for the millennial generation *The New Me* (2019)—Cosslett adds to the list of aphoristic labels by calling Butler's 30-year-old protagonist Millie an iconic figure in the now established millennial "school of the privileged antiheroine" (2019: online). Sudjic also cites Lara Williams' story of a group of disappointed, desperate and desirous twenty-something women in *Supper Club* (2019). Likewise, Amber Medlan's *Wild Pets* (2021) was described by Cummins as an "instant set text" (2021: online) in the new millennial canon for its authentic portrayal of dating and cross-platform communicating in this 2020s. As with Rooney, Moshfegh, Butler and Williams, as Cummins states, Medlan's "deadpan prose generates momentum by cutting out the connective tissue" while still delivering "picture-perfect descriptions with casual brilliance" (online); evincing a similar stylishly understated aesthetic to millennial speak films. And while, as I also prefaced at the beginning of this chapter, Sudjic acknowledges the impossibility of a singular form of artistic unity amongst a fractured generation, age and media landscape, she still identifies a number of useful key aesthetic and thematic features that unite these works.

In particular, Sudjic notes that the majority of the novels which have been labelled millennial are written by women and focus on female protagonists that are "navigating or avoiding adulthood, usually desperate, disenfranchised, displaced, ironic, full of rage or grim humour that covers unbearable shame and sadness" and are, as she puts it bluntly, often

“unlikable” (2019: online). She also describes novels that paradoxically “lambast our need for external validation and commodified selfhood” (online) whilst playing into the very same thing. Even those more socially-oriented millennial novels like Kiley Reid’s *Such a Fun Age* (2019), about a young racialized protagonist, Emira, filter meaningful observations about white privilege and race in the 21st century through a personal prism, making Emira’s aimlessness and post-college angst the novel’s centrepiece. These novels mine the rather profound alienation and longing of the millennial generation, but they place it on mundane rather than heroic terms. All of which, Sudjic offers, harmonises with an aesthetic of realism that balances a feminine brand of deadpan humour, irony, self-reflection and earnestness, and pursues individual relatability rather than universal truth.

THE MESSY MILLENNIAL WOMAN: UNDERSTANDING THE THEMATIC AND AESTHETIC CENTRE OF MILLENNIAL SPEAK

Notably, Sudjic returned to the notion that these works principally depict an “anxious life” (2019: online). Given that writers such as Peberdy (2011) attest that the preeminent image of contemporary masculinity in art has become the image of male angst—perhaps best personified by the dead-pan ennui of a mid-life crisis Bill Murray (an iconic multi-film performance I will return to in my examination of Coppola’s oeuvre)—and writers like Bruzzi in her discussion of the male cinema aesthetic suggest that there is a textually “phantasmagorical” presence of male anxiety in many male-authored films, symbolic of the increasing awareness that maleness “is the most precarious and unsustainable of identity positions” (2013: 26, 50), it is prudent to ask more specifically how women’s millennial art differs. Kostko deliberately simplifies it in his entertaining introduction when he states that: “Our men are awkward in seduction, always worrying that an unwelcome advance will produce impressions of awkwardness or its dread cousin creepiness, while our women never know whether making the first move will be taken

as a welcome relief or an off-putting display of castrating pushiness” (2010: 3). There is no doubt that anxiety and awkwardness run as a common thread in much contemporary art, in varying shades of existential to trivial. Yet, there does seem to be something acutely female about the anxiety depicted in these female-authored works, and the way they represent it.

To return to Mulvey, in her discussion of the male gaze she stated that although women were cinematically displayed as icons for the “gaze and enjoyment of men” they were also sites of anxiety (1999: 84), and thus needed to be narratively controlled, commodified and finally fetishized. Although I used Lacan’s mirror theory earlier as a way into understanding the aesthetic approach of these artists, it also bears mentioning here that his work had an inherently male skew, one picked up on by Mulvey when she explicated that when we look upon the male on screen we are being encouraged to see the “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego” (1999: 838), that ideal ego which reminds us of that first moment of mirror recognition, and leaves the female viewer deeply cognisant of her own gendered lack. Conversely, texts which are created by women and for women have long also been sites of anxiety, often too norm-challenging for the patriarchy and too norm-reinscribing for successive feminism waves (Wanzo 2016: 655). Perhaps then today’s millennial speak movement offers women the opportunity to lean into the anxiety that has long been psychoanalytically and artistically heaped upon the female gender, whilst subverting its origins and male-authored manifestations, moving it to a paradigm far beyond penis envy.

In short, then, I perceive millennial speak to connote works which embody this fundamental anxiety-come-awkwardness of being and for the case of this discussion, embody them not only thematically but also critically, aesthetically. In Yacavone’s discussion of film aesthetics and worlds he argues broadly for the existence of a “distinctly *aesthetic* affective presence in cinema” (2014: 161, original italics), suggesting that, in the tradition of ‘expression’, it is the sensory and representational dimensions of any work of art which

translate its structures of feeling and human qualities to its audience. There are many unique, though typically complementary, ways in which film—and other comparable narrative forms of art, like the novel—utilise the possibilities of artistic expression to generate these affective responses. Thus, given the breadth of his investigation Yacavone offers a range of semantic structures and cinematic properties which can be manipulated to affect audiences on the level of what he terms a “sensory-affective”, “cognitive diegetic” or “formal artistic” response (170). Aesthetic responses to film can operate on “immediate, visceral, and ‘natural’” terms and occur through the structures which encourage active imaginative participation and/or through a purely aesthetic response to its form and design (170).

What seems most relevant here is that while Yacavone speaks of the affective power of “editing, in-frame motion, camera movement, the use of sound effects and music (...), CGI manipulations, and all manner of kinesthetic and audiovisual capacities for stimulating the viewer’s innate physiological mechanisms” (172), all of the cinematic bells and whistles, he also speaks of a very different form of cine-aesthetic expression. In this alternate mode, films draw upon “naturally or inherently expressive” images from what he terms our “common lifeworlds” (172). This is a kind of mimetic process, that draws on the audience’s familiar understanding of images, objects, events and situations, as well as bodies, faces and gestures that elicit certain emotions. Yacavone argues that beyond narrative causality—although the two are often linked—feeling and affect can be generated purely by “the faces, voices and body language of performers; by colors, light, and natural sounds” (174).

In this light, I would suggest that millennial speak works—logically, as inheritors of a naturalist/realist tradition—spur the ‘bells and whistles’ style of artmaking and instead rely primarily on pared back images of normalcy and verisimilitude to depict and transmit their authorial worldview. As such, they stage their flawed but relatable (although not always likeable) protagonists, amongst a circle of flawed but relatable (and, again, certainly not always

likeable) people, against the backdrop of relatable locations, scenes and experiences. When Yacavone speaks of the mimetic and sensorially expressive images of film, he cites in particular the affective power of the close-up of the human face (174), drawing on the influential work of Balázs and his celebration of the “language of the face” (2009: 277). While the close-up is not a novel cinematic device, its use in millennial speak works can be considered novel given its prevalence as the dominant frame. No longer reserved for climatic moments, in these works “even the mundane is given close-up treatment” (Christian, 2011: 124), mirroring a millennial vision of intimacy and connection born of the social media selfie and webcam. And although close-up is a term with traditionally filmic implications, I think it works metonymically across both film and literature to describe the female gaze of millennial speak: millennial females gazing at millennial females in close up.

When they gaze in close up they reflect the deep self-interest of their protagonists and, as established, they see these young women in a very unvarnished light. It has been alluded to from the descriptions of the key millennial speak texts I have mentioned that there is a very particular type of young woman at this evolving mode’s centre, and it is this close-up treatment that has undoubtedly allowed her to come to the cultural fore in such a profound way. Aroesti dubs her the “Messy Millennial Woman”, a “a good-time girl who lurches from chaos to crisis, from euphoria to despair” and whose life is a “whirlwind of thrilling disarray” (2022, online). As Aroesti states, she is a paradoxical figure because her “self-involved unhappiness” can be “strangely aspirational” and “the chaos she leaves in her wake is” is “entertaining” (2022, online). The Messy Millennial Woman is a paradox, at once myopically self-aware and deliberately desultory, coquettishly charming and confident yet profoundly awkward and anxious. Kotsko’s pithy proposition that we live in an age in which awkwardness “threatens to engulf everything” (3) seems inextricable from the epoch in which the Messy Millennial Woman has been born. In short, she is a woman who makes us cringe but whom we also feel

drawn to precisely because she appears to understand, and even embrace, the ontological awkwardness and gaucheness of 21st century life. Moreover, her close-up interest in her own life, in particular the way she candidly and dryly pour over the awkwardness of her inner and outer life—in synthesis with the millennial speak aesthetic that mirrors this—makes it a subject of a sort of bleak levity and works to resolve this awkwardness for a young millennial female audience, to an extent, recoding it as decidedly normal.³⁸

THE POSTFEMINIST PROMISE OF FULFILMENT: A PIXEL-BY-PIXEL PORTRAIT OF ‘GIRLHOOD’ IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As my picture of this mode develops, it should have also become clear that there is something distinctly postfeminist at work in this burgeoning mode. Badley *et al.* suggest, at least on cinematic terms, that these are texts which are feminist enough to “defy association with the formulaic myths of the mainstream ‘chick flick’” but are not feminist enough to be considered amongst “the ideological and experimental radicalism of feminist counter-cinema” (2016: 234). This in-betweenness is something which feels distinctly postfeminist, both from a theoretical standpoint and as a reflection of the constantly oscillating conversations around feminism that have been witnessed in the 21st century, and that have been woven into the conversations present in these texts. Although I have already touched upon the connection between the millennial zeitgeist and this genre’s unique reimagining of realism, as McDermott articulates in response to Dunham’s *Girls* it also expresses “a particular *femininity* born of a

³⁸ Although these texts are not exclusively made for millennial aged women, there is a certain natural affinity, and the reception of some of the canon’s messier and meaner figures seem to draw out a more defined demographic divide in readership; relatable in millennial circles, insufferable in others. I particularly like Hildyard’s phrase in her review of *A Very Nice Girl* by Imogen Crimp (2022)—which she compares explicitly to Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020), Naoise Dolan’s *Exciting Times* (2020) and Rooney’s *Conversations With Friends* (2017), three core millennial speak novels—“Like many older people (...) I have a limited attention span for the pixel-by-pixel portrait of one person’s fluctuating self-worth (...) But it seems reasonable to think that similarities in these stories expose something about the lives of young women now” (2022: online).

particular cultural moment” (2017: 46, italics added). Moreover, it “belongs to an emerging genre navigating the contradictions and complexities that coming of age in a primarily postfeminist media era entails” (46). For McDermott, *Girls* reflects the fictional and lived generic conventions of postfeminism, both synthesising and subverting pre-existing modes, for instance sapping the romantic-comedy of its easy optimism in a commentary on the “postfeminist promise of fulfilment” (46).

This is the second counterpoint association that has been made between millennial fiction and the chick-flick or chick-lit novel in this chapter, but as I foregrounded above, this is an association that demands a greater conversation. Readers would be right to question what exactly distinguishes a millennial speak text from a ‘chick’ one, given their often comparable subject matter. McRobbie develops a deeply incisive and interesting discussion of 21st century chick texts, including Sharon Maguire’s film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), based on Helen Fielding’s novel of the same name. She argues that these texts positively “normalise post-feminist gender anxieties” and create models of young female selfhood couched in the “language of personal choice” (2009: 21). Given the criteria of the Messy Millennial Woman that has been established, Bridget Jones certainly appears to us to be alike in her messiness, yet I contend that—as McRobbie also supposes—her messiness is subsumed by her “endearing femininity” and “infectious girlishness” (12). However, I propose that she can be read as a kind of proto-millennial.³⁹ As can the quartet at the centre of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), another iconic chick title from the early postfeminist epoch that has generally, and fittingly, been labelled as a proto-*Girls*.⁴⁰

³⁹ As could, I must state here, any of Jane Austen’s heroines, with her novels also serving in a distant manner as proto or ur-millennial texts. Although they precede this mode significantly, they represent the first mainstream yet still literary-merited manifestations of a young woman’s complex full and flawed inner life, dating prospects and, dare I say it, her narcissistic self-interest.

⁴⁰ In Joyce Carol Oates’ telling review of Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) she cannily described it as an “urbane dark comedy” that feels like “a perverse fusion of *Sex and the*

Although the ‘chick’ prefix is often used and judged in pejorative terms, Genz and Brabon explore its thematic and social possibilities, articulating that the typical 21st century “chick lit heroine” is often skilfully rendered as both “flawed and fallible, eliciting the readers’ compassion and identification” (2009: 86). They articulate that chick lit also succeeds in creating an authentic and confessional voice that grapples with the contradictions of the current epoch and signifies the “‘return to the I’ in postfeminist discourse” (2009: 86). Modleski similarly suggests that the chick lit form has long offered and continues to offer women the opportunity to write novels that “point to their discontents, some of them explicit (...) and some implicit” (2008: xxvii). I agree. However, I believe what these descriptions crystallise is what distinguishes the millennial mode I am evolving here. Within as little as ten years (following the post-*Girls* demarcation) the millennial speak mode has transformed the expectations and aesthetics of the early 21st century ‘chick’ text. Turn of the century texts that tracked the—at that time—‘new’ terrain of women’s ‘twentysomething’ years relied on less critical and more hopeful paradigms of both romantic and economic wish fulfilment, and although their protagonists were flawed, they were above-all likeable ‘heroines’. In opposition, the millennial speak text, as McDermott proposes, saps the ‘chick’ mode of its broadly positive or rosy vision of young womanhood by choosing a darker-tinged, drier and more raw and realistic aesthetic. In doing so, the millennial female creator exposes both the freedoms and the failings of 21st century postfeminism and embraces the truly (and often irredeemably) messy subject that arrives in its wake.

Another dimension of the millennial speak realm which distinguishes it from other previous and/or coeval styles is how the ‘particular’ femininity it traces belongs very specifically to the 2010s and 2020s era of the postfeminist epoch. As such, one of the defining

City and Requiem for a Dream” (2018: 25), a line which seems to capture the shift from pre to post-millennium coming-of-age womanhood.

characteristics of the mode is the extension of the coming-of-age period in these works, or, as White labelled it in her discussion of Dunham's aptly titled *Girls* and her cinema contemporaries like Akhavan, Robespierre and Shelton, "a new spin on prolonged adolescence" (2013: 80); one which often extends to a young woman's thirties. Negra (2008) in her critique of postfeminism, suggests that it has increasingly stressed the various stages in women's lives leading to a time panic or temporal crisis. Yet, as ever in this contradictory frame, there is also the paradoxical "promise of new freedoms to transcend or cheat time" (2008: 50), or as she wrote elsewhere with Tasker, there has been a cultural "'girling' of femininity" because the icon of the young woman has become the "marker of postfeminist liberation" (2007: 18). In the commodification of time and the feminine that has become the hallmark of postfeminism—and in the wake of its (arguably) unreachable promises—it seems no surprise that millennial speak creators populate their works with juvenile and awkwardly anxious 'girls' occupying the "temporally unmapped" (Negra 2008: 50) space relegated to women who are, in some capacity, failing to follow the normative female lifecycle. And who, for this reason, are in equal measure liberated and trapped.

Although the mode I seek to define here is an acutely nascent one, and one formed from a nebulous collection of sub-genres and sub-sub-genres, I believe that its cultural importance and relevance to a postfeminist reading should not be understated. As I foregrounded earlier in this chapter, the work of female Indie cinema practitioners has rarely been attributed to any pre-existing categories (Badley *et al.* 2016, Perkins 2016). As Raymond similarly notes, contemporary female authors tend to be categorised into sub or sub-sub genres (2015: online), whilst core genres remain hegemonically associated with the work of male creators. As she continues, she suggests that 'new adult fiction' stories—those texts which push back the locus point of the coming-of-age paradigm to the complexities of life in ones' twenties, and one of the subgenres I opened this chapter with—have, at least in some sense, been written by men

for years. However, the male-authored version of this mode is, and long has been, simply considered literary fiction (online). In this way, Raymond sees that championing the title and the sub-genre of new adult fiction is an act of liberation, one which embraces that the female-authored stories which are beginning to populate this mode are unique because they expose truths about modern womanhood, especially young modern womanhood, from the perspective of young modern women.

GRETA GERWIG, *LADY BIRD* (2017): LIVING THROUGH SOMETHING

Prior to American-born Greta Gerwig's (b. 1983) independent directorial work, she drew acclaim for her collaborations with mumblecore progenitors like Joe Swanberg and Noah Baumbach. As an actor, distinguished critic A.O. Scott for the *New York Times* called her "the definitive screen actress of her generation", suggesting that "the wandering camera and meandering stories, the ground-level observations of unfocused young people desultorily negotiating the challenges of romance and friendship" of the movement were "epitomized" by Gerwig (2010: online). Gerwig—with her acting style that didn't seem to be acting at all—became synonymous with the kind of restless and rootless young women that have come to populate the world of millennial speak. His praise is worth quoting at length:

Ms. Gerwig, without a background in Hollywood, television or professional theatre, is different. She does not carry herself like a would-be movie star or sound much like one either. She is more goose than swan—big-boned and a little slouchy, indifferent to the imperatives of gracefulness that can land you romantic-comedy roles and a spot in the *Vanity Fair* "Young Hollywood" group portrait. When she takes off her clothes—which is not infrequently—it does not seem teasing or exhibitionistic but disarmingly matter-of-fact. Her diction is more like what you hear at the next table in the local coffee bar than at the movies. She tends to trail off in midsentence, turn statements into questions or sometimes tangle herself up in a rush of words. She comes across as pretty, smart, hesitant, insecure, confused, determined—all at once or in no particular order. Which is to say that she is bracingly, winningly and sometimes gratingly real. (online)

As a co-writer, she worked most notably on *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007) and *Nights and Weekends* (2008) with Swanberg (she also co-directed the latter), and in *Frances Ha* (2012) and *Mistress America* (2015) with Baumbach, her creative and romantic partner. Across these films, which she also starred in, Gerwig began to develop a growing range of fearlessly intimate portraits of “impulsive, prickly, demanding, talkative” millennial young women (Taubin 2013: 27). And critically, she imbued the characterisation and portrayal of these complex young women with a sympathy and generosity many critics observed was lacking within the dominantly male-authored paradigm of the early mumblecore movement (27).

It is this generosity towards flawed female characters which is on show more fully in Gerwig’s later fully independent work and which is key to texts created by millennial women for millennial women. In *Lady Bird* (2017) and her historical but distinctly contemporary version of *Little Women* (2019)—both of which she directed and penned for the screen—Gerwig exhibits her penchant for exploring mother-daughter relationships, female friendships and the creative ambition of young women. *Lady Bird* is the story of Christine ‘Lady Bird’ McPherson a seventeen-year-old senior in her final year at the Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, in suburban Sacramento, California. The name, as she describes it, is “given to me, by me” (*Lady Bird* 12:17-12:20). In turns immature, wise, selfish, selfless, manic, melancholy, anarchist, conformist, superficial and soulful, Lady Bird is best defined by her desire to “live through something” and go to “where culture is” (1:45-1:47, 2:47-2:50). The film charts the coming-of-age milestones that mark her final year of school and subsequent move to New York for college including losing her virginity, turning eighteen and going to prom, although its thematic heart rests in the contradictory dimensions of her character and the complex relationship she holds with her mother. Thematically speaking then, the film charts both familiar and new territory, though unequivocally it’s one of the few films I have ever seen that conveys the explosively fraught and fiercely loving relationship between a mother and daughter

so tenderly and truthfully. Gerwig consistently brings nuance, depth and authenticity to cinematic beats that we have seen before, imbuing what could be considered cliché with a potent blend of quasi-autobiographical realism and subtle and impactful trope subversion.

Unlike the by-rrote melodrama of much Hollywood teen cinema, *Lady Bird* spurs the scenes and symbols of dramatic excess—there isn't a locker-filled corridor or cheerleader in sight—for understated visuals that gently mark Lady Bird's inner tumults and shifts, such as her striking through 'Danny' and writing 'Kyle' in marker on her bedroom wall after her first brush with love ends in heartbreak. Unlike the standard face of such cinema, Gerwig populates her film with actors that actually look real—as Oria (2018) noted—including Saoirse Ronan as Lady Bird herself, with her faded red home-dyed hair and humanly blemished skin. Gerwig's camera holds frequently on her, savouring both her normalcy and rich inner life. As with other works of millennial speak the film favours the close up, frequently eschewing the conventional use of establishing shots to stay close to Lady Bird, only seeing the world from her own myopic lens. It is also Ronan's performance as the eponymous Lady Bird which is key to the affect of the text. Under Gerwig's direction Ronan adheres to the brand of "underperformativity" acting that Gerwig helped to pioneer in a millennial context (Berlant 2015: 197). According to Berlant, this underperformativity, as a kind of artistic antidote to melodrama and as a reflection of millennial social relationality, "destabilises the conventional relation between high intensity and importance" (195). In other words, this casual, flat or anti-method style of performance is an aesthetic of expression that reframes what is considered emotional and important and how that emotion and importance are evoked. With her frequently near deadpan blank-eyed stare, monotone cadence and slouched posture—not to discount her alternate fits of fittingly teenage

hysteria—Ronan evolves the idiosyncrasies of her character and embodies the genre’s acknowledgment that the small things are the big things.⁴¹

Similarly, it is Lady Bird’s loquaciousness, which comes often at the cost of hearing others, which drives the film both thematically and aesthetically. From the film’s outset Lady Bird’s voice defines the screen space. The film’s first primary scene, featuring Lady Bird and her mother Marion in the car returning from a college scouting trip, introduces us to their robust style of tête-à-tête, where moods, tones and topics constantly elide and fragment, their speech often appearing like two disjointed monologues rather than a coherent and cohesive duologue. At times, a cacophonous sense of babel is created as they speak over one another and conversationally traverse everything from Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to Lady Bird’s East Coast college wishes to the family’s financial situation to driving tests and school stabbings and bagging groceries in just over a minute and a half of screen time as exemplified in the snippet of this opening scene below.

Lady Bird: I wish I could live through something.

Marion: Aren’t you?

Lady Bird: Nope. The only exciting thing about 2002 is that it’s a palindrome.

Marion: Okay, fine. Well, yours is the worst life of all, so you win.

Lady Bird: Oh, so now you’re mad...

Marion: No, it’s just...

Lady Bird: because I wanted to listen to music?

Marion: you’re being ridiculous, because you have a great life.

Lady Bird: I’m sorry I’m not perfect.

Marion: No one’s asking you to be perfect. Just considerate would do.

Lady Bird: I don’t even want to go to school in this state anyway. I hate California.

(*Lady Bird* 1:45-2:09)

⁴¹ Popular in both critically renowned Hollywood features and in independent films, four-time Academy Award-nominated Ronan is a naturally empathetic and spontaneous performer, with a naturally dry and subdued yet still sparky style that harmonises with Gerwig’s millennial speak aesthetic, and which she further evolved as the lead in Gerwig’s *Little Women*.

This quickly shifting dialogue, which is designed to mimic real speech, makes space for both the inanities of real life conversations and moments of actual gravitas, and frequently sandwiches the two together.⁴² It also becomes the film's governing editing principle.

At times, *Lady Bird* operates like a series of intertwined yet distinct vignettes of varying complexity and emotional depth, much like real life appears to us. Principally then, it is Lady Bird's voice which bridges these scenes and moments to create affective unity. Considering Eisenstein's archetypal ideas about cinematic montage, particularly tonal montage, in which the emotional affective unity of the scene is heightened by music (1977: 75-76), Gerwig makes Lady Bird's voice the film's principal soundtrack. Innovatively neither a conventional voice-off, the voice of a character off-screen, nor a traditional voiceover, the voice of inner life or inner monologue (Doane 2009: 321-325), Lady Bird's actual words in conversation overlay cutaways and construct these montage moments, suffusing the whole film with the subjective candour of Lady Bird herself.

Thus, as with other millennial speak works, the aesthetic works in service of character, bringing Lady Bird in all her vicissitudes to the cinematic foreground. Yet, while the film's aesthetic is thus fundamentally pared back—its muted yet softly warm colour palette, use of

⁴² As established earlier in this chapter, the aesthetics of dialogue are rarely studied, but Wilkins delivers some particularly interesting notes on dialogue in two major schools of American independent cinema that are worthy of inclusion here. She contrasts the dialogue of New Hollywood, a naturalist narrative movement that flourished from the 1960s to the 1980s driven by notable directors like Robert Altman and John Cassavetes, and American Eccentric, a contemporary school associated with filmmakers like Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman that she proposes is influenced by New Hollywood. I will chart American Eccentric concertedly in the following chapter on metamodernism, but both movements have overriding masculine associations. From a dialogue perspective, Wilkins says the following: "dialogue, in the New Hollywood, was often presented as imperfect, naturalistic speech" governed above all by a desire for "verisimilitude" (2018: 292). Alternately, American Eccentric films use, what Wilkins terms "hyper-dialogue", which reconstructs dialogue as a formal element and "exhibits an often unnatural level of intelligibility (292). While the millennial interpretation of dialogue, as I have proposed earlier, is broadly naturalistic, it can also be seen to mediate these two distinct approaches. Although millennial speak dialogue seeks to be believably realistic in both structure and delivery, because it takes shape from the hyper self-attention and hypervocal manner of its characters it embodies a sense of both authentic candour and constructed performativity; similar to the way its aesthetic is principally naturalist yet still artfully designed.

ambient lighting and location filming also apposite to its neo-realist underpinnings—it is frequently beautiful. In particular, the film’s closing montage features a luminously golden image of Lady Bird behind the wheel of a car with cutaways of the suburb that once suffocated her, now open, awash in a tangerine haze and dazzling beams of light. It appears as philosopher David Hume said regarding aesthetic taste, that with “a perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to any object” we shall know the “universal beauty” (1910: 220). This kind of teleological understanding of aesthetics seems intertwined with Gerwig’s vision of the beautiful ordinariness of Californian Sacramento, and though her camera favours close up, her intensely close cinematic scrutiny of Lady Bird also allows her to see the minutiae of the world that surrounds the character, and through what Zangwill might term the “doctrine of natural aptness” (2001: 156), find beauty there. This appears to be a key dimension to works of millennial speak and to their naturalist yet designed aesthetic: amongst the messiness and vapidness and anxieties and ready acceptance of ugliness—the last time we see Lady Bird she has dark panda eyes and rivulets of dried mascara down her cheeks—there is both the levity and humour I have previously described, and an appreciation of beauty and style.

This is connected perhaps with the autobiographical dimensions of these works. The protagonists of the millennial speak world are frequently creatives, sometimes artists, writers, performers, sometimes aspiring, sometimes failing. Lady Bird herself is desirous of beauty and meaning, drawn to the world of theatre and places like “New Hampshire, where writers live in the woods” (*Lady Bird* 2:53-2:55). Thus, amongst the sparseness of the world of realism from which these works draw—and make manifest cinematically in unadorned, naturalist cinematography and in prose in precise, bare sentences—there is still room for beauty and its appreciation. Distinguishing themselves from the masculine anti-aesthetic that Dudley described as being at the heart of naturalism (2004) and from those early mumblecore works by Bujalski *et al.*, which employed a deliberately lo-fi and casual DIY masculine non-aesthetic

of their own (Taubin 2007), the millennial speak works authored by women appear to have hybridised the revealing precision of these earlier modes with a more sensuous and feminine sensibility, aligned perhaps with the postfeminist reclamation of beautification as “femininity construction” (Lazar 2011: 37).⁴³

In this hybridity, it becomes clear that *Lady Bird* is a product of a postfeminist frame. As Genz and Brabon articulate postfeminism is, by its very nature, a hybrid concept (2009: 3) and, as this dissertation will develop, this fundamental hybridity is made manifest on both gendered and genre terms in contemporary artistic renderings by women. Many postfeminist texts can be offered as works that seek to construct an anti-essentialist image—and in tandem, a pluralistic series of images—of female identity in a “post-traditional” era (1), and that stress difference rather than equality as the defining characteristic of feminism beyond the second wave (27). However, as critics like Tasker and Negra have added to the discourse, one of the most resounding failings of postfeminist culture is that it has become “exemplified by the figure of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman” (2007: 16). Although I established earlier in this chapter that—unlike the male-led early years of mumblecore—the millennial speak movement, as a mode driven by female authors and auteurs, embraces the complexity of female identities, including intersectional identities, these works still tend to be typified by a distinctly middle-class experience, and in many cases a white middle-class experience. Despite the financial difficulties faced by the McPherson family and the backdrop of the early 2000s recession, the problems which are *Lady Bird*’s own—as a cisgender, straight, white, private school attending and fundamentally smart, pretty girl—are arguably of the superficial kind (at least according to the tenets of more conventional naturalism or neo-realism).

⁴³ In this light, it is interesting to consider the millennial female aesthetic also as a kind of tempering of the rosy fantasy, aesthetically bright, saturated and stylised look of more conventional chick flicks with the grittier ‘serious’ aesthetic of male-driven realism. Moreover, this desire to reclaim a *feminine* aesthetic, as I established in my introduction, is a significant decision that heralds a new female-led way of understanding aesthetic realism.

Gerwig has Lady Bird herself express it best, after the achingly realistic and understated cinematic moment in which she loses her virginity. Upon her realisation that she has “just had a whole experience that was wrong” (*Lady Bird* 1:00:41-1:00:43) her quasi boyfriend Kyle, somewhat sagaciously, if cynically, tells her that she is “deciding to be upset” (1:00:43-1:00:46) because she is going to have “so much unspecial sex in (her) life” (1:00:53-1:00:56). As he begins to reference the Iraq War as a litmus for sadness Lady Bird retorts that “Different things can be sad. It’s not all war” (1:01:07-1:01:10). It is an incredibly poignant moment in the film. Much as Moshfegh in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* uses the September 11 attacks purely to allow her unnamed protagonist to see a woman “diving into the unknown” by jumping from one of the Twin Towers and know that “she is wide awake” (2018: 289), Gerwig backgrounds the war. The references to Iraq operate as a contextual touchstone common to the mode of neo-realism, but here it is glimpsed only in occasional TV spots or scattered conversation, making it an amorphous presence in the film that can only hold meaning through Lady Bird’s own relationship to it. Primarily however, Lady Bird has very little relationship to the war. It is not because she is simply too irreverent or blithely unaware (although she can also be that), because this moment acts as a tender showcase for both her character’s vulnerability and self-possession, her naiveté and wisdom. Instead, it is because she has decided to uphold the worth of her own emotional experience. Unlike the “serious” male writers that Heti spoke of, whom she described as “com(ing) at life from the outside” (2012: 218), female millennial speak creators like Gerwig look inwards and unashamedly exhibit their myopic white, middle class, heterosexual femaleness. They tell stories of personal rather than social realism, and thus typically embrace rather than eschew their privilege.

This is a decision which has seen its creators garner their fair share of criticism. Dunham’s *Girls*, for instance, was robustly critiqued for “adher(ing) to a narcissistic and self-important individualism that authorises entitlement and self-absorption and insists on (its

protagonists') right to be heard and rewarded" (Genz 2017: 18). Yet, it is a narcissistic, self-important individualism that only seems to be available to women within a postfeminist paradigm and in the millennial epoch, when women are able to engage in the "neoliberal reflexive 'project of the self'" (18) to the same extent as men. In *Lady Bird*, the first time we see Lady Bird conscious (in the film's very first image she is asleep in a motel bed with her mother), she stands before a mirror and asks, "Do you think I look like I'm from Sacramento?" (*Lady Bird* 0:31-0:33). There is another question to be asked. Is Lady Bird just another incurable millennial narcissist? The answer depends certainly on your viewpoint. In her discussion of the millennial novel, Sudjic indicated that millennial was both a reference point to the age of a text's author, the age of its protagonists and the age of its intended audience (2019: online), and, as I signposted earlier in this chapter, it is a valuable observation. When Gerwig's camera looks upon Lady Bird, who is arguably a roman-à-clef styled stand-in for her former self, she does so humanly and fondly, and we can extrapolate that she hopes that her fellow female millennial audience will see her in a similar light.

If the film gazes tenderly at Lady Bird, it also gazes in a way that appears distinctly female. In one playful scene, the film subverts the male gaze when Lady Bird, on her eighteenth birthday, buys herself cigarettes and a *Playgirl* magazine and stands outside a suburban convenience store smoking and flipping, in fact rather disinterestedly through images of naked men, salacious images the film also quickly passes by. It is fundamentally a throwaway moment but one which speaks to the relationship of millennial speak creators to sex. In 2008 Williams identified two polarized models of sex on screen in dominant North American media culture, the "cloying romance of the dominant Hollywood model" and "the wall-to-wall ecstasy of hard-core pornography" (23). However, she also spoke of more innovative and contemporary possibilities which came from European schools of filmmaking that defy "soft focus erotic prettiness" to show sex which can also be "aggressive, loveless, or alienated" (23).

While she tended to skirt around issues of gendered gazing in this analysis, it is at the foreground in her 2014 discussion of a selection of recent Cannes Film Festival films. Using films like Palme d'Or winning *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (2013), she acknowledges the male hegemony of looking within the industry, but suggests broadly that the male gaze is a rather dated feminist paradigm which denies women's equal pleasure at looking.

It is, in many ways a worthy sentiment, especially as a postfeminist epoch stresses women's sexual pleasure and agency. However, *Blue* and its lengthy sex scenes were publicly critiqued by both Julie Maroh, the author of the graphic novel on which it was based and its young cast. Maroh called it a "brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn", something that made her feel "very ill at ease" (in Dargis 2013: online); its female leads said filming was unbearable, with Léa Seydoux who plays Emma saying she felt like a "prostitute" (in Greenhouse 2013: online). In a post #MeToo epoch, when many high-profile female actors like Keira Knightley are refusing to film sex scenes with male directors (Shoard 2021: online) and when production houses are increasingly hiring intimacy coordinators (Feidelson 2020: online) I would thus suggest that probing the relationship of gender to depictions of sex is as timely a pursuit as ever. As Williams argues, the way to identify a male verse female representation has become more complex because old aesthetic gendered rules—such as Mulvey's ideas about bodily fragmentation (1999) or the explicit close up—no longer apply so cleanly when the proliferation of pornography in the digital age has led to new visual styles including that of the hand-held documentary style camera (2014: 16). Perhaps then, as Dargis identifies, female filmmakers' use of innovative visual conventions is the clue. By this, she means ones which—unlike those of much male-authored cinema—don't borrow from any of the codes of male-oriented pornography (2013: online).

While some of the above represents a slight digression from *Lady Bird* and the millennial genre it is worthy to establish here, in this first chapter, given the inextricable connection of sex, gender and gazing. And, of course, *Lady Bird* has a key sex scene of its own, one which certainly feels innovative. While both the pornographic and the standard Hollywood romanticised vision of “sacred” sex generally “treat women as abstractions instead of flesh-and-blood individuals” (Dargis 2013: online), Gerwig’s portrayal of sex, like those of her contemporaries, presents a much more bodily, authentic experience. Filmed in dim light and entirely from a set of mid-shots, Lady Bird remains in her bra and talks at her characteristic frequency throughout. Alongside her obvious nerves there is a suggestion of pleasure, or perhaps more-so the possibility of her future pleasure, but the entire act, which is incredibly short, ends with her asking her indifferent partner Kyle (played by Timothée Chalamet), “Are you... are you done? (...) Sorry. I was confused” (*Lady Bird* 58:44-58:51). Rather than that enshrined image of virginal bleeding, Lady Bird’s nose comically bleeds after the act. Aside from the naturalistic aesthetic and the obvious lack of titillating or didactic excess, the simple honesty and brevity of the scene alone seem to mark it as female. In particular, it is hard to imagine any male director having his male protagonist finish in just over 30 seconds, unless he was mining it for Judd Apatow-esque comedy. Here, Kyle, like Lady Bird is simply young and human, their normal looking (and believably teenage) bodies appearing humanly before Gerwig’s camera without mood-building music, sensuous lingerie and undressing scenes, slow motion effects or sumptuous Hollywood hair and makeup.

Ultimately however, it is not who Lady Bird chooses to have sex with, or how much of it she has which defines her, because as with many millennial speak works, it is the non-romantic relationships between females that shape the film and her character. As Gerwig said,

I just don’t feel like I’ve seen very many movies about 17-year-old girls where the question is not, ‘Will she find the right guy’ or ‘Will he find her?’. The question should be: ‘Is she going to occupy her personhood?’ Because I think we’re very unused to seeing female characters, particularly young female characters, as people (...) And that is something that *really* annoys the shit out of me. (in Zuckerman 2017: online, original italics)

I include the last part of that quote because it strikes me as being something Lady Bird herself would say, and as such underscores the intense intimacy held between filmmaker/author and subject in this mode. Gerwig also frames her own film exceptionally well here, the central question in this work, as in others of a similar ilk, really is: will she ‘occupy her personhood’. As such, the film’s closing image is of Lady Bird, now calling herself by her birth name, Christine, standing dishevelled in front of church steps. It’s the morning after her first college party (and subsequent first alcohol poisoning hospital visit) and she has just left a voicemail for her mother telling her that she loves her. Christine looks beyond the camera for a moment and then to the side, unsure perhaps of what to do next, or of where to go. Then, she inhales and the film cuts to black. If Christine in *Lady Bird* has been engaged in the millennial speak self-aware journey of self-definition (Sudjic 2019: online), or this 21st century neoliberal project of the self (Genz 2017: 18) she remains, at the film’s end, unfinished, although, perhaps, a little more equipped.

SALLY ROONEY, *NORMAL PEOPLE* (2018): GLITTERING WITH TALK

The appointed ‘first great millennial author’ and likely the buzziest figure of the literary zeitgeist of recent years is Irish author Sally Rooney (b. 1991). In a 2021 editorial by Thomas-Corr for *The Guardian* on the dominance of young women in literary fiction she still singles out the “cultural buzz of a Sally Rooney” and “the Sally Rooney phenomenon” (online). So too does Grady for *Vox*, speaking of “the cult of Sally Rooney” and suggesting that reading her books has become a “status symbol” (2019: online). Hu for *The Ringer* calls her no less than “a voice of a generation” (2019: online). Over the course of two novels released in quick

succession (followed in 2021 by *Beautiful World, Where Are You*) Rooney cemented her status as a bona fide literary sensation. Therefore, her influence upon, what Cummins called in mid-2021, “the emerging canon of millennial fiction” (2021: online) should not be understated.

With her 2017 debut *Conversations with Friends*, Rooney captured headlines and popular attention in a way few contemporary literary fiction novelists have since the turn of the century. The novel, a study of four interconnected sometimes-friends and sometimes-lovers narrated by Trinity College student and sometimes-poet Frances, established Rooney’s now famed style and subject matter. In short, in the novel, college-aged best friends and ex-girlfriends Frances and Bobbi become increasingly messily intertwined and romantically involved with the rather unhappily married thirty-something Melissa and Nick. As the title implies, the novel is about the conversations that the novel’s central quartet, Frances, Bobbi, Melissa and Nick, are near-constantly engaged in. These conversations, which frequently “spiral out” (Rooney 2017: 303) to traverse everything from the middling to the “momentous” (8) contribute to an aesthetic that “glitters with talk” (Schwartz 2017: online). Schwartz described the novel as possessing a “lucid and exacting style” which is “uncluttered” by the figurative language common to literary novels, instead offering a quiet beauty (online).

Beyond its aesthetics, *Conversations with Friends* is fundamentally a story of becoming, with Frances in particular in the process of self-construction. As she explains, “at any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that’s the kind of person I am” (Rooney 2017: 19). In part, the ‘person that she is’ is egotistical yet self-effacing to the point of being damaged, acutely observant yet wilfully naïve, insincere yet precariously vulnerable, amoral yet morally superior. However, akin to the sympathy Gerwig extends to her flawed females, the authorial gaze that defines Rooney’s debut is distinctly non-judgemental. As Waldman observes, Rooney is “acute and sensitive”, she “may have pinned these fragile creatures to a board, but her eye is not cruel” (2017: online). Under the intensely

close scrutiny Rooney subjects these characters to it seems in the end that she simply finds them human. As Bobbi tells Frances, “I’m just a normal person” (Rooney 2017: 229).

Normal People, with its similarly indicative title, questions what normality looks like in the millennial epoch, what normal dating is, what a normal selfhood looks like. Charting primarily the on-again, off-again romantic entanglement and friendship of its two young protagonists Marianne and Connell, the story spans from 2011 to 2015 as the pair graduate high school and embark upon university life and young adulthood. Traversing similar thematic coming-of-age ground to *Lady Bird*, the novel both feels familiar and utterly new, transposing conventional touchstones to the on-again-off-again and frequently disappointment filled landscape of millennial dating.⁴⁴ Beyond any specific narrative events, which are often placed on secondary footing, Rooney’s incredibly nuanced and intimate depiction of Marianne and Connell’s complex inner lives and desires, and her distinctly millennial mechanisms of representation crystallised the book’s popular and critical success; particularly among young women.

As McCalpin writes for *NPR*, much of the affect of Rooney’s work lies in her dialogue and prose, and the aesthetic harmony of the two. Stylistically, they are both “slyly ironic, alternately evasive and direct, but always articulate. (They) cut to the heart” (2019: online). As she continues, Rooney:

seems remarkably comfortable writing about sex—even uncomfortable sex—and she seamlessly integrates well-crafted texts, emails, and Facebook posts into her narratives like the digital native she is. Yet while (she) may write about apparent aimlessness and all the distractions of our age, her novels are laser-focused and word-perfect. They build power

⁴⁴ Particularly, Rooney’s on-again-off-again partnerships and love squares, and the lengthy editorialising undertaken by her characters regarding their various nebulous not-relationships, sexual encounters and complex, charged friendships feels indicative of the mode’s overall interpretation of the current dating landscape. It also seems to encapsulate the generationally millennial fear of emotional involvement and commitment (Berger 2018), and its connection to the broken state of monogamous love in the 21st century. Plausibly, Rooney’s precision at capturing the disappointment of millennial dating is, in large part, what caused her first two books to strike such a chord amongst her millennial female readership.

by a steady accretion of often simple declarative sentences that track minuscule shifts in feelings. (online)

Written in a third-person, limited narrative style, with chapters that alternate between Marianne and Connell's perspective, Rooney's colloquial, precise and unvarnished prose seems to serve as an astute yet gentle encasement of the intimate, revealing, vulnerable, and alternately guarded and masked conversations that fill the novel. Although Waldman notes this of *Conversations with Friends*, in Rooney's harmonious aesthetic of talk, dialogue tags are also completely absent in *Normal People*. While this absence does not represent an entirely new mode of expression, as Waldman attests, "in some fiction, the choice to present dialogue without signpost punctuation can feel affected; here, it underscores how talk is not just a part of the story but the very material of the book" (2017: online).

As with other millennial speak works, *Normal People* is devoted to the things its characters say (and also don't say). In particular, the intimate and revealing conversations between Marianne and Connell—both the profound ability to understand one another that these conversations exhibit, and the misunderstandings big and small that are also littered throughout them—are central to their characterisation, their conceptions of themselves and to readers' connection to them. These conversations, which create a "sense of total privacy between them" (Rooney 2018: 16), are frequently wholehearted and utterly and unselfconsciously earnest, but they can also be arch, disingenuous or sometimes even cruel. They explore their personalities, their relationship, their world, "the novels he's reading, the research she studies, the precise historical moment that they are currently living in, the difficulty of observing such a moment in process" (165-166), spanning also time, distance and various modes of communication. Described as a "self-conscious generation", focused on "self-image" and "peer approval", and heavily reliant on "crowdsourced opinions" (Carson in Berger 2018: 123), millennials spend more time texting and talking with their peers than any other prior generation (48). As such, Rooney's dialogue-heavy style enshrines the importance of conversation (both in person and

online) and self-expression to an acutely millennial journey towards personhood. As Rooney describes through Connell, “At times he has the sensation that he and Marianne are like figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronisation that it surprises them both” (2018: 166). Their lengthy, verbose discussions, which “mov(e) back and forth from the conceptual to the personal” (166), afford them both an intimacy and vulnerability otherwise unknowable.

Normal People's dialogue-centric narrative style is one that Thomas-Corr also perceives as being “distinctly modern”, attributed to Twitter-enthusiast Rooney's own “long exchanges with friends online” (2018: online). McCalpin similarly pinpoints the novel's newness and its distinctly “21st century perspective” on the “insecurity” of coming of age (2019: online). In particular, the late-capitalist, neo-liberal and postfeminist landscape that has defined the coming-of-age experiences of millennials, is one which—as has been established—demands that the journey of the self must be monologized upon and self-scrutinized. As Genz puts it (perspicaciously, if a little harshly), in this climate, “youthful restlessness and existential anxiety (are) refracted through the lens of a narcissistic and selfish kind of individualism that legitimises an obsessive investment in self-interest” (2017: 22). Much of *Normal People*'s dialogue, narration and free indirect speech—as with other millennial texts—is accordingly devoted to the protagonist's engagement with the construction, and this kind of commodification, of the self. Their conversations also reflect a keen awareness of the relationship (and often disjunct) between their private and public selves, and the reception of those selves. In particular Marianne, though not a writer like Frances in *Conversations*, exhibits a desire towards narrativizing her life, describing in the moment she first knows herself to be loved by Connell as “now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life” (Rooney 2018: 78).

Rooney also pays attention to the aesthetic texture of her epoch, drawing focus to the contextual details of “a Kanye West song playing, the one with the Curtis Mayfield sample” (2018: 67) or to Trinity College boys wearing “the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos” (120). These millennial culture touchstones—which Gerwig similarly interweaves throughout *Lady Bird*—draw upon the world of art, fashion, music, film, literature and social media and beyond temporally grounding the novel, reflect the millennial world as an aesthetic one, and millennials as aesthetically fixated. In much the same way that she understatedly peppers her prose with these scene-setting particulars, Rooney crafts a realist narrative world which is both of immense interest to and a distant backdrop for her characters. Given their intensely inward focus, structurally speaking, as with *Lady Bird*, *Normal People*’s ‘Two Days-’, ‘Six Weeks-’ and ‘Three Months Later’ styled chapters offer a string of connected but also standalone vignettes that possess varying levels of gravitas and broader significance to the novel. This means that narratively conventional moments are often bypassed in favour of more quotidian experiences like Connell “wip(ing) crumbs out from under the toaster” while Marianne “reads him jokes from Twitter” (165). An abeyance, perhaps, for the dominant masculine plot-driven narrative mode (Bainbridge 2008: 184).⁴⁵

Mirroring the intimacy of Marianne and Connell’s relationship, Rooney brings readers into these intensely private, but oft narratively glossed over moments, and views them in close-up, much as her cinematic contemporaries do. As Kellman observed, the ‘cinematic novel’ is

⁴⁵ Most millennial texts are similarly slight in conventional narrative terms, which is interesting considering their coming-of-age, Bildungsroman-esque framework. Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* serves well here as an illustration. Not just a tale of a mean-lennial anti-hero, as Greenberg describes it, this ostensible anti-narrative jettisons the conventional young woman’s marriage plot and social ambition plot, taking with it the Künstlerroman (or creative ambition plot) and the Bildungsroman form as we normally envision it (2021: 191-2). It makes sense that the stalled progression of the Messy Millennial Woman is mirrored in a sort of stalled or short-circuited plot, where typical narrative and coming-of-age milestones and beats are missed or reimagined, rather than highlighted. However, this abeyance—which will be most on show in my still life chapter—may also point to a bigger stylistic harmony to be found in these various 21st century female-led modes, a picture that will continue to evolve with the progress of this dissertation.

just as capable of constructing “high angle shots, fades, tracking, and close-ups” (1987: 472) as film, and increasingly the aesthetics of the two mediums appear to be intertwined. In this light, the literary close-up becomes a kind of leitmotif of Rooney’s novel. From the start of the novel, both the narrator and Marianne and Connell gaze at one another with astonishing closeness and scrutiny. In the opening pages, Connell notices that Marianne “has no shoes on, only tights”, “watches her lick the spoon”, and remembers the time a few weeks ago when he had seen her in “a plain white bathrobe, tied in the normal way. Her hair was wet, and her skin had that glistening look like she had just been applying face cream” (Rooney 2018: 7-17).

There is an acute physicality and visual character to these descriptions here and arguably the “female relationship to detail and generality” (Bovenschen 1986: 48) that my introduction foregrounded. Or, what Virginia Woolf termed when describing Dorothy Richardson’s writing: a female sentence capable “of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes” (in Bovenschen 1986: 48). Although Woolf and Richardson’s prose appears overrich in comparison to that of the Rooney school, which tends to be cleaner and crisper, this style, this interest in ‘suspending the frailest particle’—especially through a female subjectivity—marks the inner millennial world as a product of the female Modern stream of consciousness novel; and not only through its expansive dialogue, as I proposed earlier. Perhaps in taking into consideration Woolf and Richardson’s contemporary Kate Mansfield—who often imbricates or blends her rather substantial sections of dialogue with the roving motion of inner monologue, and punctuates both with crystalline yet vivid and deeply detailed description—the connection is even clearer. In *Normal People*, this detail oriented female sentence is witnessed particularly when the characters gaze upon themselves, as evidenced in Marianne’s first narratorial moment:

She sits at her dressing table looking at her face in the mirror. Her face lacks definition around the cheeks and jaw. It’s a face like a piece of technology, and her two eyes are cursors blinking. Or it’s reminiscent of the moon reflected in something, wobbly and oblique. It expresses everything all at once, which is the same as expressing nothing. (2018: 20)

Rooney's tight, observational prose hones-in on Marianne's physical appearance here in a way which certainly evokes the cinematic character of a sustained point-of-view close-up shot. More notable however, is the way that this sequence's mirror imagery—like a myriad of similar sequences that populate the novel—elucidates the importance of the physical as a reflection of the inner. Or, in Sartrean terms, the importance of the act of looking to the process of being.

As a postfeminist female subject, Marianne is observably concerned with and aware of how she looks and appears, both for herself but also to men. Early in the book she becomes aware of herself as a sexual subject/object when a “barman looks frankly at her breasts while she’s talking”, something she didn’t think men really did “outside of films and TV” (Rooney 2018: 53). Ultimately, his gaze “gives her a little thrill of femininity” (53). In an early conversation regarding this dissertation with an older male Irish academic, one whose sagacity I greatly admire, he said in relatively un-academic terms that Rooney’s novel was the kind of text to set back the course of feminism, especially in an Irish context. Coughlan describes Ireland as, up till recently a “narrowly patriarchal” state “obsessed with the concealment and repression of emotional and sexual life”, which in literary terms continues to canonize depictions of “strongly gendered (masculine) Irishness” (2004: 176, 195). Amongst the resounding wave of praise for Rooney’s work, I was unable to locate a source which corroborated his opinion, although anecdotally from my own conversations with friends (and also with other academics) I know he is not alone in that viewpoint. Although I disagree, he raises an interesting point, one which points to a bigger critique of postfeminism as an empty locus point of commodified sexuality and deceptive rhetoric around women’s sexual empowerment and liberation.

Although they tend to err—not unfairly but sometimes unforgivingly—on the side of criticism, Tasker and Negra’s description of their intention “to explore the address postfeminist culture makes to female spectators while acknowledging its limitations” (2007: 21) seems particularly poignant here. Rooney—although often cagey in interviews—said that she “could write a feminist fantasy novel where gender dynamics don’t exist anymore” (in Parker 2018: online), but *Normal People* is clearly not intended to be that novel. However, it is, I would attest, a novel that is greatly aware of female spectatorial pleasure. It is true that Marianne as a female subject/object often equates power and control with love, describing herself as “in (Connell’s) power, he had chosen to redeem her, she was redeemed” (Rooney 2018: 435). “How strange”, she continues, “to feel herself so completely under the control of another person, but also how ordinary” (435). Although there is a case to be made for emotional damage brought about by an abusive home life, Marianne is depicted by Rooney as being intensely self-aware and self-analytical. Thus, as a postfeminist female she is (ostensibly) free to pursue the sexual and romantic life she wishes, and although those desires may be problematized, she can also be argued to be empowered by her acknowledgment of them and her choice to pursue them, as are the female readers who may derive their own spectatorial pleasure from Rooney’s portrayal of those desires.

Much as *Lady Bird* was labelled as (and praised for being) a “feminist movie without a feminist agenda” (Pruner 2017: online), Rooney’s vision of feminism seems predicated on foregrounding the experiences of women and allowing them to be de-politicised individuals. In this way, she frees Marianne to pursue a personal and sexual identity which may be seen to be counter-feminist. With her shared focus on the inner life of Marianne and Connell, Rooney also succeeds in revealing the breadth of both characters’ complexities and neuroses. They are both flawed in equal but unique measure. They are also both clearly postfeminist subjects, politically aware but not necessarily active, navigating what Rooney terms “the gap between

gender expectations and reality” (in Parker 2018: online). Across the course of *Normal People*, they critique, evaluate, adopt, mimic and shed a range of both traditional and contemporary gendered traits that Rooney’s “Twitter voice” or casually self-revelatory narration (Barry 2018: online) divulges without judgement, including Connell’s brushes with toxic masculinity and Marianne’s desires for sexual and romantic subservience. There is a sense with *Normal People*, and other works of the growing canon, that under the millennial female gaze both female and male anxieties can be equally acknowledged. Abele positively offers that postfeminism’s enshrinement of a more open vision of masculinity has allowed a slew of male protagonists who are “works in progress, acknowledging the limits of their negotiations and self-actualization” (2016: xix) to exist.⁴⁶

Although using broad terms appear to be an anathema to Felski, I will attempt to do so here in order to draw a comparison between the late 20th century field of feminist novels of self-discovery and Rooney’s, as another kind of paragon or prototype of millennialism. Felski categorised these texts as reworks of the Bildungsroman form that function as emancipation narratives, “tracing a process of separation as the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge” (1989: 124). As such, she suggests that the realist feminist coming-of-age or experience novel of the late 20th century emphasises autonomy, rejecting both the model of the heterosexual couple and sexuality, with erotic passion presented as a danger to the protagonists’ “often precarious sense of independent identity” (131). Interestingly, the opposite can be observed in *Normal People*. Connell, as Marianne’s primary heterosexual partner, is arguably the single-most formative figure in her journey of self-discovery, despite their relationship

⁴⁶ It must be said here that although the female millennial canon is frequently populated by men who are shown to be actively engaged in the same process of self-definition, and who showcase their own insecurities and anxieties—particularly regarding dating, sex and love—for the young women in these texts, it rarely makes them better boyfriends. Thus while Connell is a bookish, earnest and mostly sensitive young man, whose feelings of class inadequacy shape him greatly, (particularly in contrast to Marianne’s financial privilege), and make him a sympathetic male millennial, other female-authored millennial representations feel more critical, including that of Gerwig’s Kyle.

being a very millennially open and ill-defined one. Likewise, sex in the millennial canon presents itself as the forefront of the emancipated female experience and as with *Lady Bird*, the femaleness of the novel's literary gaze makes itself apparent in its depiction of sex. De Beauvoir wrote that "the erotic experience is one that most poignantly reveals to human beings their ambiguous condition; they experience it as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject" (2011: 883), suggesting that while a woman assumes herself "first as object", through the carnal condition she can ultimately come to have "a more authentic experience of herself" (883-834). Rooney's writing places itself within this subject/object ambiguity, writing in detail about Marianne's complex range of physical and emotional experiences during sex.

Without any of the cringe-worthy salaciousness or penis metaphors that frankly characterise much male-authored prose, and avoiding the sacred/pornographic binary, Rooney also tends to address the physicality of sex in the relation to the emotional or interior experience. And while she doesn't shy away from the graphic mechanics of sex, her goal is not titillation, at least not in the male sense. In one sequence for instance Rooney writes in her quintessentially flat, observational tone:

She gets onto the bed while he switches off the television. He sits beside her and they kiss again. His touch has a narcotic effect. A pleasurable stupidity comes over her, she wants very badly to remove her clothes. She lies back against the quilt and he leans over her. It has been years now. She feels his cock pressed hard against her hip and she shudders with the punishing force of her desire.

And later,

He touches her hair. She feels his fingertips brush the back of her neck.
Do you want it like this? he says.
However you want.
He gets on top of her, one hand planted on the mattress beside her face, the other in her hair.
I haven't done this in a while, he says.
That's okay.
When he's inside her she hears her own voice crying out again and again, strange raw cries. (2018: 393-395)

This excerpt seems to enact Gwynne's notion that contemporary literary depictions of sex by women can "reconfigur(e) female sexuality as active and agentic, offering an antidote to

cultural elisions of female desire” (2013: 6), where the “vocabulary of sex is much more concerned with describing what happens to a man’s body during sexual arousal than a woman’s” (Richardson in Gwynne 2013: 6).

Rooney’s descriptions, particularly her more intimate and vivid descriptions in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* also remind me of Cixous’ thoughts regarding feminine writing and the depiction of sex, that:

almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity; about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain minuscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at once timorous and soon to be forthright. (1976: 885)

In Rooney’s millennial aesthetic, sex is given the millennial mode’s characteristically close up attention in a way which reflects (primarily) her female protagonists’ experience of their ‘minuscule-immense’ bodies. Through her close-up and conversational lens she also places their ruminations—both inner and verbalised—about their very particular turn-ons, their turn-offs, their pleasure, their desires and their doubts, on equal structural footing to the actual act. Because her gaze is a female one, Rooney also represents the intimacy of sex in as simple terms as “Come to bed, then, she says. He goes with her”, where “They have sex again, not speaking very much”, where—without being denied meaning—sex is placed the same human terms as “she lies down again, listening to the sound of the pipes” (2018: 158).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ As well as allowing it to be quotidian, Rooney’s vision of millennial sex is broadly ‘active and agentic’—outside of Marianne’s submissive sexual relationship with Swedish ‘maybe’ artist Lukas, where the “the quality of gratification is thin and hard, arriving too quickly and then leaving her sick and shivery” (2018: 254)—and in this way *Normal People* adheres to the postfeminist vision of sex-positivity. Without detouring too much, while sex-positive feminism has allowed women to more freely express and pursue all manner of sexual desires and, if they wish, to flaunt their own sexuality and sexual agency, some cultural critics suggest sex-positive feminism has simply further empowered a model of casual sex created by men for their pleasure that relegates non-experimental or non-willing young women as prudish (Hinsliff 2022: online). Other millennial texts include sex scenes that, while aesthetically similar to Rooney’s, embody the complexity of the current sex-positive millennial hook-up culture more explicitly. Dunham’s *Girls* is a good example as, again, is Moshfegh’s *My Year*. With the same precise observational tone Rooney employs, Moshfegh’s unnamed narrator says her not-boyfriend Trevor’s “favourite thing was to fuck my mouth while I lay on my back pretending to be asleep, as if I wouldn’t notice his penis slamming into the back of my throat” (2018: 175). However,

As a succinct caveat, although I have deliberately refrained from complicating my discussion of the novel by addressing the television adaptation of *Normal People* for BBC3 and Hulu, it's worth noting here how much of the conversation centred around its portrayal of sex and praising the work of female intimacy coordinator Ita O'Brien (Kaufman 2020: online). Sex is certainly part of the fabric of *Normal People*, as is the case in many other millennial works by female authors. And although it is and has become a genre dominated by women, the same cannot be said to be true of recent literary fiction releases by male authors. In fact, several authors and critics—including millennial novelist Megan Nolan, author of the bleak and blistering anti-romance *Acts of Desperation* (2021), a story centred on female desire—have suggested that in the current political climate, male authors (especially those of a certain artistic echelon) are reticent to write about sex at all (Thomas-Corr 2021: online).⁴⁸

Beyond depictions of romance and sex, notably Felski also describes the late 20th century Bildungsroman form as being an “*optimistic* genre, bearing witness to women’s self-identification as an oppressed group and hence as a potential challenge to existing social values” (1989: 125, original italics). While the journey towards self-knowledge remains in millennial speak works—and many other similarities such as an absence of class consciousness, a delayed coming-of-age timeline and a streak of “romantic individualism” (127) can be observed—the purposive patriarchy dismantling narrative has been shed. In the

the thought occurs to the narrator as she impassively watches porn and, as with other millennial texts, the moment isn't part of a coherent feminist evaluation of the current sexual landscape. Rather, Dunham, Moshfegh and other millennial speak authors and directors choose to depict sex (even disappointing and arguably problematic sex) through black, flat comedy or as an ipso facto reality.

⁴⁸ As Thomas-Corr's article (2021) explains, the reasons for this are manifold but also difficult to assess with certainty. Likely candidates are the evolution of the #MeToo movement, the rise of cancel culture, and perhaps also—as this chapter has also intimated—a lack of male counterparts to these thriving young female forms of creative expression. Using the previous quote from Moshfegh's *My Year* as a barometer, it seems unfathomable that a male author could have a sentence like this published without it being interpreted as misogynistic and deeply problematic, especially if it was delivered in Moshfegh's characteristic blank compendious prose; even if he had couched it in a more sensitive conversation about consent and/or aligned it with some kind of judgement of Trevor's sexual predilections—adjustments that would certainly shift the narrative experience

late 20th century feminist writers tended to smooth over complications to construct texts where women moved from a state of alienation to the “attainment of a meaningful identity” (151). They also typically populated their works with the kind of female protagonists you really wanted to root for. Alternately, the millennial text tends to leave its female, for all of their soul-searching, at a level of complication and messiness akin to that which they began with. As with *Lady Bird*, *Normal People*’s ending is characterised by liminality, with Connell leaving for New York, and Marianne trading her pain of feeling “unworthy” for the probable “pain of loneliness”, her growth both as small and as significant as her being able to tell him “You should go” (Rooney 2018: 441-442).⁴⁹

Although Felski tends to argue away from the idea of a ‘feminine consciousness’ to focus on the “social and material conditions” and cultural narratives that impact women, and become inextricably part of our deepest psychosexual gender identity (1989: 123)—while, as my introduction and this opening chapter undoubtedly reflect, I remain more open to the possibility that both may exist—she forms the perfect precis of this discussion when she states: “It is in narrative that the governing ideological conceptions of male and female roles are fleshed out, the configurations of plot mapping out the potential contours of women’s lives as they can be imagined at a given historical moment” (124). As others would suggest (McCann 2017, Sudjic 2019) in a millennial world there is and can no longer be *the* voice of *the* generation, and perhaps even—as Hannah Horvath in *Girls* sought to be—being *a* voice of *a* generation is an equally tenuous position. Rooney herself is sceptical of the title—as the experiences of her stand-in, writer Alice in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* particularly evince.

⁴⁹ In *At the Clinic* (2016), Rooney first wrote about Marianne and Connell, but reading the short in relation to *Normal People*, it reflects that the characters are evidently still in a continuum of evolving and devolving, moving through cyclical patterns within themselves, with each other and with others. Rooney describes it best, in the same pointed, clean prose, through Marianne: “As a twenty-three-year-old Marianne is occasionally subject to the same dismal anxieties that characterised her adolescent life” (2020: online).

However, she and what Barry labels her “hipster luminaries”, namely Gerwig and Dunham (2018: online), are unarguably shaping the ‘contours’ of women’s and adult girls’ lives in a contemporary epoch with their iconic portrayals of the “‘unmoored’ postfeminist subject” (Genz and Brabon 2009: 7).

Interestingly, Aroesti contends that this ‘unmoored postfeminist subject’ has already become popular to the point of feeling ubiquitous—and I agree that the figure of the Messy Millennial Woman has proliferated rapidly, including in texts not authored by millennial female creators. What Aroesti suggests, is that the increasing popularity of this figure has meant that she is no longer a “bracingly realistic proxy” (Aroesti 2022, online), especially when she is represented by non-millennials, often because they adhere to a more comic, saccharine and commercially palatable portrayal, one that, in a sense, returns to the new millennium *Bridget Jones* or *Sex and the City* aesthetic model.⁵⁰ In Nelson’s review of Seligman’s *Shiva Baby*, which she praised as “millennial woes done right”, she gives this succinct (if negative) overview of this very new mode’s rapid evolution and expansion:

A messy millennial in an on-and-off relationship with liminal job prospects has been a saturated archetype since Lena Dunham (...) It has been haphazardly recreated in many character study-esque television series and (...) coming-of-age films. Occasionally it demonstrates the nuanced fragmentation of love in a confusing world of blurred relationship boundaries and dying hopes in the gig economy. More often it gets reduced to shallow deep-fakes of toxic relationships with graphics of text bubbles and blaming the woman at the centre of the narrative for her poor choice in a partner. (2021: online)

I prefaced this generic expansion in the very first pages of this chapter but it is interesting to pull it apart briefly here because it speaks to something about aesthetic (and thematic) trends

⁵⁰ This is something that feels most obvious to me, as it does to Aroesti, in television, where for every *Fleabag*—or for every Micaela Coel’s *I May Destroy You* (2020)—there now seems to be three mass produced streaming platform alternatives. However, the so-called Sally Rooney effect may also soon lead to a new form of the millennial speak or millennial fiction novel, one which is more aspirational, lighter and commercial in character. Although, with the oldest millennials now entering their forties, it remains to be seen how millennial-aged female creators will further develop the mode that they have pioneered, or whether they will turn to distinctly new aesthetic outposts as they mature. At least on thematic terms, even Rooney leaves at least one of her female leads, Eileen in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* with a rather more conventional domestic ending, although arguably she is still somewhat of a mess inside.

in the 2020s—something which will continue to become more evident as this thesis progresses. This is that they are, perhaps unsurprisingly in a climate that is voracious for constant content, more ephemeral than ever; both more rapid to form collectively, to develop their aesthetic parameters and thematic tropes, and then to be diluted.

For now, however, it is interesting to contemplate where all these ‘unmoored’, messy and anxious yet paradoxically self-certain young women are going and when they will arrive to the end of all their becoming. While we narratively leave both Marianne and Christine/ Lady Bird just as a new moment of change has been precipitated—with their self and future in flux—Marianne’s experiences, like Christine’s, complicated as they may have been, have also been “a gift” which now “belongs to her” (Rooney 2018: 441). Maybe we are a Humesque deconstructed “bundle” of “perceptions”, sensations and selves (2010: 562), but in an affinity with the metamodern desire to return to meaning I will explore in my next chapter, there is clearly a desire by both characters—as surrogates for the unmoored millennial woman—to know that self and its possibilities. Even as they, and we, understand that the millennial female journey of self-fashioning may well be an endless one.

POST-POSTMODERNISM



THE POSTFEMINIST FICTIVE RECONFIGURATION
OF THE REAL

POST-POSTMODERNISM

THE POSTFEMINIST FICTIVE RECONFIGURATION OF THE REAL

“Postmodernism is a freewheeling, unfettered,
and unapologetic pursuit of style.”

Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Tall Building
Artistically Reconsidered* (1986)

If the birth of Modernism could be neatly encapsulated by Virginia Woolf’s decree that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” (1966: 320), and if postmodernism similarly made itself known in the iconic silkscreen paintings of Andy Warhol and the changing skylines of contemporary cities in the 1960s, the parameters of metamodernism or post-postmodernism are less clearly defined.⁵¹ While skylines and skyscrapers aren’t the same as novels and films, I begin this chapter with the words of Ada Louise Huxtable, the pioneer of contemporary architectural criticism, because it touches at the heart of what made postmodernism both so

⁵¹ The term metamodernism has widely been traced back to Zavarzadeh’s (1975) use of the term “metamodern narrative” and his description of an (at-that-time) emerging aesthetic trend in American literature (1975: 69). He perceived the metamodern narrative as a kind of as-it-is aesthetic which reckoned with the postmodern epistemological crisis and which, not incomparably to today’s form, inhabited the complexities of the “meaningful/meaningless” dichotomy (69). Realistically, however, Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s 2010 article “Notes on Metamodernism” was the catalyst for the academic implementation of the term, and for the burgeoning field of post-postmodern study to which this chapter belongs. The term post-postmodern seems to arrive a little later with the first well-documented reference made by architect Tom Turner in his book *City as Landscape: A Post Post-Modern View of Design and Planning* (1995), in which he describes a design school that tempers the eclecticism and ‘anything goes’ model of postmodernism, reorienting it towards a more timeless and harmonic form of design. However, the term has been proliferated in arguably in the same timeframe as Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism, reflecting that cultural and literary scholars have, primarily in the last ten to fifteen years, begun in greater numbers trying to define what precisely comes after postmodernism.

brilliant, and so much a product of a cultural epoch which has now past. Attuned deeply to the power of creativity, Huxtable was broadly in favour of this unfettered pursuit, propounding that “the exploration of style can, and does, enlarge the boundaries of art”, yet she also cautioned that there should be a “necessary attachment to reality” for art (or architecture) to retain its value into the future (1986: 63). While I began this line of inquiry with a desire to uphold style *as* substance, I recognise, as did Huxtable—and, as I will explore here, as do the metamodernists—that style may become more substantial when it acts in service of higher truths. Or, rather, that creativity with some fetters may augur connection.

Coeval to the timeframe of this thesis, metamodernism or post-postmodernism begins to be ushered in from the late 1990s and much more markedly arises with the turn of the century (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017, Josephson Storm 2021), reflecting a waning of the philosophical, cultural and artistic value of postmodernism to a society now radically changed. As many theorists have also noted, a “bewildering variety of meanings” have become attached to postmodernism since its widespread cultural inception (Green 2005: 1), resulting in an increasingly unbounded discursive field, and reducing perhaps its value to practitioners. Even at the movement’s outset Lyotard, the postmodern luminary, described his leading definition of postmodernism: “incredulity toward metanarratives”, as “simplifying to the extreme” (1984: xxiv). Likewise, Eagleton offers a concise and compendious interpretation of the movement, only to immediately undercut it. He states that postmodernism is:

a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation (...) [and] a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, as well as between art and every-day experience. (1996a: vii)

Then, Eagleton satirises that the above is simply what a “particular kind of student today is likely to believe” (viii).

Yet, for the sake of clarity and this discussion, which is not intended to be a theoretical interrogation of postmodernism—nor of the theory which surrounds it—I will hold, at least in part, to these “‘popular’ brands of postmodern thought” (viii). This is not to deny that as a movement predicated on “diversity, fragmentation and singularity”, postmodernism’s internal conflicts and contradictions are in fact central to understanding the nature of the postmodern condition (Davis 2004: 71), as well as perhaps one of the reasons it must by necessity become supplanted by a variety of new forms. Thus, in short, while I want to avoid oversimplification, in this chapter I will take postmodernism as the gestalt it is widely considered to be in order to provide some essential (and familiar) characteristics. Those characteristics which still tend to be widely agreed upon in the sphere of influence to which today’s metamodern composers belong, and upon which the narrative and aesthetic shifts which have occurred in the 21st century can be considered.

Much as I quoted from Lentricchia in my introduction, who suggested that New Criticism may be dead, but its spectre vividly remained (1981), Davis similarly proposes that while we may have entered into an age beyond postmodernism (and poststructuralism), the so-called ‘death’ of any movement only heralds its ‘afterlife’ (2004: 5). Therefore, coming *after* a movement inevitably entails “being still being bound up with it, still concerned to come to terms with its legacy” (5). Thus, given that postmodernism is both a historical period and a cultural phenomenon (Eagleton 1996a: vii), post-postmodernism as a period arrives chronologically after postmodernism, but as a cultural phenomenon it is still philosophically and artistically intertwined with its predecessor. To continue inhabiting my New Critical frame for a moment, as Jancovich articulates, when postmodernism was ushered in, “the New Critical concern with the unity of the text, or the struggle for meaning, (was) replaced by a view of textuality as a perpetual process in which unity and meaning are impossible” (1993: 148). In contrast, as Van den Akker and Vermeulen explain, today’s metamodernists see the dominant

artistic and philosophical form of the 2000s and onwards as, alluding to Raymond Williams, a “structure of feeling” and “sensitivity” (2017: 39) that is attuned to the postmodern but that also represents a departure from its deconstructive demands. As such, before I delve too substantially into the term and explore its aesthetic outposts, it must be prefaced that today’s metamodernists have created texts that must be approached with a view to their aesthetic unity, the gaze made apparent through that unity and the affective possibilities that unity may create; an intention I in fact wish to evolve throughout this thesis in its entirety.

DEFINING POST-POSTMODERNISM: THE IDEOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A NEW SENSIBILITY

An early contributor to the ‘what comes after postmodernism’ discussion, in 1987 Fekete contemplated life after postmodernism postulating a “renewal of value discourse” and positing a realm of both art and theory which deconstructs and reconstructs in equal measure (2001: xiv). Yet, he proposed that it would do so in a way that avoids what he terms “reconstruction” (xiv). It’s a striking and effective word choice. Without narrowing the quasi-infinite latitudes of postmodernism that we have inherited, metamodernism at its core can be offered as a movement that seeks to find new spaces in that infiniteness where meaning can re-exist and be revalued. In this way, post-postmodernism can be understood as a kind of tempering of postmodernism.

Unlike postmodernism itself, in which the *post* of the portmanteau is often stressed, and a somewhat dramatic picture of a movement that dismantled meliorist narratives, disrupted the value of knowledge and upheaved aesthetic styles is often expounded, metamodernism does not appear to present a radical disavowal of what preceded it, either postmodernism or modernism. Rather, metamodernists tend to acknowledge that theirs is a position deeply

marked by the postmodern.⁵² It should also thus be noted here that despite the semantic differences of the prefixes *meta* and *post-post* in metamodernism and post-postmodernism, I will use these terms interchangeably in this chapter, not to negate the importance of the very loaded notion of *post* to the original movement, but as a reflection of the to-date lack of critical consensus on its 21st century iteration. O’Gorman and Eaglestone also serve as my inspiration in this respect. As they succinctly evaluate in their own critical cartography of 21st century literature: “Literary critics and theorists, as well as critics of contemporary arts and culture more broadly, have in recent years been clambering for a definitive term for the new era many feel we are entering in the early twenty-first century” (2019: 2). While they state that a consensus has been reached regarding the “fizzl(ing) out” of postmodernism and its replacement by a mode of expression that maintains “postmodernism’s self-reflexive playfulness while also adhering to an underlying sense of emotional truthfulness” (2), they attest that no true consensus has been reached on the fitting name for this mode.⁵³

⁵² While it is too early in the development of metamodernism for an encyclopaedic entry of names, in the realm of critical and cultural theory Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) appear to be the most influential and currently the most widely referenced. As I will shortly mention, Josephson Storm (2021) has also both further expanded and refined the parameters of the field or sensibility. In more focused ways—as O’Gorman and Eaglestone (2019) also examine—other critics have also worked to shape and define what metamodernism might be and how it might look aesthetically and artistically. Kelly (2010), for instance, focuses on its connection to sincerity, Funk (2015) to reconstruction, and James (2019) to solace; James’ book stresses the need for the close reading of emotion and evokes the tensions and possibilities of solace and consolation in contemporary literature, which may also be understood as resolution. Alternately, Timmer (2010) explores metamodernism as to a ‘turn to the human’. In praxis and art, O’Gorman and Eaglestone’s collation also provides a pithy register of metamodernists, or post-postmodernists, that is suitable for this early stage of my chapter. They list, in order, Jonathan Lethem, Ali Smith, Jennifer Egan, Ben Lerner, George Saunders, Mohsin Hamid and Zadie Smith, and later, Sheila Heti, Adam Thirlwell and Nicola Barker; most of whom I will go on to mention in greater detail.

⁵³ Just as I opted for millennial speak as my definitive term, while recognizing its unlikeliness to become universal, O’Gorman and Eaglestone call the currently accepted, and perhaps most dominant label of post-postmodernism an “unfortunate catch-all and clumsy term” (2). Based upon conversations I have had with other academics who find it similarly lazy, it can therefore be prognosticated that post-postmodernism may be superseded in time. As such, O’Gorman and Eaglestone list some of the other titles in contention, including “altermodernism, hypermodernism, supermodernism, hysterical realism, digimodernism, The New Sincerity and metamodernism” (3). O’Gorman and Eaglestone state that the final two, The New Sincerity and metamodernism have held the most sway in literary studies and I agree. However, they discount New Sincerity from becoming the definitive term in contention because of its strictly textual focus. Whereas, they offer that the “broader in scope” metamodernism is—like

Moreover, as Eagleton validly catechised, postmodernism itself may have been less of the “wall-to-wall”, “dominant culture of (an) age” and more of a “sectoral and specific” phenomenon (1996b: 202), thus there is a danger when using “categories and heuristic labels” like metamodernism that the phenomena they describe may be “impoverish(ed)” if they are “defined carelessly or applied indiscriminately” (MacDowell 2017: 83). As Van den Akker and Vermeulen articulate, although the 21st century has witnessed “the emergence of various ‘new’, often overlapping, aesthetic phenomena” that are in some way “characterised by an attempt to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them” and by “the return of realist and modernist forms, techniques and aspirations” (28-29)—that is, by the traits that are coming to be associated with metamodernism—they still must be regarded with individual nuance. Therefore, as well as avoiding fixity in an emerging field, the interchangeable use of these terms reflects my understanding that meta or post-postmodernism—like their predecessor—may be better understood “not as an ‘age’”, or as an all-encompassing, singular, monolithic thing, “but rather as simply one structure of feeling belonging to certain outposts *of an age*” (88, original italics).

However, for the sake of this discussion it is necessary to still begin in a heuristic manner, and in artistic terms it can be argued rather concretely that while metamodern practitioners “attempt to move beyond” the now arguably “worn-out sensibilities and emptied practices” of postmodernism, they do so “not by radically parting with their attitudes and techniques but by incorporating and redirecting them towards new positions and horizons” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 47). Broadly speaking, these new positions and horizons

postmodernism was—a “wider cultural condition” that can be made manifest in artistic trends (3). Moreover, for the purpose of my discussion, and as O’Gorman and Eaglestone similarly connect, New Sincerity has been exclusively aligned with male authors, something I will unpack in due course. Like O’Gorman and Eaglestone—and their collected contributors—my dual use of post-postmodernism and metamodernism similarly and most simply reflects that for now these two terms dominate the current discourse, although likely this ‘definitive term’ is yet to be crowned, and perhaps even to be named.

involve sublimating the postmodern malaise, its negations, fragmentations and scepticisms, into what Josephson Storm in *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021) calls not a grand narrative but a “new grand synthesis” (8). As he elaborates,

Postmodern doubt can be made to doubt itself, and when cleansed of its negative dogmatism and lingering longing for lost certainties it can show us the way toward humble, emancipatory knowledge. Anti-foundationalism can become a new foundation. Postmodern cynicism and moral outrage can be transmuted into positive ends—Revolutionary Happiness and multispecies flourishing. Irony and despair can become fierce joy and hope. Beyond anti-essentialism is not a new essentialism, but a world of becoming. (4-5)

As a philosophical theory and a cultural reality, metamodernism allows for optimism and a return to the possibility of progress, even amongst the instability and doubts of our epoch. It also offers a new lens into the movements that preceded it, resolving, or seeking to resolve, the perhaps arbitrary putative demarcations drawn between modernism and postmodernism (25). To borrow Raymond Williams’ nomenclature—as Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) and MacDowell (2017) also do when discussing metamodernism—as a structure of feeling that belongs instead to what it understands as an ongoing continuum of human experience, metamodernism opens itself to both the past and the future, to both “destructive and ameliorative” forces (285) and to the Fekete-esque possibilities of reconstruction.⁵⁴ Ultimately it turns—at least in part, in ways—towards the ‘real’, towards knowledge and value, although it does so without dogmatism or orthodoxy. As Josephson-Storm concludes, metamodernism “is the beginning of a conversation, not an end to one” (285).

⁵⁴ As Williams states, a structure of feeling is “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (1977: 131), and it implies a process by which a pre-emergent structure of feeling becomes an articulated emergent cultural form. I choose to use this nomenclature in this chapter, not only because there is precedent, but because metamodernism/post-postmodernism as it is currently understood is more than just a literary movement. Although, for example, the millennial speak texts I featured in my previous chapter relate specifically to a way that a particular segment of the population is interacting with and negotiating the 21st century world, metamodernism speaks to both a more expansive and diffuse realm, which while not universal does have broader aesthetic and cultural implications. Ones which, however, are arguably not yet fully articulate or defined.

Thus, though it is a burgeoning field in both praxis and theory, post-postmodernism's philosophical underpinnings have become evident in a new world of aesthetics and textual representations in the 21st century; the more concrete world to which this dissertation belongs.⁵⁵ And although metamodernism is a heuristic label—useful in periodising the current moment but limited by its own instability, given that the movement in its nascency and by its very nature is often “characterised by oscillation” rather than “harmony” (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 37)—as a structure of feeling or sensibility, a certain kind of cultural and aesthetic “predilection” (44) can be and has been observed. While Grabes focuses on the ‘third aesthetic’ of postmodernism, that which began to develop in the 1980s and 90s, he describes art that, without renouncing the capaciousness of early postmodernism, “takes on a subtler character” or a “milder type of strangeness” (2008: 103).

Examining a slew of artworks and novels of the time he identifies several burgeoning artistic principles. This includes the heavy use of intertextuality and pastiche—but generally not for ironic ends, nor to emphasise the disjunct between what has come before and the *now*. Similarly, he suggests that these works explore and produce a variation of ‘the familiar’ but often with “minimal distance” (107). Also dominant is a return to realism. However, it is a new, or what he terms ‘experimental realism’, where “the conventions of realist narrative are for the most part retained, but at the same time the claim to an adequate representation of reality is questioned from within in varying ways” (109). If high postmodernism “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 1984: 81), its successor moves towards a “mutual relativizing” (Grabes 2008: 111), which finds and welcomes strangeness in the intersection of

⁵⁵ As with most metamodern scholars, I agree that although there are 20th century precedents, it is helpful to conceive of metamodernism as a cultural phenomenon and artistic sensibility that is ushered in by the new millennium.

reality and representation without making self-reflexivity, metafiction and deconstruction its singular hallmark.

FEMINISM, POSTFEMINISM AND METAMODERNISM: UNDERSTANDING A NEW FEMALE FORM OF EXPRESSION

Beyond these overarching characteristics, the interest of this investigation lies more specifically in women's relationship to the metamodern field. As I established in my introduction, there has been a longstanding intersection between feminist and postmodern paradigms. Postmodernism certainly provided fertile ground for many female artists like Marina Abramović, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, all of whom worked to complicate the meaning of a ubiquitous or known image. Likewise, authors like Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and Angela Carter have been, to an extent, canonised as voices that developed "feminist-postmodernist aesthetic strategies" (Garrett 2007: 38). These strategies alternately—although sometimes also in conjunction—"counteract(ed) patriarchal representations through the use of prior fictional allusion, irony, parody and self-reflexivity" and "revel(ed) in mythology, fantasy and the implementation of anti-realist distancing devices, to twist and upend patriarchal mythology from the inside" (36-37). Departing from the confessional and autobiographical mode which had characterised preceding feminist writings, Garrett suggests that the feminist postmodernist aesthetic frame excelled in exploring gender identity and politics through the development of multiple perspectives and "micro" rather than grand narratives (38). However, it lost, perhaps, the potential for an "aesthetic which privileges truth and authenticity" (38).

In this light, figures like Steiner argue rather effectively that postmodernism—and the rhetoric of formal innovation and experimentation which surrounded it—in fact relegated work by women to the status of documentary objects; interesting for their historical and cultural

value but “outside the march of technical discovery” (1999: 427). (Although I would suggest that the contribution of women to the field has become a subject of greater awareness and interest retroactively, after the initial publication of her work). As such, Steiner ostensibly champions the decline of the movement, or a reimagining of it, which for gendered reasons attunes its self-reflexive practices to this confessional mode pioneered by earlier feminists. In particular she advocates for texts that reclaim the inner life of real people, revealing the truth and “extraordinary beauty in the unpromisingly ordinary” (537). While I, like Green, don’t hold to such a binary dichotomy that places metafictionists and realists at opposite ends—“the former writing dense, hermetic, and ludic texts, and the latter producing transparent, direct expressions of experience” (2005: 28)—I do think that understanding this division is useful in understanding how female creators have begun to navigate the new metamodern epoch and approach its dominant sensibilities.

Before I begin to chart the specifics of the work of female metamodern creators, it is interesting to briefly consider the way in which today’s postfeminism may also be a product of post-postmodernism or metamodernism, and vice versa. As I established in my introduction—despite the cultural erasure of female postmodern artists that Steiner attests to—postmodernism and feminism share deep ideological bonds. As Genz and Brabon best summarise, there are “profound similarities and affinities between postmodern and feminist attacks on universalism, foundationalism and dichotomous thinking” (2009: 108). However, postfeminism, by comparison, is certainly not the kind of destabilising force that Baudrillard—who Leitch *et al.* fabulously label “a prophet crying out in the wilderness of postmodernity” (2001: 1729)—proposes “deconstruct(s) its entire universe” (1993: 95). Postfeminism is predicated on plurality yes, but I would argue, as a sensibility or a praxis form more than a theory, its plurality is not unbounded, but exists more so in a sphere of negotiation and renegotiation between “feminism’s modern and postmodern, essentialist and anti-essentialist components” (115). As

such, when postfeminism interacts with universalism and foundationalism, and similar ideologies, it tends to engage playfully and with a mixture of sincerity and irony. In this way it can be seen that, although the texts I will explore in this chapter tend to have an existential rather than a specifically feminist or postfeminist thematic preoccupation, there are certainly broad overlaps between the postfeminist sensibility and the metamodern one.

Unlike the deeply specific aesthetic and thematic similarities which are allowing the millennial speak genre to quickly gain increasing traction and critical attention, post-postmodern works are by nature deeply idiosyncratic. However, considering the Altman school of new genre criticism, which places fixity as the kind of end point of a genre or mode, before a new cycle initiates from or in counter to it (2000), it is natural that in its nascency a mode such as this may also appear to us more unbounded. Thus, without negating the uniqueness of its contributing authorial voices—and the self-reflexive quest for uniqueness that is part and parcel of the movement—there are certain shared patterns of form, content and style that have begun to emerge amongst female metamodern artists. Thematically speaking, in a manner not dissimilar to millennial speak, these texts tend to focus on the nature of alienation, longing, loneliness and connection in a modern world. However, their protagonists' personal experiences, while typically being tethered to a world and moment which is very much our post-millennium one, also connect to transcendental lines of philosophical inquiry. Thus, many of these works set the stage for an examination of such existential premises as identity, time, death, and representation and meaning, but with an interest in how they relate to the here and now. Like the millennials, the metamodernists also borrow from the conventions of contemporary neo-realism and naturalism, though they do so differently. These works often suffuse the subjective, personal, 'micro' narrative of their protagonist/s with politicised commentary on gender relations, sexual/identity politics, economic policy, environmental degradation, globalisation, commercialisation and more; although this is never done overtly.

In Booker's discussion of late postmodern Hollywood (which in practice is a discussion of postmodern male-directed Hollywood by male directors such as Tarantino, Burton, Lynch, Cronenberg *et al.*) he describes films that are rich in the aesthetic innovation and experimentation that, as Jameson stated, was a structural necessity of our late-capitalist, economically urgent, art commodifying, constantly producing world (1992: 4-5). Consequentially, he suggests—as Jameson similarly does—that these films and “virtually all art (...) produced in our contemporary era” is “weak” in terms of cultural critique, and, by and large, uncritically “reproduce(s) and propagate(s) the ideology of late capitalism” (2007: 187-189). While there are some works that offer small “cracks” or “fissures” to hidden, alternative ideologies (189), principally these are texts that are “far more interested in style than in substance” (15).⁵⁶ It is important to reinforce this shift here. Although the metamodern works of female creators distinguish themselves through their distinct aesthetic richness, their use of style acts in service of what Garrett and Steiner might describe as authorial honesty and emotive affect.

Key then to the fabric of a metamodern work is the afore-mentioned intersection of realism, which grounds narrative concepts and characters in an authentic space and grants them representational integrity, with strangeness, which invites re-examination of this familiar and emotionally accessible world. In the work of female practitioners, this seems best described as a realist aesthetic with surrealist punctuations.⁵⁷ Built upon a foundation of mundanity, often a

⁵⁶ This may seem contrary to earlier notes which have reflected a legacy of diminishing style as shallow feminine housing for art that lacks true substance. Although this has broadly been true, the avant-garde is a point of difference, particularly in the postmodern period. This is a realm in which pure aesthetic experimentation by men and masculine style is celebrated precisely for the way it intersects with narrative and meaning, including the way it deconstructs them (Steiner 1999).

⁵⁷ As per the sentiment that has informed this chapter: that post-postmodernism, like postmodernism before it, is best understood as a sensibility, when I speak of the surreal here, I think of Sontag's characteristically clear-eyed words. That by surrealism she does not mean “a specific movement in painting inaugurated by André Breton's manifesto”, but rather she means “a mode of sensibility which cuts across all the arts in the 20th century” (2013: 5270). The distinction between postmodernism, which is often bound up in surrealism, and metamodernism, which tends to only sample from this mode, will

quietly tragic one, these works tend to slowly unravel into strangeness through the accumulation of bizarre, destabilising details. As with the realm of millennial speak, these works often present a combination of irony and sincerity, and a generic fusion of drama and comedy, often however, with traces of a very dark existential style of comedy. Alongside what is strange, they also evoke the awkward, often fusing the post-millennium/millennial mode with a Camusesque cosmic absurdism that sets our human “longing for happiness and for reason” against the “unreasonable silence” (2018: 55) of an increasingly complex and crowded, yet frequently cold and lonely world.

Accordingly, these narrators and writer-directors exhibit both a distance and closeness to their characters. Like their characteristic lack of narratorial exposition or explanation, there is often a lack of interiority that leads to a sense of inscrutability, or a difficulty in fully understanding their characters’ motivations. However, these works also tend to exhibit a certain slowness through which viewers and readers may slowly seep into their slightly off-kilter worlds and the psyche of their slightly off-kilter characters. As texts that relish in this strangeness, they also imbibe the quintessential post and post-postmodern qualities of ambiguity, polysemy and pastiche. In complement, they often exhibit a fragmented narrative style, with novel-length short story collections and, what Quart first coined for *Film Comment* ‘hyperlink cinema’ prevalent (2005). We may think, for instance, of the horizontal approach to story in featured director Miranda July’s 2005 multistrand *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. However, these works also often embody a sense of circularity, and thus open themselves up to the possibility of aesthetic and narrative closure.

be evolved across this chapter. However, Sontag’s vivid depiction of the surrealist tradition “destroying conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition” (5270) begins to foreground post-postmodernism’s much more harmonious aesthetic.

POST-POSTMODERNISM IN FEMALE-AUTHORED LITERATURE: DEVELOPING A SIMULTANEOUSLY DIRECT AND HERMETIC MODE OF EXPRESSION

In literature, there is a growing body of work that is fuelled by female practitioners creating texts that are at once stylistically sparse, direct and poetic. With a sparkling kind of prose, these texts relish in semiotics, word play, repartee and intertextuality. Walking a line between lucid and elusive, and between the mundane and the ineffable, they focus on both the very concrete and tangible experiences of the here and now and the world of abstraction that always exists at its fringes. Formally, dual or multithread narratives dominate, non-linear structures are frequently employed, and narratives can be at once intimate and sprawling, offering, perhaps, a way to interpret and represent the connection between what is ‘only me’ and what is ‘all of us’. Or, as Orner describes it, “the vast and goofy weirdness of simply being alive together” (2014: online).

This is a sensibility populated by figures like Jennifer Egan and her Pulitzer Prize winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), a kaleidoscopic and symphonic book which finds a structural harmony between the novel and short story form, and Nicola Barker who Leith labels a “at once sui generis and the Google-age inheritor of a tradition” (2012: online), a fitting moniker for the mode itself. It’s evident in the writings of Sarah Hall (both novel length and short fiction), that “combine a sense of displacement with intense specificity” (Feigel 2021: online) and even in the more expansive, literary origami of Ruth Ozeki in *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). Likewise the sensibility described above can also be found beyond the English language in texts like Joy Sorman’s *Life Sciences* (2021), a deeply reflexive originally French language meditation on female storytelling told through a “spiderweb” of personal stories that Lena Dunham called a “surreal” yet “knife-deep work of fiction” written in “deceptively simple” yet “playfully archaic prose” (2021: online). The so-called ‘hysterical realism’ and characteristically oxymoronic strange-ordinariness of a Zadie Smith novel also connects.

The metamodern frame has also heralded a return of novel-length short story collections, a form that by nature balances disparity and unity. *The Middle Stories* (2001) by Sheila Heti (the pre-millennial model author of last chapter), which pastiches the surreal worlds of fairy tales with acutely contemporary anxieties, comes to mind. In the collection, her characteristically acerbic wit meets a genuine examination of human purpose, creating a world where “whimsy coexists with the angst and paralysis borne of disappointment” (Altman 2012: online). Featured filmmaker Miranda July’s *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (2007) also presents a tapestry of stories that is as harmonious as it is discordant, partnering in equal measure painful, universal truisms with the bewildering absurdities of deeply idiosyncratic lives. Likewise, Judy Budnitz’ *Nice Big American Baby* (2004), Lorrie Moore’s *Bark* (2014) and Lydia Davis’ *Can’t and Won’t* (2013)—among their other varied collections—use the mode’s exuberant and inventive prose and perplexing but striking worlds to plunder, in various forms, from flash to operatic fiction, the unfathomableness of being. As Orner observes:

Davis’s books more fully mirror (and refract) the chaos of existence than safer, duller, more homogeneous collections precisely because the stories aren’t consistent in tone, subject matter, length, depth or anything else. Neither are we consistent. One moment you can’t decide where to sit on the train, the next you find yourself staring squarely into the abyss. What Davis is attempting to express is the wild divergence of human experience, how the ordinary and the profound not only coexist but depend on each other. (2014: online)

Sing to It (2019), Amy Hempel’s first entry after a lengthy absence, is another collection that contains “juxtaposed snippets of scenes and images rather than sustained narrative” (Franklin 2019: online), and that makes “living structures” out of a spark as small as “a pun, a malapropism, or a ghost rhyme” (Wood 2019: online). Structurally embodying the ephemera of existence, the collection’s tight sentences and spaces in-between attain their full astonishing depth when they coalesce. Wood describes Hempel as both a “natural storyteller” and a writer who is attuned to the “artifice of storytelling”, who is self-reflexive without being self-conscious (online), and it is clear that the short story—as well as the multi-thread narrative—offers something aesthetically and thematically rich to the metamodern artist.

The mode, in its post-postmodern renaissance, invites attention to form and the way we construct stories. With their commonly in media res, tonal openings and open yet rounded endings, Lamb suggests that the short story brings greater focus to what he terms the disjunctive bump, or the “unavoidable sign of a story’s delimited space” (2010: 144). Structurally, these types of collections remind readers that their representation offers “but a glimpse, however revealing, into the larger story that is the life of the character” (144). Yet, this reminder serves not to crumble the integrity of this glimpse, but often to heighten it. In this sense, the form can be articulated as a facet of the post-postmodern trend towards critical fiction. Timmer describes critical fiction as works that “embed the most arresting contradictions and paradoxes of postmodern thought” (2010: 23) into the fabric of the text, not merely by reproducing theory but using it, in both formal and emotional terms. Although she focuses exclusively on male authors (the new-sincerity posterchild David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Mark Danielewski), Timmer identifies their writing—and other similar turn of the century (and beyond) texts—as critically conscious “self-narratives” that reject the deconstructive solipsism of postmodernism without structuring “a centred and stable self-concept” (46). Rather, they “are constructed, primarily, around feelings which, once shared, can lay the foundation, possibly, for beginning to make sense of ‘what it means to be me’” (46).

In essence, she conceives of a humanizing of postmodernism and a shift towards narratives that balance the fractured individuality inherited from the movement with universal feelings, recognising what she terms (paraphrasing *Infinite Jest*’s (1996) protagonist Hal Incandenza) “a structural need for a we” (45). In this sense, she describes works of literature that are structured around feelings, more than the individual psyches they inhabit. While these feelings are not totally free-floating, the inter-personal rather than private expression of emotions becomes a way of legitimizing the fact that they are expressed at all. Timmer describes this as a symptom of our still present postmodern malaise where “irony is a social

convention” (33). However, this reticence to feel and the structural distancing of self and feeling presented in her vision of post-millennium fiction seems to be more of a masculine phenomenon than simply a post-postmodern one. Although the vulnerability of sharing (and even feeling) feelings can be similarly awkward, anxiety-ridden and absurd in female-penned fiction, the quest for communion and understanding, even when we are at our most strange, and the world is at its strangest too, seems to offer more tangible rewards.

As Miranda July offers in her non-fiction mediation on fiction, *It Chooses You* (2011)—a text about this acutely metamodern quest for connection in an alienating world, and this universal realm of feeling—it is through the spark of shared understanding that we make our way through the messy morass of modern existence. One particularly clear-eyed moment in the text comes when she discusses marriage with 81-year-old retiree, homemade valentine card and limerick making enthusiast and long-time Los-Angeles resident Joe. As July reflects:

I thought about his sixty-two years of sweet, filthy cards and something unspooled in my chest. Maybe I had miscalculated what was left of my life. Maybe it wasn't loose change. Or, actually, the whole thing was loose change, from start to finish—many, many little moments, each holiday, each Valentine, each year unbearably repetitive and yet somehow always new. You could never buy anything with it, you could never cash it in for something more valuable or more whole. It was just all these days, held together only by the fragile memory of one person—or, if you were lucky, two. And because of this, this lack of inherent meaning or value, it was stunning. Like the most intricate, radical piece of art, the kind of art I was always trying to make. It dared to mean nothing and so demanded everything of you. (231-232)

This is a dense and rather expository passage, in an otherwise more free-floating piece, but it touches aptly on the synthesis I believe female metamodernists seek to draw between the foibles and quirks of the lives strangers, at once wholly alien and familiar to us, and the transcendent experiences that link us all.⁵⁸ It also showcases, that without renegeing on the postmodern acknowledgment of the simulacra—or the perilous precession of simulacra

⁵⁸ Above all, as will become increasingly apparent, it is this desire for connection, understanding and meaning—even in the face of the plain strangeness of being—that seems to be precisely what categorises a female-penned or directed metamodern text. In addition to the striking hermetic-direct aesthetic these female creators are using to express, encase and enshrine this desire.

(Baudrillard 1994)—a writer self-reflexively opening the mechanics of their storytelling may be a path not to detached analysis or a loss of the ‘real’, but towards emotional attachment.

POST-POSTMODERNISM IN FEMALE-DIRECTED CINEMA: DEVELOPING A NEW KIND OF POINTILLIST REALISM WITH SURREALIST PUNCTUATIONS

Aside from the thriving new millennial scene, (and the world of non-fiction filmmaking), due to the structural patriarchal forces at work within the film industry the pool of female filmmakers is—and will undoubtedly continue to be in the coming decades—much smaller than their literary sisters working in the novel form. Nevertheless, beyond the queen of cinematic (and literary) quirk Miranda July, there are multiple female filmmakers who are constructing works of an acutely metamodern character. Before naming them, it is useful to explore MacDowell’s definition of quirky cinema, which he sees as a core “sensibility prompted by the metamodern structure of feeling” (2017: 88). For him, the quirky exhibits:

a modal combination of the melodramatic with the comedic; a mixing of comic styles such as bathetic deadpan, comedy-of-embarrassment and slapstick; a visual and aural style that frequently courts a fastidious and simplified sense of artificiality; and a thematic interest in childhood and ‘innocence’. Most pervasive, however, is a tone that balances ironic detachment from, and sincere engagement with, films’ fictional worlds and their characters. (88-89)

Some of these aesthetic tendencies have already been established here, but as an increasingly dominant branch of metamodern expression it warrants further exploration. MacDowell names Shira Piven’s *Welcome to Me* (2014)—an in turns charming and depressing, but always quirky film about a mentally-ill divorcee who uses her lottery winnings to host an Oprah-style talk show about herself—as an exemplar of this model. He describes the film as being characteristic of the quirky tone that “both lampoons and celebrates misguided or short-sighted protagonists on quixotic quests” (89). As A.O. Scott explains, Piven “favours bright colours and tonal understatement, creating a fascinating, occasionally dizzying discrepancy between what the movie looks as if it’s doing and what it’s actually doing” (2015: online). What the film actually

does is at times ambiguous and discordant, but, like the talk-show medium it pastiches—and equally lampoons and celebrates—it “simultaneously invite(s) and defeat(s) irony” (online). Like other works of this mode, it walks a kind of thematic and aesthetic tightrope which meshes protagonist Alice’s “like everyone else’s (...) ordinary and specific” pain with the wilder eccentricities of her character and the narrative premise, and forgoes standard generic conventions, narrative beats and tonal harmony to forge something “much odder and more interesting” (online).

This mode also overlaps with what has been critically labelled as American Smart Cinema or American Eccentric Cinema. Jeffrey Sconce first devised the term ‘smart cinema’ to describe an American group of films of the late 1990s (and their male filmmakers) that manifested “a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism” and “nihilism” (2002: 350). Unlike earlier postmodern entries, which—as established—frequently focused on radical formal experimentation, these films focused on disrupting convention through tone, centrally through what he called the cultivation of a blank tone and authorial effacement. These works, such as those by Paul Thomas Anderson, Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute and Todd Haynes, created a “*dampened affect*” (359, original italics) aesthetically cultivated by devices like “long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting” (359). Alternately, American Eccentric, best defined and expounded upon by Wilkins, is offered as a thematically and often aesthetically similar but less cynical and disaffected mode, one which:

layers ironic reflexivity, intertextual game-play, and overt artifice on top of the ungrounded, free-floating existential anxiety in these films because these ironic strategies defer serious contemplation of unresolvable issues and enable an experience that might be simply enjoyed for the “offbeat” or “quirky” aesthetic and tone created. (2018: 144)

Rather than parsing the fine differences between the two terms, or schools of thought, I rather introduce them here to show them as analogous but not identical phenomenon to that which I explore here.

These terms are born of a certain maleness and belong to the realm of aesthetically “men’s cinema” that Bruzzi identified (2013: 6). Wilkins similarly acknowledges this connection, suggesting that their representation of the “urban white male sophisticate” and the articulation of his “existential anxiety” (2018: 107) has evolved as a form “grounded in the relationship between, masculinity—its ideology as well as its representation—and aesthetics” (Bruzzi 2013: 6). In particular, Wilkins suggests that the aesthetic and formal use of irony in these works is “a particularly masculine strategy”, one which attempts to “repackage” “‘ugly’ feelings” as “intellectual gameplay” (108). In less flattering, and perhaps more polemic terms, I might suggest that—as in the realm of fiction—this defining strategy represents a certain contemporary male fragility. Their attempt to intellectualise what Ngai terms ugly feelings, like envy, irritation and anxiety (2005)—those ungrounded and unbounded “less intentional or object-directed” feelings (20) that often resist sublimation or resolution—could be interpreted as a kind of male-negation of complex feeling and emotion as invalid expressions of the self; even as they increasingly recognize the precariousness of their own identify structure. Akin to this, the narrative premises of both smart and eccentric cinema tend to come from positions of irrefutable privilege which are only possible because the filmmaker and protagonist are white and male. The expression therefore of their “illegitimate’ anxiety” (Wilkins 2018: 121) is often done in such a way that sincere emotion is “presented through ironic articulation and parodic quotation” (122), one which allows for both engagement and reflexive dismissal.

The capricious protagonist of Anna Biller’s metamodern masterpiece *The Love Witch* (2016), which she wrote and directed—a film which partners genre pastiche and anachronistic “retrophile curiosity” with a singular examination of the postfeminist predicament and a “formidable” metamodern aesthetic (Lucca 2016: 87-88)—says it best. “They teach that a ‘normal’ human being is a hyper-rationalist, stoic male, and that a woman’s intuitions and emotions are illnesses that need to be cured” (*The Love Witch* 48:44-48:55). The line comes

after Elaine's love potion causes her object of affection, Wayne, to literally die from "feeling things so strongly", something he is "not used to" (31:15-31:18). As she decrees, deadpan, in the film's shlock cinema subverted voiceover-style, "What a pussy." (32:13-32:17). It's quite a moment. The net result is that in the auteurist delineation, female filmmakers have been fundamentally excluded from these modes—as female writers have generally been from the New Sincerity label—and perhaps, rightly so, given that a central affective and aesthetic difference may exist between them.

There are, occasionally, some exceptions. Writer-director Tamara Jenkins' characteristic blend of quirk with almost painful realism in *The Savages* (2007) was afforded substantial analysis by Perkins (2012), who picked up Sconce's smart cinema mantle. Conspicuously absent however, is July herself—although Wilkins did add to her analysis, as a brief caveat, that July has definitely created films she considers to be eccentric (2018: 108). Likewise, although Hollywood (and Indy/Indiewood) remains the dominant home of English language cinema production, it should be expressed that titles of this nature diminish the work of other English and foreign language metamodern female writer-directors such as Germany's Maren Ade with the utterly surprising *Toni Erdmann* (2016) and Chile's María Paz González and *Lina from Lima* (2019), an in turns cinematically sangroid and melodramatic drama/black comedy/musical that Paz González herself describes as a work which cannot be described in an arc, nor as having an arc fulfilled (in Bogolasky 2020: online). Greece's Jaqueline Lentzou and her feature debut, which she both wrote and directed, *Moon, 66 Questions* (2021) also feels like a new canonical text. This elliptical film blends banal yet beautiful VHS footage with images of tarot cards and moon phases, unconventional camera angles and spoken diary overlays. Prolific film critic Peter Bradshaw, as he frequently does, describes it best as being an "elusive, but ultimately rewarding" film (2022: online). As he states, Lentzou's work initially occludes its own meaning before it opens itself on its own terms through its

“unemphasised intensity” (online). On thematic terms, this story of a young woman trying to reconnect with her father after he has suffered from a stroke, can be both emotionally hard and tender. Murray says of the film, *Moon, 66 Questions* “can be unsettling and despairing, but it’s never alienating. It’s about moving past alienation and understanding what connects us” (2022: online), a comment that aligns the film with the sentiment that underscores the metamodern mode as adopted by women; this desire for connection, understanding and meaning. Likewise, writer-directors New Zealand’s Jackie van Beek and Madeleine Sami’s simultaneously sardonic and affable comedic entry *The Breaker Upperers* (2018) and Japanese-American Atsuko Hirayanagi’s *Oh Lucy!* (2017), a film that uses an “unfussy pointillist realism” to “trac(e) the ordinary absurdities and agonies of one woman’s life” (Dargis 2018: online), are products of an increasingly global cinema and literary culture—a thesis this dissertation is, as my millennial chapter established, progressively positing.⁵⁹

THE METAMODERN DESIRE FOR MEANING: BALANCING THE BANALITY AND ABSURDITY OF EXISTENCE WITH HOPE

As with millennial speak, and as was foregrounded at the beginning of this chapter, this is not a wholly novel mode and there are many ways in which the works of female metamodern artists—in both film and literature—derive from their predecessors. There is a certain modernist Brechtian legacy at work here, and the self-reflexive mechanics of his dialectical or epic

⁵⁹ I will continue to explore the implications, realities and parameters of this statement in this chapter and beyond, and it is not made to diminish the cultural and aesthetic nuances of these places and their various histories (film and otherwise). However, even taking into account certain local aesthetic nuances, it seems that the same gendered difference I am exploring and postulating in this chapter makes itself apparent. For instance, both Bradshaw and Murray associate Lentzou’s aesthetic with mannerisms of the absurdist Greek New Wave of cinema—a new post-postmodern mode primarily associated with Yorgos Lanthimos, of *Dogtooth* (2009) and *The Lobster* (2015). However, they both recognize that there is a much more humanising dimension to Lentzou’s thematic and aesthetic vision. Murray states that *Moon, 66 Questions* “has a similar aesthetic, but her movie is more grounded in the everyday”, and her more empathetic and sensitive approach means that her off-kilter style “pays surprising emotional dividends” (2022: online).

theatre. Likewise, there are traces of the high-modern theatre of the absurd, which “renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition” to aesthetically “present it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images” (Esslin 2001: 28). These concrete stage images, the movement’s recognisable circular structures, language breakdown and play, existentialism, and routine existences intersected with the ineffable and incongruous, are certainly part of the fabric of the metamodern sensibility. Similarly, a line from postmodern literary luminaries like Vonnegut or Heller can be drawn, and their paradoxes of pain and irreverence. As established, there is also a strong connection to the work of late or third wave male postmodernists. In film, this means figures like David Lynch, Quentin Tarantino, Jim Jarmusch, the Coen Brothers and in literature, writers like Bret Easton-Ellis, Salman Rushdie and David Foster Wallace. It should also be stated that—as with the metamodern framework itself, which begins concretely in the 21st century but makes itself apparent in pre-emergent traces in the late 20th century—the timeline of this dissertation doesn’t always neatly align with the working timespans of contemporary practitioners. As such, there is somewhat of a blurred line here, with many of the composers mentioned here having worked across the late 20th century as well as the 21st century.

Nevertheless, I argue that female practitioners of the 21st century have distilled from this realm of influence—and even apart from their more strictly 21st century male contemporaries like Wes Anderson, Charlie Kaufman, Taika Waititi, George Saunders, Jonathan Safran-Foer *et al.*—a unique and gendered mode. Ngai suggests that postmodern bourgeois art, as a predominately male-authored and recognised mode, has an “increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action” (2005: 3, original italics). Alternately, as established above, metamodern works by women use realist-come-hyperrealist-come-surrealist ‘micro’ narratives in such a way that they open a dialogue between the specific and universal and invites (frequently gendered) political commentary and

the pointed consideration of more macro-level concerns. Writers like Booker see prolific male late postmodern figures as making “self-consciously cool” art-pieces characterised by this limited social commentary, “random cannibalisation” of styles and “narrative, formal, and thematic fragmentation” (2007: 13, xix). As he aptly states, the films of postmodern icon and iconoclast Tarantino for example, are “not about reality” they are “about movies” (96).

In this way, the more recent work of women certainly differs. While art, its history, influence, power, limitations, is interwoven into the aesthetic and thematic fabric of their texts—and while they are punctuated by startling and surreal flourishes—they are most certainly about reality. Moreover, they eschew the cool in favour of the genuine. In film in particular, although writers like Safran Foer have also been accused of being “hollow” beneath the artistry (Updike 2005: online), it seems that beneath the style—which can be equally quirky/smart/eccentric, though is often slightly more subdued—in female-authored metamodern pieces there is typically more emotional gravitas, more sincerity, more empathy and more human relatability. That is, their strangeness, fragmentation and authorial blankness deliberately gives way to closeness, directness and authenticity.

As I foregrounded earlier in this chapter, the metamodern is attuned to both the modern and the post-modern (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 39), and to something which is only now coming into being. Thus, while these works are often stepped in ambiguity I would suggest that they also offer clarity, at least on emotional terms. In particular, I propose that the works of female post-postmodernists herald a return to meaning, and also critically to hope. While they—in accordance with the postmodern mode—both explicitly and implicitly acknowledge the absurdity of life, they also seem to reflect an overwhelming desire for human connection; which may present the answer, or in a protean and incomprehensible world, at least *an* answer. And while this return to meaning can be broadly considered metamodern and thus a phenomenon beyond gender—Vermeulen mused more conversationally for *Tank Magazine*

that in the metamodern epoch “grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic, hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed” (in Potter 2012: online)—it appears that male-authored works of the 21st century still tend to plunge deeper into the depths of fragmentation and alienation, (or alternately use irony and reflexivity to approach sincere emotion). Therefore, they typically cling closer to the postmodern rather than post-postmodern. Whereas, by comparison, female-authored works tend to ameliorate the ontological emptiness created by postmodernism by emphasising the redemptive and transcendental power of our bonds with others.

I’m moved to compare for instance the ending of Charlie Kaufman’s *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) with that of Maren Ade’s *Toni Erdmann*. In his debut as both writer and director Kaufman’s follows protagonist theatre director Caden Cotard, as he attempts to make a play “about everything” (*Synecdoche, New York* 1:23:58-1:24:00) over the course of several decades. In so doing Kaufman succeeds in making a film that is also about everything, about “death (...) Dating, birth, death, life, family...” (1:23:58-1:24:05). It is a film predicated on realism, but which increasingly spirals into a disorientating, surreal opus as Caden’s mimetic all-representing play sprawls into something uncontainable and his body and relationships, particularly those with his wife and daughter disintegrate utterly. Replaced in all senses, as father, director and self, all that is left for Caden is to die, as the film’s final monologue so painfully but perspicaciously details:

What was once before you, an exciting and mysterious future is now behind you, lived, understood, disappointing. You realize you are not special. You have struggled into existence and are now slipping silently out of it. This is everyone’s experience. Every single one. The specifics hardly matter. Everyone is everyone. (01:55:29- 01:55:56)

It’s a brutal conclusion. Despite the final frame, where Caden gives and receives love to an actress he “feel(s) like (he) knows” (01:58:12- 01:58:14), we know the authorial and personal emptiness that has pervaded his life and—through Kaufman’s simulacra New York and Caden

as everyone—are left acutely with its aching sadness, and perhaps worse still, the fundamental futility of that sadness.

In Ade's *Toni Erdmann*, protagonist Ines' career obsession and peripatetic lifestyle has led her into an analogous kind of existential nadir. It's one which troublingly appears to not trouble her at all, as she retorts to her father, "What do you mean by 'happy'? 'Happiness' is a strong word" (*Toni Erdmann* 40:55-40:59). Her father, Winfried-cum-Toni Erdmann, the false buck teeth and wig-adorned titular character, is a surreal figure whose tragi-comic presence increasingly destabilises the film and Ines' life. Yet, rather than having Erdmann lead her—and us—into an epistemological abyss, the purpose of his false-identity deception (and of Ade's off-kilter world) is to inveigle her to reclaim her humanity. As Kermode observes, the film "gradually turns embarrassment to empathy, awkwardness into acceptance" (2017: online). Rather than expounding the notion that "life is indeed disappointing" Ade rather "wants us to wake up to the possibility of something better" (online). As such, while the film ends with a similarly frank address to mortality through the death of Ines' grandmother, Winifried's mother, the closing image of Ines donning her father's beloved false teeth after a moment of shared kinship is both a strange but deeply moving one. Thus, although the final words of the film are used to recognise the impossibility of understanding and appreciating life "in the moment itself", as it is "just" inexorably "passing by" (*Toni Erdmann* 02:34:59-02:35:01, 02:34:16-02:34:19), they also offer the possibility of understanding and appreciating one another. Unlike Kaufman's Caden, through that understanding and connection, Ade's Ines gains the ability to "hang onto moments" (02:34:23- 02:34:26) and ascribe them—and life itself—with at least a semblance of meaning.

Although Ade's vision remains a fundamentally postmodern or post-postmodern one, trading a more sentimental vision of closure for liminality, surrealism and bleak comedy, it shifts the focus away—like the other female-authored works I have named above—from

deconstructing meaning to consider instead how we can construct meaning from the disparate and often ennui-producing experiences of 21st century life. As Scott claimed about Alice in *Welcome To Me*, Ade's characters provide the "human face, (the) flicker of recognition, (the) bit of company in our misery" (2015: online) that we are all, ostensibly, searching for. Creating texts that are both obsessively minute and all-encompassing, painfully real and almost unbelievable, the female metamodernists use this "pointillist" aesthetic (Dargis 2018: online) to create a harmony between the 'dense, hermetic, and ludic' metafiction mode with the 'direct expression' of realism (Green 2005: 28).

At the time of first writing this chapter, I had just watched Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch* (2021), a tremendous aesthetic accomplishment from a metamodern filmmaker at the height of his powers. Yet it crystallised for me what seems to be the core gendered difference in this mode: that while a Wes Anderson film is "clearly constructed" (Wilkins 2018: 147) (especially the 'unfettered style' of his later works), texts created by women are populated by characters and narrative worlds that we are not just supposed to *accept as real* but who actually *feel real* despite the whimsy, distancing, existential skew, or emphasis on style. Despite also having a deliberately "unstable relationship to verisimilitude" (387), these texts simultaneously elicit the "'pure' gaze" of "higher", or intellectual and reflexive contemplation of a work of art and the "'naïve' gaze of simply engaging with characters and the emotional content of the story" (Murray 2014: 258). They also construct an unflinching gaze which invites us to reconsider the ordinary and ourselves, not in the way of the millennial, but on existential terms. As Schrag asks, "after all the postmodern dust has settled what traces remain of the self in discourse, the self in action, the self in community, and the self in transcendence?" (1997: 28). It's something all genders are asking, yet, as female creators make manifest this line of questioning, it seems they draw us further from nihilism and closer to certainty.

MIRANDA JULY, *KAJILLIONAIRE* (2020): TRANSCENDENTALISING THE HUMDRUM

From her early performance work through her various short films, books and feature films—*Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), *The Future* (2011), *Kajillionaire* (2020)—American artist, actor, writer and filmmaker Miranda July (b. 1974), has come to be one of the key arbiters of the female metamodern cinematic gaze. Herself a striking performative presence, July’s brand of “deadpan whimsy” (Franklin 2012: 14) embodies the tension between genuineness and artifice that defines the post-irony age. Developing a distinctly post-postmodern mode of expression across her oeuvre, Kushner describes the central themes of July’s work as “people hoping for miraculous events to intervene in their lives, (...) cultivating their own private idiosyncratic longings” and “improvising ways to communicate with one another” (2005: 63). Chang suggests that her works interrogate “the fallacy of the normal” (2000: 16) and Balestrini says that July courts the divisions—both the contradictions and concords—between our emotional and rational, and real and performative selves in her consideration of life “as a collection of particulars” (2015: 140).

For me, her thematic preoccupation is perhaps best encapsulated in the tender moment shared between July as aspiring performing artist Christine and shoe store clerk Richard in *Me and You*, where he tells her—while fitting her for a new pair of shoes and seeing her for a moment with startling clarity—“You think you deserve that pain but you don’t” (*Me and You* 09:10-09:14). July’s are stories about pain, about the universal pain of being that seems inevitable in an alienating and disorientating digital age and the very particular pains of ‘me and you and everyone we know’—which appear to us at once as universally understandable and entirely unfathomable. However, her films are equally characterised by an “insistence” on

a “state of wonder” (Franklin 2012: 14). In July’s worlds love, empathy and connection have value just by being offered, just by existing, and over time they offer unexpected meaning. There is a peculiar brand of sentimentality and even sanguinity at work in her texts. In an era rife with disconnection, July invites us to question whether there is “there virtue in the act of loving itself, no matter what its object or its consequences, in that it opens one up to the world and forces close attention” (16).

Catsoulis describes July as the auteur behind “strange” and “whimsical movies” that are “suffused with coyness and childlike characters, bizarre visuals and eccentric behaviour” (2020: online). Yet, her acute attention to the rich and specific details of everyday existences, “deepen(s)” her stories and “mute(s)” these eccentricities, whereby, “working with a soulfulness that slowly gains force, July hides real feelings inside surreal scenarios” (online). Blending the abstract and the concrete, July’s films are formally built around complex patterns of opposition and harmony. Much as she conceptually “illustrates coexisting discourses in flux”, July creates films in which the referential and the surreal “compete regarding their authenticity effect” (Balestrini 2015: 145). Or, in other words, she creates films that require us to ask: what is more *real*? July’s nuanced tapestries of life intertwine characters, moments and feelings of such micro and macro foci, such small and cosmic significance, such a relatable and un-relatable (or believable and unbelievable) quality that our perception of the verisimilitude and value of the experiences they depict must, by necessity, shift. Franklin identifies as one of July’s hallmarks “the creation of an independent universe that she defines on her own terms” (2012: 15).

Representing an apotheosis of sorts, one that culminates July’s diverse yet characteristically singular work across mixed media, *Kajillionaire* (2020) centres upon Old Dolio, played by Evan Rachel Wood, the only offspring of a pair of career grifters and small-time con artists who eke out a meagre existence in Los Angeles. Together they live in the

abandoned office of a bubble factory that metronomically spews an ooze of pink suds down the walls while waiting for “the big one” (*Kajillionaire* 35:08- 35:10), the earthquake that will end life on earth. Lacking in “tender feelings” (53:36- 53:38) but well versed in petty criminality, Old Dolio leads her family on an airport baggage scam that sees *Ocean Eleven* franchise heist enthusiast and eyeglass store clerk Melanie join in their ventures. As the film develops, Old Dolio’s privately tragic perception that “life is... nothing” (52:24- 52:27) is reluctantly winnowed away by the sparky, effervescent and emotive Melanie, who Old Dolio perceives as being “married to life” (01:15:22- 01:15:24), and it concludes with the pair kissing at a Kmart cashier desk. Old Dolio, now estranged from her parents, is on the receiving end of their latest con, but something profound is burgeoning between her and Melanie, and the con itself allows Old Dolio to return their orchestrated slew of “false fakey people” (01:04:16- 01:04:21) birthday presents to cash in her precise three-way split of the earnings of their initial airport job. For Old Dolio, this gesture affirms both that “We can only ever be how we are. But we love you.” (01:31:46- 01:31:54).

As with other works in the metamodern mode, and in a sense similarly to millennial speak, in *Kajillionaire* there is a shift away from conventional narrative plotting or exposition as the central tool of meaning making, and instead it is the broader aesthetic texture and experience of July’s film which distinguishes it. As Brody incisively determines,

The movie’s drama is built on an abstract and fantastic framework (...) but a bare-bones synopsis hardly captures the florid displays and pointillistic touches with which July dramatically expands and exquisitely illuminates the action—the emotional power that arises from her large-scale inspirations along with her finely discerning, poignant sensitivity to the piercing power of offhand remarks and passing glances. It’s in these adornments, at both ends of the perceptual spectrum—the monumental and the flickering—that July turns an implausible fantasy into a work of emotional and intellectual realism. (2020: online)

He argues effectively that July, in the truest auteur tradition, harnesses all dimensions of the cinematic experience to create something of “radical expressiveness” (online). Critically, this aesthetic expressiveness, and all of July’s “teeming, idiosyncratic contrivances” (online), are

not just a “mere affectation” but rather offer a visual testimony to both “the world’s wonder” and “also to what is unspeakable and unbearable” (Backman Rogers 2015: 203). As foregrounded above, July’s style is both ‘substance’ itself, but finds its truest affective gravitas in its deliberate partnering with the arresting ideological and emotional landscapes of her texts. Backman Rogers stated that the “strange and implausible occurrences” that form the essential fabric of a July work, are ultimately their “most affecting and haunting elements” because we “recognise the emotions, which occupy the realm of the unfathomable or unnameable, at the heart of her narratives” (203).

In the independent aesthetic universe of *Kajillionaire*, July creates a pastel world that both inhabits very real spaces that films rarely live in and—to use her name as a verb—’July-ies’ familiar spaces in a way that transposes them (almost) to the world of fable. Her steady, patient camera appreciates empty spaces, symmetry and floating movements and it ushers in a Los Angeles of both immense sadness and tonal brightness. Wilkins articulates that Eccentric films typically create “anachronistic and referential cinematic space(s)” that are “congruous with overtly cinematic characters and their use of hyper-dialogue” (2018: 46). Or, in simpler terms, they create cinematic worlds that are recognizable, particularly by name—like Kaufman’s New York in *Synecdoche*—and yet are “openly artificial”, relishing in devices like “spatiotemporal incongruity” (309) that create an aesthetic harmony with the eccentricity of their narrative and characters. There is certainly a dimension of this in July’s work, and the work of her female contemporaries. Yet, despite its destabilising aspects (the foaming froth of pink bubbles, the saturated hues, the clearly fictionalised place names like Bubble Inc.), shot in a neo-realist vein on location, *Kajillionaire* is certainly Los Angeles: its busy street sidewalks, its petrol station convenience stores, its working class homes, its Kmart’s. Much as *Me and You* was very much Portland; ordinary overlaid with whimsy.

As Loughrey said of the film, “the world inside of July’s head looks essentially like our own. It’s a little brighter, perhaps; a little more symmetrical. But emotions work differently here (...) they spill out in odd and arresting ways” (2020: online). From the family’s landlord’s constant teariness—“I have no filters”, he weeps (*Kajillionaire* 11:14-11:17)—to Old Dolio’s counterpoint stilted repression, July’s characters are also in a sense Wilkin’s ‘overtly cinematic’ and ‘hyper-dialogue’ spouting, and yet they are both more strange and real than that. As Lane proclaims of July, “the foibles of her characters require no explanation” (2020: online), and their emotions, and the collective feelings those emotions speak to—which as Timmer suggested offer a structure to the film (2010)—are both difficult to make sense of and startling in their resonance. As a director of performance, July harmonises her complex conceptual and emotive web through her “rich, pugnacious dialogue, puckishly oblique compositions, and subtle gestural precision, which are most conspicuous in the lead actors’ performances” (Brody 2020: online). In their 2015 anthology of what they termed the ‘post-1989 sensibility’—a connected if not quite coeval frame to mine, on the cusp between postmodernism and post-postmodernism—Perkins and Verevis considered the “performers whose idiolects and personas” (7) had influenced this sensibility. One of which they named as July herself for her turn in Alison Maclean’s *Jesus’ Son* (1999). As both a kind of performative progenitor to and directorial descendant of this school of filmmaking, July’s own works similarly “refuse strategies of exposition and continuity in favour of looser and more ambiguous formats” (11).

As such, as Baron and Tzioumakis argue, her films align with 21st century Indie film’s “prevailing” tendency of making “performances a crucial element of a film’s mise-en-scène” (2020: 268). They elaborate that much metamodern cinema exhibits a unique, paradoxical form of “muted expressivity” in performance (272). As with *Kajillionaire*—which Catsoulis suggests, particularly in Evan Rachel Wood’s Old Dolio, has “acting-with-an-exclamation-

point, so stylized that the character is often unreadable” (2020: online)—the metamodern sensibility entails a more heightened form of performance—whether arch, mannered, or flat—than contemporary naturalism. Yet, in accordance with the mode’s broader aesthetic dualities, the “artificial dimension” of these performances “does not preclude realism” (Baron and Tzioumakis 2020: 276). So too does July give us the monotone, wooden Evan Rachel Wood with her impossibly long straight hair like curtains separating her from the world and her personal and performative foil in Gina Rodriguez’ Melanie, who acts as “our emotional interpreter” (Catsoulis 2020: online). As such, despite their ‘overly cinematic’ nature, it is equally necessary in July’s film that this sense of artifice is divested and that genuine investment in character takes place.

In a film which features a number of meta-play acting scenes, the characters also exhibit an awareness of the constructed nature of experience. Some of these performative scenes are tragic: at the film’s midpoint a dying old man that the Dynes have come to rob wants to hear the sounds of clinking cutlery and the piano being played, so he can pretend that they are “his family” (*Kajillionaire* 44:32-44:34) and that he is not entirely alone. Others are more tender: Old Dolio repeatedly attends a parenting class in which she performs as both herself and her own daughter, and, in one such vignette, has her hair lovingly fake-brushed by the course facilitator. Inviolably bittersweet in nature, such levels of deception may appear to be the opposite of sincerity. Yet, in a postmodern vein, for July, this awareness of construction is in fact an essential quality of being. And, in a post-postmodern vein, choosing to collectively ascribe meaning to things which may naturally offer none becomes an act of hope. As she contends, “we *must* play roles, and believe in them enough to connect to each other through them” because sharing in and celebrating “the invention of us together”, in joint imaginative acts, is a thing of transcendental power (in Kushner 2005: 64, original italics).

The mechanics of storytelling is certainly foregrounded in *Kajillionaire*, as in July's other works, and in the aesthetic of the metamodern mode. Despite July's insistence that her characters don't have "pretend 'movie person'" feelings, she similarly establishes her intention to "both create a fiction and make it permeable, such that it gives the audience some feeling of agency, of relating to the process of its making, when the lights come up" (in Kushner 2005: 65). As such, this tension between the real and unreal and the representable and unrepresentable lives, arguably very wilfully, at the centre of the film. The purpose of this duality, if I may be so bold as to be so singular, becomes clearer when July's own words are again taken into account. She describes herself as having an interest in "real and unreal people and real and unreal physical pain and how the movies—or art—could make someone so unreal they didn't have to suffer" (July in Chang 2000: 17). Perhaps as Balestrini suggests of July, "artists fictionalise because real individuals remain enigmatic" (2015: 142), but I would offer that July fictionalises, and even hyper-fictionalises, because imagined individuals can often better lead to us to real realisations. Along with self-reflexivity and self-referentiality, July's works present a kind of artistic daring and an ebullient sense of hope. In *It Chooses Me*, July conceded that as an artist she "would fail at it, this re-enactment", that she "would make something a little clumsier and less interesting than real life", but that knowledge came "with a smile" (2011: 232).

Perhaps it is also bold to venture so deeply here into July's intentions as an artist. Therefore, I return to Battersby's notion that the post-Barthes "debunking the subjective authority of an author", dismisses the lengths by which women have had to go to—and still continue to go through—to attain any standing as authors in the annals of artistic "truth" and "greatness" (1989: 146). Thus, while this chapter has hitherto taken a slight departure from delving so explicitly into the field of postfeminist inquiry, in accordance with the overall thrust of this investigation, it is both necessary and worthy to connect the dots here. Although less

thematically interested in gender and gendering than the millennial mode, metamodern filmmakers like July still explore femaleness, sexuality and identity politics in the 21st century and utilise aesthetic strategies that can be broadly understood as being postfeminist. In particular, their intersection of fantasy with realism, attests to Irigaray's formative conception of the female imaginary (1985), and that "the imaginary", as Bainbridge extrapolates, it is a space in which we can "think through the feminine" (Bainbridge 2008: 185).⁶⁰ As Bainbridge articulates "films that make political play with images, narrative and notions of fantasy provide a rich seam of potential in terms of attempting to build a politics of the feminine through textuality" (185-186). Certainly, there is a sense in these works that they escape the boundaries of conventional representation, and thus, without having to explicitly labour feminist concerns or standpoints, they still inscribe new feminine subjective positions. As Bainbridge continues, by "playing with the slippages between truths and fantasies" they "present glimpses of possibilities" (194). A July film, like an Ade film, or any other metamodern female-directed film, holds to its own textual integrity, as if boldly saying, yes, here I am, and here is the world as I live it, as I see it.

Likewise, these filmmakers' unabashed interest in intensely individual individuals, most centrally women, seems to harken to the individualism that Gill identified as being central to postfeminism (2007: 255). And although they may reach for the universal more than their millennial counterparts, their affirmation that the idiosyncratic interior mindscape of any and every woman is a worthy epicentre for a film, can be considered an artistic choice in harmony with the postfeminist milieu. Perhaps also, it is their deliberate obviousness as auteurs, which

⁶⁰ Irigaray's term is one with typically broad implications, however, here it can be best understood as a possible form of female knowing, knowledge and expression waiting to "deploy itself" (Irigaray 1985: 30). It is, at its core, a conception of a female consciousness at the locus point of what is and what could be. The female imaginary will not deploy itself in "*one* universe", because that would limit the plurality of the female experience, and not "as volume instead of surface", because the female experience locates and expresses meaning in both (30, original italics). It will, however, deploy itself in a manner that coalesces "discourse and fantasy" and fuses "the real to the imaginary" (98-99).

demands that their presence be noted, that is a postfeminist act. July particularly, who as an actor “maintains a similar physical style and presence” in all her films: “the cropped curly hair, the thrift-store clothes” (Franklin 2012: 20), seems to be inextricable from her works.

Despite however, this fearless Julyness and its destabilising details, *Kajillionaire* still appears to us a product of the living and breathing postfeminist epoch that we occupy. Just as the film very much depicts a Los Angeles of the ‘real’ world, it very much depicts the Los Angeles of the 2020s. In distinguishing the works and modes of this dissertation from their predecessors (and in time their successors), the textual details of this ‘nowness’ become particularly important, especially given the similar temporal interest in nowness of postfeminism. As the museum curator in *Me and You* questions—making it ipso facto the barometer of judging art—“Could this have been made in any era, or only now?” (*Me and You* 49:57-49:59). Using this criteria, Franklin describes July’s films as being “simultaneously relevant and timeless” (2012: 20), and I would concur. Thus alongside *Kajillionaire*’s lines of more transcendental philosophical mediation, it is also evinces July’s attunement to the nuances and complexities of the current cultural moment.

All of July’s works display a keen interest in how we manufacture and live our virtual or digital lives and *Kajillionaire* adds meaningfully to this line of inquiry. As Lane identifies, the film also has “stirrings” of “disquiet” and “political heft” (2020: online). “Wrapping damage and poverty in bubbles and sunshine” (Castoulis 2020: online), July uses her tonal incongruities, and the symbolism of the paradoxically glittery and grimy Los Angeles and its periodic earth tremors, to convey the instability of the “Ha-ha-ha. Cry-cry-cry” (*Kajillionaire* 19:39-19:42) world of 21st century neoliberalism where “most people want to be kajillionaires” (19:33-19:35). Other dimensions of the film, such as the gentle understatement of the queer romantic arc between Old Dolio and Melanie, and her almost ASMResque motif of non-sexual touch (Kushner 2005: 63), mark the film as a very distinct product of the early 2020s. Yet, in

accordance with the more distant politicising of postfeminism, the ambiguity and inscrutability of the metamodern mode, and July's own aesthetic, she suffuses her symbols and commentary with her trademark strangeness. As Franklin attests, she is a filmmaker who understands that an "awareness of the concrete intention behind an ethereal vision can detract from its impact" (2012: 19-20).

The film is certainly impactful, and as I contend, a distinctly female text. July's gaze, like that of the millennial cohort is encapsulated by its interest in 'close attention'. Her focus on the deeply small and personal and how it may connect to the unfathomably grand and cosmic, or, what Brody calls her world of "ordinary sublimity" (2020: online), often stands in opposition to cinema's more masculine world of big action and the "technically audacious, visually complex sequences, made up of a rich array of images, angles, shot lengths" (Bruzzi 2013: 1-2) that portray this world.⁶¹ Lane aptly dubs her "a transcendentalist of the humdrum" (2020: online), and I would offer that July's interest in the minutiae of life reminds us once again of Bovenschen's understanding of the "female relationship to detail" (1986: 48).⁶² Perhaps what is most clear is that July's gaze is so fearlessly her own, which stands as an immense accomplishment in a still hegemonically masculine industry. Anderson suggests that July's works resonate because they so boldly exhibit both the "courage of her convictions" and "the peculiarities of her sensibility" (2005: 73). Brody concurs. In *Kajillionaire*, he says, "July's aesthetic imagination is inseparable from her empathetic curiosity and emotional

⁶¹ This analysis also serves as another example of the broader aesthetic tendencies that appear to cut across the new female-led modes in this thesis. Just as the millennial female filmmaker dispelled with the 'bells and whistles' mode of filmmaking, the metamodern female filmmaker makes the ordinary sublime not through grand scale filmmaking, but through intimate attention to the fabric of life. This rejection of the masculine world of action will also be further taken up in my subsequent chapter on the realm of still life filmmaking and literature.

⁶² Although July's medium is film—and therefore, in traditional terms her primary language is the image—her deeply attentive and empathetic films also return me to Irigaray's vision of *écriture féminine* as a female form of writing that "embraces itself with words" (1985: 29), as I included in my introduction.

urgency” (2020: online). He continues, the film “tempers a howl of anguish at a world of pain into a kind of cinematic music that unfolds it in nuanced detail and extends a hand of consolation, even offers a note of hope” (online). It is this potent humanity and fusion of emotion encased in a world of fragile normalcy and beautiful strangeness that makes *Kajillionaire* metamodern; both an aesthetic experience and an affectively and narratively resonant text.

ALI SMITH, *HOW TO BE BOTH* (2014): ERODING NARRATIVE BOUNDARIES

One of the most (to-date) prolific writers that this dissertation profiles, Ali Smith (b. 1962) has amassed an impressive eleven acclaimed novels to her name since her debut *Like* was released in 1997. Notwithstanding her early plays, ongoing short story collections and wide contributions as an essayist and commentator. Selected as the kind of midpoint in her artistic trajectory—following *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005), *Girl Meets Boy* (2007), *There But For The* (2011) and *Artful* (2012) but preceding her seasonal series: *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019) and *Summer* (2020)—*How to Be Both* (2014) epitomises the aesthetic for which she has become known and operates as a suitable litmus for more deeply considering the metamodern literary texture. Self-effacingly seeking to avoid what she herself calls the “myth of Smith”, the openly and as she suggests “fashionabl(y)” queer and Scottish, Inverness-born writer (in France 2005: online) Smith has nevertheless become a literary name recognized for stories that exalt “the extraordinary and the everyday”, “fizz with pyrotechnic prose, whirlwind openings, bewitching invention” (France 2005: online) and thrum with the unique nuance of her intersectional experience.

Smith has begun drawing critical attention in the last decade. The most comprehensive investigation of her work to date is Germanà and Horton's edited collection, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2013). Although it predates the release of my principal Smith text, many of my own thoughts on Smith's oeuvre derive from their analyses. I will try not to re-tread the worthy ground the text and its contributors covers, but somewhat humbly add to the conversation by beginning this examination with a reflection on some of their principal insights. As with July, Germanà and Horton perceive that across Smith's works a sort of harmonious dichotomy is evoked where aesthetically her "self-reflective language games" meet their counterpart in her "insightful critiques of the contemporary condition", and where thematically, the deep darkness of contemporary anxieties is foregrounded while, simultaneously, "the redemptive power of language and self-fashioning" is celebrated (1-2). Like others, they identify "the *jouissance*, ebullience, subversiveness, playfulness, political forcefulness and eloquence" (2, original italics) of her prose and point to her style as being coterminous to that of the late postmodern or post-postmodern milieu. Tapping into the quotidian-meets-existential aesthetic, that has now been well established, Germanà and Horton suggest that Smith's works "pivot on apparently ordinary events" that in fact "are the big issues that haunt postmodernity" and the 21st century (2). These issues being, "the ineffability of language, the blurred boundaries between real and imagined worlds, the non-linearity of time, the instability of the self" (2). In Smith's metamodern hands, however, these issues become spaces of new possibility, new expression, new connections and new understandings.

Much as July's works centre on the experiences of everything from the restlessness of precocious children (*Me and You*) to talking cats (*The Future*) and the existential awakenings of career gifters called Old Dolio (*Kajillionaire*), narratively Smith's works diverge into vast imaginative territory. They chart the lesbian sexual awakening of the ghost of a hotel chambermaid (*Hotel World*), the Shakespearean double identities of a flailing, fretful British

nature blogger and his fake Croatian girlfriend (*Winter*), and the friendship between a 101 year old former songwriter and a 32 year old junior arts lecturer (*Autumn*). McRae and Carter describe her as “a writer of otherness in every sense: fractured language, fractured fictional devices, fractured realities” (2004: 138). Yet, although Smith is certainly what Bradford calls, a proponent and producer of “radical fiction”, her writing equally “involves the plausible, the rational and the predictable” (2007: 70, 67). As Bradford continues, “if it weren’t for the self-evident contrasts between (her) excursions into the inexplicable and stability of a routine, ordinary existence the latter would be ineffective” (67). Thus, within her novels exists a rich thematic heart that considers how we exist, actualise, communicate and love in our actual fractured world.

In the case of *How To Be Both*, a text that can literally be read two different ways—as Benfey calls it, it is a “shimmering double helix of a novel” (2014: online)—there are two key stories that unfold, although stories, in itself, may be a limiting term. The first—at least in my case, based on my print edition, and which can now never be unread for me—was that of a fictionalised Francesco del Cossa, an Italian Renaissance painter who worked in Bologna during the 1400s. The second belonged to George, a teenage girl living in Cambridge who recently and suddenly lost her mother to an allergic reaction to a common antibiotic. Francesco’s experiences as a woman masquerading as a man and as a luminously talented yet underappreciated painter come to readers in fragments, drifting from childhood to adulthood to the future to no time at all, delivered in poetic musings and unformed thoughts. As Bradford said of 2005’s *The Accidental* “at one point the book itself appears in danger of fragmenting, as words and letters collapse out of regular typeface and scatter across the page” (2007: 73). It is a device that Smith again uses to traverse the luminary and timeless expanses of Francesco’s self, or ghost self, or perhaps self as imaged by George:

hello all the everything
to be

made and
unmade
both.

(Smith 2014: 2045-2063, original placement)

As Francesco floats, mostly untethered to our world of binary structures and fixity, so too does Smith's frequently stream of consciousnessesque prose float both metaphysically and physically across the page, and we along with her. Because, as Bradford acknowledges, Smith "make(s) linguistic shape coterminous with character" (73).

George's experiences in mostly present day Cambridge are delivered somewhat more narratively, as she grapples with and mourns her mother's absence, although they still make use of the abundance and openness of time, a core motif for the work. Framed mostly around George's sessions with her sort of hapless but well-intentioned school counsellor Mrs Rock and her blossoming friendship come romance with the plucky and lively Helena Fisker (better known as H), George's mindscape circles around her memories of her mother, particularly on their last trip to Italy where they saw del Cossa's provocative and utterly unique frescoes. As George's mother asked—as is revealed to us in one of George's sections fluid flashbacks—"Do things just go away?" (Smith 2014: 3170). It's the question that plagues but ultimately frees George, her mother and the ghost-not-ghost of Francesco. Although early on in her section, George has the painful moment of reflecting that "Her mother doesn't say. Her mother said. Because if things really did happen simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable" (2145-2155), she still arranges her photos of her late mother "so that there is no chronology" (2542).

Smith's novel appears to us a bit like this 'overprinted' book. George's youthful inability to fathom how someone she loved so entirely and who was so central to her own existence can simply cease to exist leads to a narrative erosion of the boundaries between *now* and *then*, to the extent that Francesco and George's stories—which only technically converge

in the moment at which they find themselves both before her portrait of St. Vincent Ferrer—conceivably chronologically come “both before *and* after” the other (Miller 2014: online, original italics). “Do things that happened not exist, or stop existing, just because we can’t see them happening in front of us?” (Smith 2014: 3170), George’s mother continued. For metamodernist Smith the answer is evidently no, but this ready embrace of what is fundamentally anti-ontological serves not as a deconstructive force but a reconstructive one.

As with time, which is both a governing formal construct and thematic line of inquiry, art and its constructive powers is at the centre of the deeply self-reflexive *How to be Both*. Perhaps more evidently than in *Kajillionaire*, which certainly deals less explicitly with art and artmaking than July’s other films, Smith makes art her guiding principle. As alluded to previously in this chapter, the post-postmodern creator recognises both the agency of the audience, and of the art itself. However, as it was for July, for Smith this irrefutable fact that her story is both hers and not hers appears to be something welcome. Spurred on by this recognition, the post-postmodern creator, with a kind of reflexive candour, then forges an epistemological truce between art as a limited ontological object that exists in a set time and space and *art* as an entirely unconfined entity that eclipses what can easily be known and governed.⁶³ As Francesco explains, “A picture is most times just a picture: but sometimes a

⁶³ Although forging these connections between July and Smith and their texts conforms to the contours of the shared metamodernist patten that this chapter has committed to sketching out, I recognise that so explicitly connecting these two composers may need further remark. Especially given that at the start of this chapter I asserted that the metamodern mode by nature is idiosyncratic. Moreover, although I have begun to assert a global artistic and aesthetic culture, these two women live in different countries, were born into different generations (July: Gen X, Smith: baby boomer) and have lived through, taking their biographies into account, rather different circumstances. More so than Rooney and Gerwig, whose places in the tightly focused middle class millennial generational mode meant their connection did not seem to require such specific clarification, the question can be asked of July and Smith: how do they participate in the same zeitgeist? This question is indeed an unwieldy one and perhaps it is the same as the question of generic evolution. In this respect, I have no better answer than what Bourdieu proposes in his exploration of the cultural field, particularly regarding the ‘space of possibles’ and creative producers’ counterparts. As he explains, and as I established in my introduction, the ‘space of possibles’ defines and delimits what is conceivable and inconceivable in “genres, schools, manners and forms” at any given moment (1996: 236). As such, cultural producers are “irremediably placed and dated” in so

picture is more” (Smith 2014: 1347). Francesco—perhaps as a stand-in for Smith and all artists—arrives at this epiphany when she appraises her work, realising that the people she had painted had “broken free from me and from the wall that had made and held them and even from themselves” (1347).

There is a clear sense in the novel that even after a veritable century of deconstruction, art, by nature, remains transcendent—something much larger than itself—and the gusto with which Smith approaches formal inventiveness is a testament to that. Francesco, located in the great flourishing of artistic endeavours that the Renaissance heralded, offers readers an allegorical lens into a time well before irony. As Francesco muses:

I like very much a foot, say, or a hand, coming over the edge and over the frame into the world beyond the picture, cause a picture is a real thing in the world and this shift is a marker of this reality: and I like a figure to shift into that realm between the picture and the world just like I like a body really to be present under painted clothes where something, a breast, a chest, an elbow, a knee, presses up from beneath and brings life to a fabric: I like an angel’s knee particularly, cause holy things are worldly too and it’s not blasphemy to think so, just a further understanding of the realness of holy things. (1347)

The words feel very reminiscent of July’s own in *It Chooses You*, when she discusses how to artistically render life:

Bridging it seemed like one of the few things I could do that might be holy or transcendent. I’ve been trying for so long now, for decades, to lift the lid a little bit, to see under the edge of life and somehow catch it in the act —“it” being not God (because the word God asks a question and then answers it before there is any chance to wonder) but something along those lines. (2011: 79)

far as they participate “in the same *problematic* as the ensemble of (their) contemporaries (236, original italics). Although his analysis is now dated, it strikes to the heart of how aesthetic styles and forms develop and reminds us that despite their lived differences, Smith and July are cultural producers operating in broadly the same moment, a factor which—especially in a global culture—defines the artistic heritage to which they belong, and from which they navigate what is artistically possible. More specifically, in the context of post-postmodernism itself, Bérubé’s description of postmodernism as an “epiphenomena of globalisation itself” (2002: 7), seems to strikingly indicate the links that exist (and existed even in the latter half of the 20th century) between a more global and interconnected society and more profoundly shared cultural and artistic movements.

How to be Both grounds itself in glimpses of the requisite late-irony of our epoch and in George's sardonic wit, which often bristles with a certain dogmatic teenage idealism come cynicism. At one point George, who is "tired of what stories are meant to mean" (Smith 2014: 3969), astutely narrates: "Is her mother being ironic? It's hard to tell" (3207), remarks that could easily be extrapolated to larger swathes of the novel. However, it chooses to believe in and commit its own value, its own realness, and (to paraphrase Josephson Storm) its humbly emancipatory power. As George's mother, the quasi-famed subversive, once tweeted: "Art makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen" (2542).

It is no mistake that this averment, and the profundity it contains, comes to us through an allusion to one of the 21st century's most flippant forms of communication. Although Smith's characters can be siphons for ideas about the world, and although her texts—like July's and their contemporaries—stage conversations and inner monologue streams that grapple with art's value, among other existential threads, she lets her characters be real-not-real people first. Deliberately avoiding the "inertia (...) semantic finiteness and calcification" of what Bakhtin terms "authoritative discourse in prose" (1982: 344), Smith focuses on the specifics and quirks of her characters as her way—if there is one—to the universal, and the edifying, and plays with meaning on a word, sentence and structural level. As such, *How to Be Both* formally relishes in its made-ness, but not simply for the sake of intellectual exercise. As George observes, when admiring one of Francesco's frescoes:

It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, and behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. Then there are the separate details (...) They're all also happening on their own terms. (Smith 2014: 2617)

The metamodern fabric of Smith's novel doesn't eschew teleological narrative entirely, but it does expand its parameters, offering readers a collection of connected but also separate voices, details and layers, similar to those that George observes in Francesco's work. Again, in a

Bakhtian sense, *How to Be Both* linguistically and structurally attunes itself to the fundamentally “heteroglot assemblage” of the novel (O’Donnell 2010: 67).

Likewise, as Kristeva reads Bakhtin, Smith’s style reflects that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations” (1986: 37). Accordingly, her polylogue prose obligates both readers and literary critics alike to “hear the many voices of the text at once” (Becker-Leckrone 2005: 93), not to deconstruct the possibility of enjoying a more singular affective reading of the text, but rather to find both the harmonies and discords between them. Like July’s open symbols, Smith selects open, breathing words and layers. In her prose the academic and the colloquial and a host of now familiar oppositions collide. As such, George’s transcendental inquiry, which also feels like the readers own inner monologue as they uncover the novel, still finds an authentic and believable home in her teenage ‘likes’, while Francesco’s acutely personal musings on the living quality of art—as featured above—showcase a kind of destabilised lexicon, with words like ‘cause’ evoking the plausible George-as-Francesco interpretation of the text, or again may even belong to readers.

These layers and this sharing of feeling and experience isn’t quite a rendering of the postmodern plural paradigm of the self, but rather seems to manifest the need for a structural we that Timmer identified (2010) and harkens back to July’s participatory ‘invention of us’. Certainly it evokes a sense that the novel’s story is both autonomous and not, both deeply idiosyncratic and much more collective than that and, like other metamodern works, bound up with “the inextricability of inwardness and relation” (O’Donnell 2010: 59). Close to (my version of) the novel’s ending, Smith reminds us of the book’s relationship to story before she leaves George, Francesco and readers “For the foreseeable” (Smith 2014: 4037):

This is the point in this story at which, according to its structure so far, a friend enters or a door opens or some kind of plot surfaces (but which kind? the one that means the place where a dead person’s buried? the one that means the place where a building’s to be built? the one that means a secret stratagem?); this is the place in this book where a spirit of twists in the tale has tended, in the past, to provide a friendly nudge forward to whatever is coming next.

George is ready and waiting. (3998-4007)

This layered excerpt, seems to contain George-as-George (as a kind of discrete ontology-expunging artistic entity) in conversation with Smith-as-George, in conversation with Smith-as-Narrator, in conversation with Smith-as-Smith. Smith plays with both George's awareness of story and her audience's, much as in *Me and You*, where July's Christine translates the conventional story of a relationship to a "whole" theoretical "life together" lived on just "this block" that she and Richard are walking along (*Me and You* 31:36-31:40). But George's, like Christine's, like readers' knowledge of story doesn't preclude their nor our earnest participation in it.

These passages are also useful for a closer analysis of form. Akin to July's visual ebullience, observable here is Smith's distinct word play, in particular her attention to cadence, alliteration and repetition, her organic style of punctuation, warm wit, use of bracketed asides and the way in which third person limited and omniscient narration dovetail into both direct and indirect interior monologue; showcasing her preference (both formally and thematically) for this heteroglossic layering. What is aesthetically constructed by Smith on this kind of cellular level of prose is mirrored in the book's entirety, and this structurally embedded unselfconscious self-reflexivity is key to the text and to the metamodern mode at large's relationship to representation. In considering *How to Be Both*'s self-reflexivity and relationship to representation, it is also evident that there is a certain surrealism at work. And, without delving too much into Breton's brilliant but now dated work, it seems that writers like Smith similarly exalt the imagination and decry the "vacuity" (7) of texts borne of what he perceived as the flawed ideology of realistic mimesis. As such, it is Francesco's fantastical voice and dreamlike vignettes that give greater credence and affect to George's more 'of the world' struggle with loss. Moreover, Francesco's simple act of being—like Smith's many, varied other phantoms—invites a literary "refashioning of verisimilitude" (Bradford 2007: 71). As July said, regarding her process of writing *The Future*, she realised she "could actually write

anything or cast anyone. (She) could cast ghosts or shadows, or a pineapple, or the shadow of a pineapple” (2011: 141). As an academic statement it feels a little capricious, but it culminates an authorial epiphany that the surreal can also be the real. So July uses her pink suds and her faux Earth-ending earthquakes just as Smith uses her Renaissance ghost-not-ghost narrators and page margin eclipsing prose to enlarge the boundaries of the 21st century novel.

Perhaps then, the most fitting word to associate with the post-postmodern mode is one that has been mentioned previously in this chapter, and which was similarly associated with Smith by Germanà and Horton: “the hyperreal” (2013: 2). The word hyperreal came to us first from Baudrillard as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1994: 161) but today is more commonly associated with an aesthetic brand of high-fidelity realism. I would suggest in the case of metamodernism an enmeshing of the two notions may be beneficial. Just as July smiles at the failings of her fictional ‘simulacra’, Smith’s novels interrogate the representations, constructions and images of images she (and we) make, but without inherently finding them lacking. I mentioned earlier in this chapter that Leitch *et al.* labelled Baudrillard a “prophet crying out in the wilderness of postmodernity” (2001), and I would suggest that despite his fears, the real, such as it is, persisted. Works like Smith’s are not given fully to the surreal or deconstructive, but rather they practice, in his words, the “revolutionary micrology of the quotidian” (Baudrillard 1994: 163) as their central aesthetic tenet and seek to rediscover meaning there. In simpler terms, post-postmodernists like Smith offer a more moderated, tempered exploration into the line between fiction and the real than their predecessors.

Although he covers a slightly more dated epoch, reaching from 1980 to the point of publication in 2010, and focuses exclusively on the American novel, O’Donnell seeks to understand what had been nichely billed as “‘new realism’, ‘dirty realism’, ‘minimalism’, ‘maximalism’, ‘surfiction’, ‘avant-pop’”, and perhaps more accessibly labelled as

“‘postmodernism’, ‘metafiction’, and ‘avant-garde’” (2010: 34). He perceives that these labels, by their nature and in their profusion, “are indicative of a literature in search of a language to contend with reality” (34). Or “more accurately”, he states that they indicate “a literature recognising that the infinitely complicated relation between reality and the imagination can only be viewed partially, through the finely ground lens of a specific aesthetic and style” (34-35). In the wake of the ten plus years since O’Donnell first defined these modes, they now feel like analogous dimensions of a more evolved metamodern sensibility as I and others have conceived of it. But, they place Smith and her contemporaries as a 21st century outpost of this late postmodern desire to tailor an aesthetic capable of “probing beneath the surface of the quotidian for the complexities of the ‘real’” (35-36).

O’Donnell suggests that this aesthetic looks like “the rich interpolation of experimental and traditional narrative strategies” and “the admixture of linguistic reflexivity and various realisms” which is “often to be seen in the same novel, chapter, even sentences of recent writers” (O’Donnell 2010: 57). Focusing his analysis on British literature in a fairly coeval timeframe, Bradford comes to an essentially similar assessment on the post-postmodern reimagining of realism. Adding a key detail which certainly resonates with Smith, although which may not be as nationally limited as he perceives it, he argues that “realism, particularly that robustly British variety in which poised irony, satiric resignation and a reliance upon comedy as an avoidance of despair are variously present” (2007: 74) in the post-postmodern novel. To digress briefly, it may be evident here that I have not made much of Smith’s Scottishness, as I similarly did not make substantially much of Rooney’s Irishness. This is a deliberate choice. It’s useful to succinctly highlight these two recent commentators of the late postmodern novel, not despite of but for their British and American focus, because it seems to me—as I have previously contended—that the essential fabric of the works they describe

eclipses country lines.⁶⁴ More so than even in O'Donnell and Bradford's more late 20th century oriented timeframe, in the 21st century there is a profusion of works that, without belligerently blind to their local influences, belong to what I intimated earlier in this chapter as a now an indisputably global literary market.⁶⁵

In considering the market, Bradford especially has some striking observations. He suggests that “the battle between countermodernists” (that is, late 20th century purveyors of realistic mimesis) “and postmodernists is over, the former have become more flexible and the latter more market-orientated and both now face the pitiless spotlight of evaluation” (2007: 244). And, as a consequence, the postmodernists pursuit of “experimental writing”, “obsession with reaction and reinvention” “righteous celebrations of the unfathomable and unprecedented” has been quelled (244). In his discussion of how Smith narrates the experiences of *Hotel World* protagonist Sarah Wilby, he compares her to Joyce the “radical purist” who he suggests “would never have allowed Molly Bloom” such “well-crafted conceit(s)” (Bradford 2007: 243),

⁶⁴ Additionally, the term ‘country lines’ prompts a consideration of how blurred country lines are in the 21st century. As the latest census figures from many nations in the global West reflect, people have global and inter-country roots that are more complex than ever; many featured writers and directors of this dissertation included. In my home country of Australia, for example, the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that 48.2% of all Australians have an overseas-born parent, and 27.6% of all Australians were born outside of the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022: online). Although the cultural ramifications of this are complex, it does speak credibly to increasingly shared, adapted and interwoven global cultures.

⁶⁵ Many literary (and cultural) commentators today agree that globalisation has led to a certain type of cultural homogenization, and while this can be interpreted as broadly positive move towards global unity and cohesion, or a negative process by which “impersonal forces begin to dismantle cultural identities and infringe upon territorial belonging” (Shaw 2019: 27), it is inexorable. As Shaw's analysis of 21st century globalized fiction attests, in both the realm of English language literature—which is my principal focus here—and in fiction in all other languages, globalization is a vast influence upon the novel form, both bound up in its style and its subject matter. The novel, like other forms of cultural production, is, in short, a response to “the globalised contemporaneity of 21st century life” (34). In particular, Shaw concludes his discussion with a description of the globalised world as being “convergent, but not unified” (34), which I think is also particularly useful here. Without dismissing the systemic inequality of artistic production in a global framework, nor the way that globalization is often used synonymously for Westernization by Western commentators—and, likewise, without ignoring the rich depth and uniqueness of national identity and forms of expression that still shape and enrich art in manifold ways—the 21st century is undoubtedly a site of worldwide convergence in literary and artistic production. One which, to date, seems to constantly hasten and deepen itself.

suggesting Smith would rather impress than confound her reader (243). Interestingly, Bradford levels the same quasi critique at other female authors that have been discussed in this chapter like Nicola Barker. Should this investigation be far greater in scope, his words could prompt a reconsideration of the forces that have constructed the metamodern sensibility that I have hitherto outlined. He is right in pinpointing the mammoth marketing machinery of the 21st century as an almost all-powerful adjunct of the artistic world. However, there is a certain resignation and cynicism to that line of inquiry here that I am reticent to pursue too far. So far as to say, it is true that this thesis does not host works of such inscrutability as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and I have hitherto suggested that metamodern works by women tend to preference emotional gravitas over pure aesthetic experimentation more so than their male counterparts. Women, perforce, have always had a greater need to secure a more viable audience, given their formal innovation has tended to be less recognised and merited. Arguably, this gendered necessity may also be heightened in our current climate of this 'pitiless spotlight of evaluation'. As an avid appreciator of Joyce, I'm also still moved to propose that any desire to 'confound' rather than relate to one's reader seems like a very distinct by-product of the male ego and the persistent "rhetoric of genius" linked to a kind of competition of "male power", "size" and "strength" (Battersby 1990: 4-5).

Smith's playful but popularly palatable aesthetic then is perhaps inviolably bound up in her femaleness, and the broader cultural forces that dictate her position in the literary canon. However, her gaze, which also feels acutely female is there by design. Like July, and like the other women mentioned in this chapter, the simple fact that *How to Be Both* focuses on women, not men, as the hallmark figure of the metamodern age is worthy of attention. Similar in a sense to Old Dolio's baritone voice, genderless tracksuit and queer longings, Smith's women—especially Francesco—are also rather androgynous and their queer affections are pursued with similarly little ado, ergo as naturally as the long dominant hetero narrative. Much as the novel

erodes other binaries it also opens the cultural space between men and women through the real del Cossa's gender fluid paintings. "Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other. Who says? Why must it? her mother says" (Smith 2014: 2126). As I foregrounded in my introduction, alongside the welcome rise of trans visibility is the rapid and very recent recognition of non-binary orientations, which do, as I explained, to an extent, problematise the gender underpinnings of this thesis. Yet they may also continue to connect with the female gaze as a socio-cultural rather than strictly biological phenomenon. Multiple demographic analyses have clearly indicated that in our postfeminist epoch cisgender women (especially young urban women) are "substantially more likely" to identify as both non-binary and bisexual than cisgender men (Wilson and Meyer 2021: online, Gates 2011: online).

In artistic terms, works by women, like Smith's, may then more comfortably and adeptly pastiche gendered conventions. "Seeing and being seen" are "rarely very simple" the novel attests (Smith 2014: 3374), but it uses both its femaleness and gender dexterity to try and understand the relationship between seeing and being seen, and to forge a close, compassionate and creative gaze. There is a particularly excellent extract from *Winter*, which runs as follows:

"Art is seeing things", says Arthur's friend, a little worried about him. "That's a great description of what art is", says Iris. "Where would we be without our ability to see beyond what it is we're supposed to be seeing?" (Smith 2017: 117).

It's a moment of levity, but it says something about the way in which art and sight are connected. Taking this quote into consideration, the female gaze may be understood as seeing clearly what is in front of you and seeing critically all of the cultural webs, philosophical forces, inner life and possibilities both behind and beyond that. In particular, in the case of this chapter, it is also about seeing connections and possible connections, and the hope that those connections may augur. As Smith's Francesco describes herself as an artist: "all we are is eyes

looking for the unbroken or the edges where the broken bits might fit each other” (Smith 2014: 701).

In the fractured legacy of postmodernism, women in the post-postmodern mode are using their hegemonic alterity to reconsider the postmodern interpretation of the self as “divers(e), plural, heterogene(ous) and incommensurab(le)” and to reinterpret and redescribe “modernity’s conditions for unification” of a transcendental self (Schrag 1997: 127). In this process they find both aesthetic polysemy and harmony and thematic dislocation and connection. In a moment that is very reminiscent of *Me and You*’s shoe fitting scene, at one point in Francesco’s beyond time tale, she is “seen, entered and understood” with perfect clarity by a stranger upon first meeting:

Cause nobody’s the slightest idea who we are, or who we were, not even we ourselves - except, that is, in the glimmer of a moment of fair business between strangers, or the nod of knowing and agreement between friends.

Other than these, we go out anonymous into the insect air and all we are is the dust of colour, brief engineering of wings towards a glint of light on a blade of grass or a leaf in a summer dark. (Smith 2014: 1072-1083)

It’s a conception of the self that is tragic and lovely in equal measure. By aesthetically synthesising realism and surrealism, mundanity and sublimity, the particular and the universal, irony and sincerity, drama and comedy, quotidian awkwardness and Camusesque absurdism, narrative transparency and inscrutability, and hermetic and direct expression it seems, if Smith’s lyrical image is any indication, that amongst the oppositions and openness, the metamodernists simply find beauty in the strangeness and discords of being.

To return to Huxtable’s words, the aesthetic of female authored metamodernism is not a freewheeling nor unfettered pursuit of style, however there is something pleasingly unapologetic about their boldly female and authorial gazes, their humanising and empathetic portrayals of idiosyncratic existences, their striking re-evaluation of the ‘real’, and even their return to hope. On their own terms, female metamodernists strike upon what I attested at the outset of this dissertation, that style can be substance. However, they do so in a female and a

post-postmodern way, not by dredging the two apart and dismantling narrative and artistic conventions, but by finding new interstices between form and theme, and by crafting a new style that both *is* substance itself and that creates works of affective and emotive substance. In this way they are deeply similar to the still life movement I will explore in my next chapter as both modes uphold the value of a text's form, aesthetics and gaze—that is, its way of seeing and artistically rendering the world—without neglecting its thematic depth

STILL LIFE



THE POSTFEMINIST ABNEGATION OF PLOT

STILL LIFE THE POSTFEMINIST ABNEGATION OF PLOT

“Still life, unable to abstract itself from its entanglement in detail (is) incapable of producing mental as opposed to merely sensuous pleasure.”

Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990)

I have termed this chapter “Still Life” deliberately although it may appear more esoteric and less cogent than the chapter titles that both precede and follow this one. Given that, perhaps more so than in any other mode I am featuring in this dissertation, the works studied are not particularly unified in subject matter, a more conventional label seems to stifle the aesthetic tendency I have observed (even though my principal texts are in fact quite thematically similar). The term still life rightly evokes the image of a better-established mode of the plastic arts. In one of the few extended critical evaluations of still life painting, Bryson develops a profile of the form from which my translation of the term has arisen. In particular, his central tenet that the essence of still life painting is looking at the overlooked (1990) feels like a harmonious extension of what has now been established in this dissertation about the female relationship to both looking and detail.

Although not hitherto widely considered in gendered terms, Bryson also effectively makes the case that still life is met critically with “deep ambivalence” because it has clear connections to the “cultural construction” of the female/feminine (136). On the most basic level, these paintings are situated within the interior of the home, a space that was (and in many cases still is) regarded as “intrinsically female” (158). Given that many still life painters were male, Bryson argues that the structure of individual paintings within the mode and the

iconography those paintings employ inherently constructs a gendered commentary on the nature of this domestic space. Where male still life painters typically imbued the domestic realm with drama and disorder, women, like French 18th century still life painter Anne Vallayer-Coster, showed “no desire to inflate the scene beyond itself” (162).

This needs to be unpacked. Although the still life, by its very nature, finds its objects necessarily in stasis, there is an inevitable juxtaposition that can be drawn between the domestic ‘female’ space, which is a world in stasis, and is often valued as such, as a safe predictable space, and the world of ‘male’ action outside. As such, while female painters savoured this stillness, their male contemporaries exhibit a painterly yen to disrupt it, typically populating it with images of masculine items from the world of ‘real meaning’ beyond.⁶⁶ If I am to begin drawing parallels here with a filmic and literary movement, works that savour stillness are certainly a place to start. Still life is in a sense the anti-narrative genre of the art world, and it appears to me as if female creators today are capturing something of its essence in their chosen form of expression. The title also fits because, as Bryson ascertains, the style speaks to a kind of diametrically opposing view of life and art:

one that describes what is important in existence as the unique event, the drama of great individuals, the disruptions of creaturely repetition that precipitate as narrative; and one which protests that the drama of greatness is an epiphenomenon, a movement only on the surface of earthly life, whose greater mass is made up of things entirely unexceptional and creatural. (154)

⁶⁶ Bryson lists the following images as masculine attributes in still life painting: “watches, abandoned documents, envelopes spilling tobacco, pipes and pipe-spills, even swords” (1990: 160). These objects certainly signal spaces of male work and industry, as well as male drama and violence, as with the sword. As Bryson explains, these objects—both by their nature and by the way male still life painters aesthetically depict them in a state of painted disorder or disarray—symbolise a male’s discord with the peace and quiet of the female domestic space. As he elaborates further, these emblems of masculine identity, confront “the *eventless* routines of domestic life” and provoke “the re-assertion of an allegedly higher level of reality” (16, italics added). By contrast, this means we can infer that women’s still life paintings are deliberately eventless rather than ‘evental’, and that they deliberately find aesthetic harmony, both through their images and with the domestic space, rather than finding discords and tensions.

Although this paragraph verges into more recondite territory, the tension it evokes between a dramatic narrativizing of existence and a gentler appreciation of the surface of simple things—a tension which is inevitably gendered—touches at what seems to be at the heart of this developing mode of aesthetic expression.

I also want to draw attention to my chosen opening quote. This dissertation has thus far upheld the work of various contemporary female creators in light of their richly detailed creations, citing a number of feminist and formalist academics who have established that female creative works tend to pay far closer attention to fine details than those of men. In this quote, however, Bryson reminds us that this investment and immersion in the particular is commonly perceived as a sort of artistic weakness, an inability to shed what is insignificant and rise to the realm of ideas and abstraction, an inability to render the surface appearance of things with substance. In accordance with the bifurcation, which he identifies between art that adds narrative substance and art that simply sees the beauty of the scene, the quote I opened this chapter with also speaks to a divide between mental (male) and sensual (female) pleasure when engaging with art. This binary, which was and is at the heart of the mode of still life painting, is, perforce, also at the heart of its contemporary incarnation.

Perhaps in my quest for a title or label, I could have also arrived at the aesthetic category of ‘the pretty’, which Galt heralds as an existing and rich “aesthetic field in cinema”, but which contains films “hitherto unassimilable by the critical canon” (2011: 2). As she foregrounds, “the rhetoric of cinema has consistently denigrated surface decoration, finding the attractive skin of the screen to be false, shallow, *feminine*, or apolitical” (2, italics added). Ergo, this rhetoric has, in a very gendered way, delineated prettiness as something far removed from meaningfulness. Citing the fact that even the word ‘pretty’ implies a certain veiled critique—with pretty lexically, culturally, and aesthetically perceived in far lowlier terms than beauty,

and sublimity, which in art have traditionally been available to men only—Galt’s study instead considers the possibilities of the decorative image in film.⁶⁷

In short, she argues that “the pretty articulates a mode of image making that foregrounds the surface of the screen and, with it, cinema’s potential for a decorative regime of meaning in contrast to the exigencies of mimesis” (300), speaking to the feminist, queer (and intersectional) potentiality of this decorative turn. In exploring “the contours of this regime”, she suggests works within the field of pretty comprise “colourful, carefully composed, balanced, richly textured, or ornamental” images” (300, 11). More specifically, Galt evokes qualities like:

colour that seeps past the limits of line, pattern that supplants representational depth, camera movements that trace arabesque designs, picturesque compositions that demand an aesthetic eye, and an array of bodies, objects, and landscapes that resist supplementarity to articulate an ornamental visual order. (300)

Although Galt traces the evolution of the field across a more disperse swathe of time and place than I have attempted here, her description bears a striking similarity to the aesthetic preferences and features that I attest have been honed most particularly amongst a small, but growing body of 21st century female filmmakers, and in the written form, by a similar body of 21st century female novelists. It is with these two key aesthetic concepts of stillness and

⁶⁷ The pretty, as Galt similarly identifies, also draws parallels with the cute. Both are what Ngai would term, “minor taste concepts” (2012: 14)—aesthetic tendencies or styles that can be sampled across both mediums and modes—concepts that are relegated as lesser categories in contrast to beauty, sublimity and ugliness. While broadly alike in their alignment with femaleness and femininity—and therefore softness, delicateness, sweetness etc.—the cute, in general terms, has more diminutive and infantile implications than the pretty. Interestingly, although both the pretty and the cute have broad aesthetic implications both within and beyond art, and are certainly corollaries of a much bigger realm of popular culture, media and design, they are also alike in their general critical erasure. However, interestingly, when Galt unpacks the feminine and feminist archaeology of the detail and the ornamental in art, she suggests that “whereas the detail is now valued, and even the cute enjoys a subcultural hipster caché, the pretty may be the last target of traditional aesthetic disgust” (2012: 10); perhaps because what is male may be cute in its infancy and youth, but what is male is almost never pretty. This is aside perhaps from the derogatory ‘pretty boy’, a man or boy who is condemned essentially for his feminineness, his feminine looks and/or vanity. This connection between the pretty and the cute, and the basic and implications of the cute as an aesthetic concept is something I will also evolve further in my following chapter on the female-led thriller.

prettiness that I will begin to develop a picture of the new female-led mode that I have termed still life.

STILL LIFE IN FILM:

A NEW FORM OF NARRATIVE WEIGHTLESSNESS

Interestingly, Galt also makes an association with the pretty and a cinematic use of the *tableau vivant*, or staged, static living picture, which finds accord in my adoption of the label still life. The works of female filmmakers in this mode distinguish themselves in their ornate and finely orchestrated *tableau vivant*-esque cinematic frames and compositions, compositions which are typically captured in lengthy, unbroken, static, or gently floating takes. Their dialogue is often similarly sparse and drifting, with feelings conjured better by the film's mise-en-scène. Colour palettes, tactile textures, visual patterns, and symbolic images are not a cinematographic afterthought but are rather the film's heart space. Music scores and soundscapes also take on a thoughtful, expressive pre-eminence rarely witnessed in commercial film. In essence, these texts exhibit a heightened attention to both the visual and audio components of film and a strong interest in aesthetic harmony. Rather than driving their stories forward with narrative complications these films tend to sink into their character's psyche and world, observing subtle shifts and nuanced feelings. In order to evoke these still but layered worlds and characters, alongside their visual and aural intricacy and 'prettiness', many of these films also exhibit a style of contemporary tactile filmmaking that, in fiction filmmaking was arguably pioneered by Jane Campion, and in non-fiction, by Agnes Varda.

Varda is a female cinematic giant, and this thesis would not be complete without some reference to her influence on the field of filmmaking, especially upon the field of female filmmaking. Her contributions to screen aesthetics are rich and varied, however here I am primarily interested in what respected critic Richard Brody calls her films of "handmade

intimacy” (2019: online). As he describes, Varda uses the camera:

like a paintbrush, holding it in her hand and getting close to people and things for detailed and urgent proximity, for a sense of immediate physicality, for the visual feeling of personal contact. It also served as a mode of intimacy with herself (...) She made her state of mind and body inseparable from her work and (...) became one of the great cinematic self-portraitists. (online)

This quote serves to underscore both the tactility and physicality of Agnes Varda’s filmmaking, and connects this style to her bodily and lived experience as a woman, aspects that, as this chapter will develop, are central to the new still life mode. Brody’s inference that Varda has a painterly eye as a filmmaker is also worthy of note here and serves to reinforce my application of the term still life to a 21st century mode which is being developed, to some extent, in her legacy.⁶⁸

Like Varda—whose feature film debut was *La Pointe Courte* in 1955—some of her Jane Campion’s earlier works fall before the timeframe of this thesis. However, the “intense tactility or palpability” (Polan 2001: 62) of her filmmaking style earmarks her as both a progenitor to the still life movement and part of its 21st century development. With *The Power of the Dog* (2021, adapted from the Tom Savage’s novel by Campion), a texturally rich film that savours the corporeal quality of ropes, horses’ manes, mountain ranges, fabrics and fleeting clouds, Campion affirms touch as her primary filmic language and showcases its ability to create affective meaning. Bolton suggests that a “tactile concentration” on objects, substances, and surfaces, including those of minute detail, is used almost solely by female filmmakers, and that this use allows them to convey their “female protagonist’s subjectivity” (2011: 146, 148). I agree, although I would suggest this tactile concentration works to evoke the inner life of both

⁶⁸ Varda herself speaks of her connection to the plastic arts. Especially when she describes her earlier years of filmmaking, she states that “my influences were painting, books, and life” (in Brody 2019: online). Although this thesis is predicated on a certain cross-pollination between cinema and literature, this symbiosis feels particularly relevant here and is—as I will elaborate—evident in the aesthetic of both the still life novels and films I am referencing, given that they are similarly informed by the aesthetic principles of painting, especially of the original still life form.

their female and male protagonists, as is the case in *The Power of the Dog*.

This same sensory focus also typically extends to the physicality of the body and physical touch (not on sexual terms, although it can also be that). Bolton aligns this use of mise-en-scène with films that exhibit “no deference to narrative completeness or generic convention”, and rather base themselves on a directorial conviction that the sensory experience constructed will be sufficient to experience the consciousness of their central character/s (148). In the course of her discussion, Bolton refers to the work of Campion, as well as to Sofia Coppola and Lynne Ramsay, filmmakers whose works belong to this realm of still life in my view. Although not the central subject of this chapter, as a sort of darker sister to Coppola, Ramsey’s films like *Morvern Callar* (2002, adapted from Alan Warner’s novel by Ramsey and screenwriter Liana Dognini) are equally emblematic of this haptic style of storytelling by which, as Bradshaw perfectly describes, she confidently creates a “condition of stasis in which the moment is held (...) for as long as she wishes it” (2002: online). Rather than constructing a linear, purposive thrust, the film instead comprises “moments which succeed each other in a kind of narrative weightlessness” (online). Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020, adapted from Jessica Bruder’s nonfiction book by Zhao) also exemplifies this sensory and still style of worldbuilding. As mentioned in my first chapter, although the film draws strongly on neo-realist tendencies, (which are manifest in all of these works), its meandering plot and non-narrative digressions, its visual interest in the vast and living textures of the American wilderness, as well as those of lead actress Frances McDormand’s face, and its recurring elegiac images of the road and cyclical employment of Ludovico Einaudi’s melancholy and slightly soporific *Oltremare* (2006), reflect its affiliation with this mode.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This is also a sensibility she arguably brought to her foray into the Marvel-verse with *The Eternals* (2021), which many reviewers noted still bore traces of her intimate scope, “relative quiet” and “feel for natural landscapes” (Dargis 2021: online), despite the unquenchable Marvel brand machinery.

Another filmmaker who makes use of the still life mode is writer-director Joanna Hogg, particularly in films like *Exhibition* (2013), a sensual film that shirks the structural conventions of narrative to accrue meaning instead through the rectilinear spaces of the film's central location (a modernist house in London designed by architect James Melvin) and a series of mesmeric loops of its directionless artist occupants. Bradshaw proclaimed the film "superbly glacial" and "a composed experiment in fictional cine-portraiture" (2014: online). I highlight this quote not just because 'superbly glacial' is such an adroit assessment of the film, but because 'cine-portraiture' is another nebulous label akin to still life. Bradshaw's use of it, as a prolific film critic, seems to speak to a collective desire to find the right vocabulary to describe and canonically locate films of this ilk, a desire which I further here. Hogg's British contemporary and fellow writer-director Clio Barnard has also been suggested to "create very watchable set-pieces where nothing of any great narrative import appears to be happening" (Bradshaw 2021: online), and she relies particularly on music to develop what narrative there is.

French filmmaker Céline Sciamma's oeuvre also feels like it belongs in this realm, particular her recent *Petite Maman* (2021), which she wrote and directed, a dreamy cinematic poem enriched by exceptionally tenderly and carefully framed and staged visual images. Although a little more dramatic in concept than many films in this mode, Deniz Gamze Ergüven's acclaimed Turkish-language film *Mustang* (2015), co-written with Alice Winocour, develops an incredibly intimate, tactile, and visually beautiful portrait of female sisterhood through an oneiric form of realism. In a similar vein, there appears to be a small Spanish school of female writer-directors that approach themes that are generally dramatized and emphasised in gentle, languid and 'weightless' ways, using a mise-en-scene that elevates the art of cinematic composition, although their filmic palettes tend to be artfully muted and lack, perhaps, the suffused visual luminescence of the other films described here. Pilar Palomero's

films come to mind, like *Schoolgirls* (2020), as does Avelina Prat's subdued and human story of migration *Vasil* (2022), which shares the still life mode's interest in art and music and intertwines them in its staged, symmetrical, slow frames.

Perhaps one of the most significant recent entries to the still life cinematic realm is Charlotte Wells' award-winning debut feature as both screenwriter and director, *Aftersun* (2022), a deeply empathetic film and a subtle rumination on memory and grief suffused in fluid cinematography, sensuous textures and a radiantly luminous yet tangibly melancholic and nostalgic visual quality. As A.O. Scott commends, Wells' "nearly reinvent(s) the language of film, unlocking the medium's often dormant potential to disclose inner worlds of consciousness and feeling" (2022: online). Although he doesn't state it on such terms, what this statement implies is that Wells' has unlocked film's literary potential. This is something all films in this mode appear to achieve—as will become clearer as this chapter develops—as by shifting away from traditional narrative dictates and devoting themselves to the aesthetic surface of the medium, they find new expanses of inner expression. Likewise, Maggie Gyllenhaal's directorial debut, *The Lost Daughter* (2021) (adapted from Elena Ferrante's novel by Gyllenhaal), is ripe with touch, slow painterly imagery, and a certain literary quality. Although Brody, for *The New Yorker*, describes it as "sluggish" he also suggests that it offers a challenge to the "current cinema of dramas" (2022: online). More than just belonging to the field of literary cinema by nature of being an adaptation, he contends that the film is literary because it "consider(s) women's lives in intimate detail and in the light of wide-ranging, deep-rooted experience" (online).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ It does not escape my notice that many of these films, like Gyllenhaal's, are adapted from novels. In addition to the specific still life symbiotic connection between the cinematic and literary mediums that I have begun to propose and will continue to expound upon in this chapter, it should also be noted that there is always a productive tension between the source and film in adaptations. In Gyllenhaal's case, for example, her filmic style fits and perhaps even emulates Ferrante's literary style. Alternately, Campion takes Savage's very masculine and much busier and more tonally heightened source material

STILL LIFE IN LITERATURE:

SHAPING A FEMININE DEMOTIC OF STILLNESS

It is interesting that Brody also draws this connection because, as I have begun to assert, despite their visual and aural ‘prettiness’, there is a certain literary quality to films like these. Despite their interest in the physical surface and appearance of things they still comfortably reside in the interior frame and resist contracting the complex constellations of time and of the self into swiftly moving sequences or montage packages in a way that feels novelistic. However, if these filmic works could be said to be—at least in part—novelistic, then works of fiction in this mode also interpolate cinematic qualities. In particular, works of fiction in this mode define themselves through their close attention to the visual qualities, colours, lights, textures, and dimensions of their literary spaces in a way that evokes the attentive and perceptive eye of their female contemporaries’ cameras. Rather than using these visual traits, and the imagery which inherently depicts it, for strictly and more obviously pointed allegoric, metaphoric, or symbolic ends, it is important to distinguish that here the imagery often just *is*, found as if by a camera eye, assessed perhaps by the protagonist but not forced or bent towards a more didactic authorial will.

Though not descriptive to the extent of the literary romanticists or some of the earliest classics, female still life writers still evidently depart from the more clipped, pithy, minimalistic, and deliberately non-poetic prose that has become prevalent in much male-authored contemporary literary fiction. As such they often revel in long, unstructured, discursive sentences and considerable streams of dialogue, and yes, consciousness. In this way, these texts lightly resemble their Modernist stream of consciousness predecessors. Though, as

and turns it into something of a much more subtle character, taking its descriptive and sensorially attuned sections and turning this into the film’s narrative heart space.

with the metamodernists, who similarly follow in the legacy of the modern and postmodern avant-garde, they typically temper this more unorthodox style of presentation. Rather than a dogmatic or ideologically driven disruption of literary paradigms, the free-floating and introspective nature of consciousness becomes a partial aesthetic lens in which these women can gently explore the possibilities of storytelling beyond narrative, and in which they can locate beauty in the intricate details of experience. Like their filmic sisters, they are often given to the pretty, to the aesthetically pleasing and deliberate layering of the varied dimensions of literary prose. These books are therefore, in essence, slow and sensuous works that are attuned to beauty. They are thematically focused on interiority but ground themselves through their characters' own grounding within an evocatively articulated sense of place, through their attachment to the living textures of that place and, more broadly, through their attachment to the aesthetic structure of the text.

There is an evolving body of female authors who are writing works in this mode. Deborah Levy's "mesmeric" writing style (Hodgson 2019: 58) is a key example. Her novel *Hot Milk* (2016) is "dense in the way a poem is dense" and rich with meaning that is "poured into" its "incantatory language" (Wagner 2016: online). Rather than through conventional plotting, her vivid rendering of its protagonist's inner life is built through "an accumulation of detail" and "a constellation of symbols" with only brief "narrative bursts" (online). Similarly, Jenny Offill's portrayal of domestic motherhood and wifedom in *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), which comes to readers in floating fragments, presents the protagonist's thoughts and recollections with an "aphoristic neatness" that is "enhanced by the way each paragraph is set alone on the page, white space above and below" (Self 2014: online). Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, the text that began my thesis also connects to the still life mode. Although her works are most commonly defined as lyric essays that blend "poetry, autobiography and theory" (Parsons 2019: 145), Nelson's Wikipedia entry describes *Bluets* as "an unclassifiable book of prose"

(2022: online), which I quite like. Nelson floats, drifts and wades through the colour blue, and her use of an aesthetic element as the key structuring component of her work—a text of stunning emotional depth, despite its lack of narrative propulsion—reflects the affective weight of this still life approach.

A preference for this still life aesthetic is also evident in Anna Burn’s atmospheric and slow burning 2018 Man Booker Prize-winning *Milkman*. The novel embodies a deliberately digressive prose style not entirely unlike Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), which Burn’s unnamed protagonist reads, and translates a story—that of The Troubles—which would typically be dramatized and actionized into a work of slow introspection. In this way, still life appears to be an aesthetic mode capable of cutting across genre, and novels like Sophie Mackintosh’s *The Water Cure* (2018), which would broadly be categorised as dystopian, instead becomes a poetic, ambient, introspective and artfully hazy experience of girlhood and sisterhood. Interestingly, many reviewers linked the novel to Sofia Coppola’s oeuvre, like Revely-Calder, who states that Mackintosh writes “the way that Sofia Coppola would shoot the end of the world: everything is luminous, precise, slow to the point of dread” (2018: online). This luminous, precise, and slow style is also abundant in Eimar McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013). This aching, slow-moving “novel of phenomenological, semi-expressionist rendition” has a “private language”, which is representative of a quest for, what Hodgson terms, a “feminine demotic” (2019: 58, 61). That is, a style of expression which is capable of “recover(ing) the presence of a radically different mode of experience”, that being the experience of women, “within the parameters of a communal language” (61). If the works of these women are to be considered, it seems that one such style of expression to render the female experience may be stillness.

Particularly relevant here is Sykes’ study of ‘quiet’ American literature. This contemporary style—which she associates most specifically with Marilynne Robinson’s

epistolary novel *Gilead* (2005), and her subsequent novels located in the same narrative world, *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014)—is placed in opposition to “evental narratives” (2017: 38). The prose of quiet novels is reflective and meditative and “divorces narrative meaning from the noise of the contemporary world” (38). Drawing on the gendered dimensions of quiet as both a construct and aesthetic, Sykes unpacks the mode’s critical neglect, arguing that the conflation of ‘quiet’ with “passivity and inactivity” (37) is connected to the fact that quietness has long been a social mandate for women, and even more so for women with intersectional identities. Although she considers less singularly the aesthetic specifics of literary quietude, she proposes that a “quiet text privileges the depiction of quiet characters, locations and interior life so that very little happens in the body of the text that might outwardly be described as action” (81).

Sykes argues that the quiet novel, like *Gilead*, suspends linear time by focusing on the conscious interpretation of experience, and by doing so “retrieves moments of existence from the belligerent drive of a future-oriented present and holds these moments in a suspended state for further engagement” (91). *Gilead*, which hosts an expansive, personal rumination on death and faith, does not appear to us as being conventionally narrative. Wood critiqued Robinson’s book as being “out of time” (2004: online), a turn of phrase that reminds us of the great slowness of classical literary tomes. And although the fascinating connection between speed and contemporaneity is something I do not have the scope to interrogate in full here, I suggest, like Sykes, that—despite the way in which classic novels may *now* appear slow to us—this kind of quiet writing is distinctly ‘of *this* time’. This speaks to a growing and distinctly new incarnation of deliberately slow novelistic expression, one which rejects the urge for narrative and aesthetic urgency. By choosing not to drive the reader ceaselessly forward, and by their carefully composed eventlessness, still life authors foster a meditative and aesthetically centred textual experience.

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF STILL LIFE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY ENSHRINEMENT OF STILLNESS

This chapter began with me grasping for a suitable label, and alongside Skye's inquiry into the quiet, there exists another niche one that resonates with these novels: loiterature. Coined by Chambers in his own suitably loiterly work of critical analysis he describes literary texts that are emblemized by "idleness", in which "nothing much is going on" except the "mere passing of time" (1999: 9), and often by their characters physical and/or inner loitering. This is a rather unbounded and deeply longstanding field which he finds traces of in the works of (mostly men) like Sterne's own *Tristram Shandy* and Jules Verne in *Round the World in Eighty Days* (1873).⁷¹ Interestingly, Chambers proposes that these works, despite their idleness, are ultimately "sites of endless *intersection*" (9, original italics), which find their narrative attention and consciousness constantly eliding in a kind of harmonious counterpoint to the loitering. Because of this, they seem to lack the confident stillness that is at the heart of this contemporary mode. Rather than spontaneous or random, still life texts exhibit their deliberate and careful orchestration. However, Chambers' notion that loiterature challenges the critical yen to summarize and reduce texts to synopses—because works of loiterature have no centre, and therefore no periphery—is certainly valuable and akin. These texts, in part, offer the loiterly dreamlike collations of pre-conscious impressions and the loiterly attention to the world of, what I will call here, 'periphera'. These two core aspects similarly decentre these contemporary texts by women, and thus shift their value from being premised purely upon plot progression.

Chambers also argues that by nature loiterature novels are subversively pleasurable because they incorporate and enact "a criticism of the disciplined and the orderly, the

⁷¹ Chambers also locates the aesthetic of loiterature in some of Agnes Varda's films, a filmmaker whose sphere of influence on contemporary female directors is apparent in many of the new modes I propose in this dissertation, but most so in this realm of still life, as my preceding analysis attests.

hierarchical and the stable, the methodical and the systematic, showing them to be unpleasurable” (10). In this way, it shares much in common with the texts operating in this still life mode, which depart from their respective medium’s typical focus on exposition, action and plot, and all of the (masculine) epistemological ideologies that underscore this focus. Unlike the conventional conception of story that has become instilled through 19th century novelist and playwright Gustav Freytag’s pyramid—which reifies exactly the above: exposition which leads to action which leads to a dramatic climax which leads to resolution—these works instead exhibit a penchant for stillness. Rather than being propelled by plot, which feels predicated on a conception of life as being purposive only when it moves in a set direction towards some form of self-actualization, goal-achievement or resolution, they avoid dramatic climaxes and standard cause-and-effect narratorial structures. In the absence of this kind of linear plotting, they devote attention to way in which mood, tone, feeling and atmosphere can gain resonance and affect across the duration of the text. In the realm of in-praxis conversations on the shifting new outposts of literature Barnett develops another, rather perfect, new term for the still life mode, and its cultivation of mood, tone, feeling and atmosphere. Barnett calls it ‘No Plot, Just Vibes’, and she describes the style as a new female-led form of book for when “you’re not in the mood for character arcs, stakes, and obstacles, but you want to get lost in a novel’s worth of atmosphere or mood” (2022: online).

These texts often leave critics, reviewers and audiences asking: but what is it *about*? Yet, they are still about *something*: a feeling, an experience, an idea, a character, or characters, as Nelson exemplifies, even a colour. They still offer a thematic and emotive depth. As Hart described of *Gilead*, “not a great deal happens, except that everything happens” (2012: 100). Ultimately, still life films and novels come to feel like a literary or cinematic fugue, where a glimmer of a character, a place and a moment permeate through their aesthetic fabric, and where their meaning culminates through an increasingly intricate visual, aural and sensory

layering. Although Adorno suggests that “art betrays transcendence when it seeks to produce it as an effect” he offers that transcendence is attained through “the nexus” of an artwork’s “elements” (1997: 78). Rather than transcendence, I would suggest that these works seek, more concretely, to produce a new form of female expression defined by a lyrical style of stasis. However, they exhibit a keen awareness of the nexus of their filmic and literary elements and approach the act of artistic creation with a sense that ‘story’ is just one element of equal import to a text’s many and varied formal aspects.

It becomes apparent that their approach to stasis differs from previous filmic and literary conceptions of the term, such as the motionless cinema described by Remes (2015). This male-directed avant-garde post WWII movement was strictly non-narrative and is typified by films like Bruce Baillie’s perfectly titled *Still Life* (1966), a short which comprises solely sun drenched, still life-inspired images of the woods north of San Francisco. This mode was, at its core, a rejection of the conflation of cinema with motion and a challenge to movement as a formal ‘sine qua non’ of cinema. As such, filmmakers like Baillie gave preference to fixed, held, often incredibly long almost photographic frames. The key point of difference then, is that the films I discuss here do not seek to take the visual motion out of motion pictures (although they appreciate the stillness evoked by long takes and wide painterly compositions), nor do the novels I have hitherto outlined try to enclose their action in just one scene or space. Their sense of stasis instead comes on narrative terms. Static films, nonetheless, as a movement “insistent on spectatorial contemplation” and concomitantly insistent on a spectatorial “awareness of time” rather than a loss of it (Remes 2015: 20, 13), feel influential. For these 21st century women, it seems that this focus on spectatorial contemplation and time can intermingle with a more aesthetically centred and layered, yet narratively quiet, patient text.

STILL LIFE AS ANTI-NARRATIVE: USING AN AESTHETIC OF FEELING TO UNSETTLE THE PARADIGM OF PLOT

This deliberate narrative stasis also suggests that these texts can be considered non-narrative, and by many popular markers they are. However, to articulate a work like Coppola's or Cusk's as being non-narrative or anti-narrative (which many critics have done) is not strictly in the same deconstructive terms as postmodern commentators like Derrida might have envisioned. However, again a line of influence can be traced from his more moderate thoughts regarding the organisation of meaning that still exists in non-teleological texts, because "the completion of each moment, each form" (2002: 30) will invariably be present, something certainly witnessed in these texts. Arguing against proponents of finalism and ultra-structuralism, Derrida states—paraphrasing Jean Rousset, one such proponent—that such doctrines must "consider as 'genetic accidents' 'each episode, each character'" who is "independen(t) from the 'central theme' or 'general organisation of the work'" (2002: 29-30).

Alternately, as works like Cusk's emphasise, an episodic, discursive, meandering approach to story is in fact a central aspect of its textual integrity. Scholes, discussing the high-postmodern anti-narrative, suggests that narrative can be broken into three core components: "the *events*, the *text* and the *interpretation*" (1980: 210, original italics). As he articulates, narrative is "always presented *as if* the events came first, the text second, and the interpretation third" and that through this process the events "become humanised—saturated with meaning and value—at the stage of entextualization and again at the stage of interpretation" (211, original italics). Although he developed this structure considering deeply metafictional and deliberately deconstructive texts designed to "problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation" (211), it serves well here. The stories contained in this chapter do not lack in this fundamental teleological process of meaning making, or telos, nor do they totally disrupt

the traditional mechanism of a causal diegesis. More simply, they change what we may understand by the ‘events’ of a story.

Although he developed the term in consideration of film, more specifically Lynne Ramsay’s filmmaking, Bradshaw suggests they display “an extra-temporal sequence of events” (2002: online), which is a useful way trying to understand the way in which both something but also nothing occurs in these texts. While the still life term perhaps more vividly evokes these texts’ interest in spatial and visual arrangements, they are equally defined by the way they seek to suspend the temporal frame. Scholes concluded his evaluation of anti-narratives with the assertion that “even the most devout practitioner of anti-narrativity” could not “do without it”, suggesting narrative was “too deeply rooted” in the human condition and experience to be entirely dispensed with (212). I agree, and much has changed since the radical pre-1980 efforts that contextualised his remarks. Therefore, today, the turn away from narrative exhibited by the women operating in this mode is perhaps better understood as a turn away from plot. Because, once having become unburdened by the conventional concerns of plotting, these creators become free to create an aesthetic that works in service of feeling and sensual affect, not just in service of narrative. There is also an overlap here with the female metamodernists I discussed in the previous chapter, whose works similarly demonstrate “the failure and malfunctioning” of “narrative principles and conventions”, while evoking the fact that the modes of the novel and film “can still perform important work” when their “self-metaphorising capacities” are drawn upon (Hodgson 2019: 65).

In this sense, these texts lean away from the logical “fettters” of language and towards its “illogical aspects” like “metaphor” (Nietzsche 1992: 94). Therefore, they also lean away from what Nietzsche envisions as the masculine world of prose and towards the feminine arena of poetry, a notion depicted most visually in his own metaphor of poetry as a “lovely goddess” who is driven into “despair” by the “dry and cool” prose of men (Nietzsche 2001: 90). As

Nesbitt Opper interprets, the prose-writer's—or rather prose-man's—"revelation of a poetic capacity" is "analogous to" him "revealing his femininity" (2005: 104). As Rousseau articulated in his analysis of the development of language and the usefulness of writing, "poetry was devised before prose" because "feelings speak before reason" (1966: 51). Prose, which belongs to the realm of the masculine, then also belongs to the realm of reason, as well as the realm of mind/intelligence: being logical, linear, and controlled. Whereas, poetry, which belongs to the feminine, also belongs to feelings, and to the space of body/intuition: being emotional, circular, uninhibited.

Following this line of argument, it's not a particularly huge leap to suggest that plot, as the kind of backbone of orderly narrative prose, may be born of something masculine, and that the fundamental premise of story as being propelled by action may also be a kind of male thing.⁷² As Olney attests, Rousseau spoke of much poetry "scornfully", which charges the "reason v. emotion and prose v. poetry" debate (1998: 122) in a very gendered way that reflects how male-envisioned conceptions of art and its value have shaped its aesthetic course. I brought up Berger and his thoughts on gazing in the introduction of this dissertation and he is worth returning to here. As he so aptly identified, the standard artistic representation is that "men act and women appear" (2008: 63). Perhaps, bearing this in mind, this 21st century mode of still life represents female creators' deliberate ownership of the gendered alignment of men with action and women with inaction, by shifting the value away from the 'acts' of a text entirely. Perhaps it also represents a conscious return to the conceptions of the *écriture féminine*; Cixous in particular placed the poetic form and the conventional novel in opposition, describing the former as a "limitless country" and a space for women (1976: 880). Although

⁷² This is not to say that women don't employ or enjoy complex plotting, as my next chapter reveals completely otherwise. Nor is to say that rigorous plotting is antithetical to a kind of literary femininity as the works of pioneering authors like Jane Austen make plain. Rather I speak here to the possibility of literary and filmic expression beyond plot and seek to understand why female writers and directors may find an affinity for and with it.

her writing is characteristically dense, Kristeva's conception of "poetic language" also feels like a plausible coterminous influence. In her discussion of poetic language in *Desire in Language* (1969), she describes poetic language as an "unsettling" but not deconstructing "process" (1980: 125), which feels mirrored by what these contemporary works are doing. In particular, her image of how, through a poetic lens, "the thin sheath of the sign (signifier/signified) opens onto a complex architecture where intentional life-experience captures material multiplicities, endowing them first with noetic meaning, then with noematic meaning" (129) also helps to explain how these films and novels possess such lateral and affective depth, even if by a conventional linear story framework they are considered slight.

This is not to discount the fact that, alongside Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and Kate Mansfield—who I previously named in my millennial speak chapter—many of the early stream of consciousness novelists were male, nor that, as established above, male artists pioneered an entirely anti-narrative vision of cinema. This is also not to discount the work of contemporary male practitioners whose work comparable qualities with those of the women discussed here.⁷³ In literature, there are a smattering of 21st century stream of consciousness-inspired authors, most significant among them Max Porter with works like *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), a text which "shows us another way of thinking about the novel and its capabilities" (Gunn 2015: online). This meditation on grief and loss, constructed through airy prose and poetic verse feels akin to the works of the women I have foregrounded here, though it distinguishes itself from them because it takes a poetic kernel from Emily Dickinson and

⁷³ Even at the incipience of the *écriture féminine* movement, Cixous recognised that there were male writers who were capable of writing and embodying the feminine. As she asserted, there are some men, like French novelist and playwright Jean Genet, "who aren't afraid of femininity" (1976: 885). Although this thesis is invariably structured around a certain gender division, I also spoke of wanting to avoid essentialism, binaries and fixity in my introduction. Accordingly, although my analysis does not leave me significant scope to answer this question, and in fact it would prove difficult to quantify, I wonder how many men have felt 'authorised' seeing still life films or reading still life novels—such as those I have listed here—to deviate from the male norms of story and of engagement.

uses it to solely inhabit a set of male psyches. This is not a critique, for it does so very credibly, pointing both through its prose style and thematic ruminations to the absence of the feminine, female, and maternal in the house that follows the death of Dad's wife and the Boys' mother.

In film, aesthete Julian Schnabel comes to mind, with works like *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2008)—the adaption of Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir of living with locked-in syndrome—exhibiting a sumptuously cinematographic purity and a collation of deeply aesthetically pleasing frames rarely witnessed on-screen. That aside, its sections of languid narrative slowness find a bold counterpoint in rock star-styled montages of the protagonists' former glamorous life, and the film's thematic heartbeat—like that of Porter's—is existentially and didactically gut-wrenching in a way that the more subtle works by women tend to avoid. It should also be said here that—although I have previously spoken to the existence a globalised literary culture, a statement I am not reneging on—European cinema, the realm of production to which *The Diving Bell* ostensibly belongs, has for much of modern film history sought to distinguish itself from its English language counterpart, primarily its Hollywood counterpart, by its “unique form of ruminating” (Elsaesser 2019: 4) and more sensitive slowness.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Likewise, certain modes of Asian cinema have historically cherished slowness, with Japan, China, Taiwan and Thailand, in particular, all having developed distinct forms of slow cinema that have drawn academic attention and international acclaim. On more contemporary terms, there is also a growing interest in a field of filmmaking called contemporary contemplative cinema, which evokes a not dissimilar aesthetic to the still life mode I am developing here—and which, although loose in its boundaries, is associated with international male filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Bruno Dumont, and even Lars von Trier. These names reflect that, with a few exceptions, the conversation around slow cinema and contemporary contemplative cinema alike tend to be male-centric. Moreover, it should be re-attested that alongside the slow, still life texts by women are very interested in the pretty and are defined by their aesthetics and their—as I have previously described it—suffused luminescence. In one of the to-date most expansive studies of international slow cinema, De Luca and Barradas Jorge's edited *Slow Cinema* (2016), they discuss Kelly Reichardt, who is one of only two female filmmakers included in a chapter length feature. I have previously mentioned her name in my millennial chapter as a leading cinematic voice in the field of female neo-realism but it is certainly true that her work also is defined by its slowness. However, one of their contributors, Gorfinkel, captures the distinction perfectly when she describes that Reichardt's slow style is “an instantiation of austerity and narratological and pictorial restraint” (2016: 127). While a form of narratological restraint is similarly on show in a Sofia Coppola work, for instance, her style is almost the opposite of pictorial restraint or austerity.

However, as Elsaesser proposes, today, in a world of diffuse audiences and increasingly capacious visions of Europeanness, this may be more of a “prosthetic self-construction” than reality (2). Nevertheless, the connection between films of rumination and the enshrined institutional valuation of the figure of the European auteur may be another link to understanding how slowness has been seized upon as a defining narrative and aesthetic by contemporary female creators.

THE SENSORY QUALITIES OF STILL LIFE TEXTS: POSITING TACTILITY AS A FEMININE FORM OF PERCEPTION

Although I have alluded above to the sensory or tactile experience of still life works, I am yet to expand upon it in sufficiently explicit or gendered terms. In rendering the terms of this burgeoning mode, I have once again invoked the nature of the phenomenological experience. In my introduction I stated that my exploration owed a theoretical debt to Merleau-Ponty, a fact which has no doubt become obvious in the preceding chapters of analysis. However, as Sobchack rightly observes his conception of phenomenology is grounded in an:

insistence upon and elaborate description of human embodiment as the ground of all meaning and semiosis, (which) has neglected any consideration of bodily existence as it is culturally and historically lived in certain forms of critical differentiation and discrimination. This is to say that the “lived-body” of existential and semiotic phenomenology has been explicitly articulated as “every body” and “any body” (even as it has implicitly assumed a male, heterosexual, and white body). (1991: 148)

This “implicit universalization of the male subject” (Butler 1989: 98), or this fundamental equation of male-as-human has been previously critiqued by several feminist scholars including Butler in her worthy 1989 essay “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception”. Without pontificating on the subject too much, I acknowledge and certainly further the same claim that his clearly gendered gender-blind conception of the lived-body experience is ripe for continued

feminist and postfeminist revisitations. However, my interest here lies more so in how existing revisitations can be used to understand the style of texts that are the focus of this chapter.

As Sobchack concisely summarises, phenomenology describes the lived-body as both immanent and transcendent. That is, it is both “an object in the world and immanent in its materiality and situation” but “transcendent nonetheless” (1991: 153), something which moves outward from itself to affect the world of action. Using this same paradigm, phenomenologist Young, applying the gendered theoretical dearth that Merleau-Ponty left open, intuits that “rather than simply beginning in immanence” the “feminine bodily existence remains in immanence, or better is *overlaid* with immanence, even as it moves out toward the world” (1989: 59, original italics). Or, as Sobchack paraphrases, “the lived-body’s transcendence is ambiguous when it is lived as a woman” (1991: 153). My inquiry also began with an assertion of women as a longstanding object of the gaze, rather than solely the purveyor of one. As such, given that women as lived-bodies are inherently both the subject and object of gazing and sensorily perceiving the world, it does not come as a surprise to think that a woman’s phenomenological experience is bound up in a more heightened awareness of herself as a physical object or ‘thing’. I turn to Young and Sobchack’s writings here, because I believe they help to understand the interest of female creators in the physical textures of their medium that I have identified. Perhaps this amplified “attention both to the lived-body as a commutative system of perceptive and expressive functions”, manifests itself in the “material body” of these texts, which although “not sexed” (per say) is certainly “sensible and sensual” (Sobchack 1991: 161-163). I would add that, although not sexed itself, the material body of a text certainly exists in an immutable relationship with the biological and socially constructed sex of its director.

The female writers and directors operating in this still life mode exhibit a textual preoccupation with the haptic experience and an interest in how constructing and sharing haptic experiences can operate as a uniquely female/feminine method of meaning-making beyond

narrative. Marks defines haptic *perception* as “the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies” (2002: 2). In extension, she proposes that texts can offer haptic *images* through an appeal to haptic *visuality*, which a type of sight that “draws from other forms of sense experience” and involves the audience’s body (2-3). Marks also suggests that in inviting this bodily identification, the haptic look ensures that there is no textual ‘object’, instead a “dynamic subjectivity” exists between “looker and image” (3).

Although Marks perceives the haptic “as a feminist visual *strategy*” more so than she adheres to “the notion of tactility as a feminine form of perception” (7, original italics), an interest in touch has a longstanding gendered component both in and beyond artmaking. Irigaray, for instance, argued that “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” (1985: 26), something that seems manifest in Doane’s vision of the ‘over-closeness’ which female spectators exhibit towards the cinematic image (1987). Galt observes that the pretty is an acutely haptic and sensory mode (2011) and Marks suggests that haptically-oriented films encourage the viewer to give themselves “over to an entire scene, sometimes literally a shimmering surface”, and to ‘think’ with their skin, rather than intellectualising the content of the film itself. As a caveat, it must be addressed that if we are to follow Deleuze’s postulation, as developed in his influential *Cinema 1* and *2* (1983, 1985), cinema by nature is tactile and it is and has always been the tactile which constitutes the “pure sensory image” of cinema (1997: 12). However, I contend that something more is at work here.

This contention gains weight when the acutely tactile quality of still life literature is also considered. Although they examined the work of experimental women’s fiction in an epoch slightly ahead of the one in focus here, Fuchs and Friedman speak of female writers who placed “emphasis on sound, rhythm, and repetition as bearing the weight of progression and meaning” who made “linearity, conventional syntax, and climactic development” absent and

who and fused dimensions of “lyric and prose” (1989: 15), traits whose legacy is apparent here. Above all, that which seems most relevant as a precursor to this current mode is the development of women writers who focused on the “‘wordness’ of words” (15). This possible fullness of words, and how this full wordness can evoke the aural, visual, and tactile dimensions of the world and the body is integral to the works of literature in this mode. Gagné identifies an even longer heritage of literary tactility, suggesting that since the Victorian era tactility has allowed “female characters to reclaim or maintain subjectivity” by being “defined and depicted beyond the visual” (2021: 2-3). By moving away from the visual, a “voyeuristic frame” that has always tended to disembody, disassociate and dismember women, touch can instead “create and renegotiate an embodied whole” (3). Here, the haptic dimension is just one aspect of what distinguishes these texts, alongside their aesthetic prettiness and narrative slowness, yet it is an essential one, that speaks a priori to a new type of artistic female gaze.

STILL LIFE AS AESTHETIC UNITY:

DEVELOPING A NEW FEMININE STYLE OF FORMALISM

Lehrer, in Brand’s collected works on beauty, considers the interrelationship of feminist art, content and beauty. He establishes some interesting notions that overlap here. He suggests that interacting with art involves a kind of “toggl(ing) back and forth between an immediate awareness of colour and form and an awareness of meaning we find in the colour and form” (2013: 301), suggesting that both a sort of inchoate sensory immediacy and a more complex gestalt response are available to us. Leaving this toggle open, he suggests is the “opening for beauty”, because there is “intrinsic value in the way meaning is exhibited in the sensory materials” (302). Along the same lines, he also offers that this toggling is what often lends feminist artworks, which operate strongly on both the sensory and contextual planes, their striking affect. This is perhaps a soft approach to the long fraught debate between extreme

formalists and anti-formalists, that Zangwill (2013) insightfully navigates. Without leaning too far into an exegesis of Zangwill's text, films and novels distinguish themselves from artworks in their more extended and complex cultivation of character, story, feeling and purpose in a way that makes the extreme formalist view that all the aesthetic properties of a work are formal feel particularly foolish. Therefore, as he does, I "appreciate the virtues of moderate formalism" (2013: 62).

This still life mode of sensory storytelling, by design, reminds us that "formal aesthetic values, nonformal aesthetic values, and nonaesthetic artistic values can all combine so as to produce an aesthetic effect" (62). That is, this aesthetic and sensory approach to story evokes Moore's principle of organic unity. As Moore stated:

It is not sufficient that a man should merely see the beautiful qualities in a picture and know that they are beautiful (...) We require that he should also *appreciate* the beauty of that which he sees and which he knows to be beautiful—that he should feel and see its *beauty*. (2012: 329, original italics)

Articulating that aesthetic appreciation has a unified emotive and cognitive element, Moore further argues that there is a "whole", which is "formed by the consciousness of that kind of beauty *together with* the emotion appropriate to it" (330, original italics). It is certainly a simplification to say that following this logic, the aesthetic whole is more than the sum of its aesthetic parts, and yet it is a useful framework for understanding how these texts create meaning and attain value. Without completely reneging on the fundamental premise of story inherent to both mediums in question, authors and auteurs operating in this style seem to channel Zangwill's moderate formalist approach by their intent focus on the aesthetic unity of their creations and the affective beauty created by that unity.

Although his inquiry is strictly literary, Kivy maintains that the modern novel form, with its "thin and transparent" prose, stands in opposition to the "thick, opaque poetic medium" (2011: 70), another interesting contribution to the prose versus poetry debate that I have foregrounded in this chapter. In the case of most novels and most readers, he attests that the

“structure and other ‘aesthetic’ features of the novel are, for the most part, not objects of artistic attention”, meaning in essence that the modern novel has become “more or less (a) non-aesthetic artwork” (Kivy 2011: 154). In the wake of my preceding chapter on metamodernism, this interpretation—though functional in the scope of his own investigation—seems a little thin itself. It negates this more experimental realm and, what I will call for lack of a better overarching label, the *de rigueur* bourgeois intelligentsia realm of Pulitzer and Man Booker Prize literary fiction (which can be more interested in content than form, but never entirely neglects it). These are forms that seem unlikely to disappear entirely from the literary experience. However, Kivy’s words do feel like a fairly succinct evaluation of mainstream, commercial literature. Interestingly, he also continues a point that Iris Murdoch introduced in her writings on attention, looking, gazing and literature. Although her analysis adheres to a moralistic sentiment that feels distant from my postfeminist framework, in her essay “Against Dryness” (1961) she argues that prose novels (as separate from both poetry and drama) are made worse for their “journalistic”, “crystalline” or “dry” prose, to the extent that modern novels are “too shallow and flimsy” in their depiction of human beings and their worlds and “indeed not *written*” (1961: 16-19, original italics). As such, she proposes “a new vocabulary of attention”, suggesting in this essay—and in others like “The Idea of Perfection” (1964)—that attention (especially to detail) is an exercise in *really looking*, one of vulnerability, love and grace, which enriches both art and ourselves. This is an interesting corollary to the discussion of the feminine relationship to detail that has thread itself through this dissertation.

In his exploration of aesthetic value in contemporary readership, Kivy derives a taxonomy of readers that is useful to consider here. Firstly he separates non-serious (i.e., poolside Piña Colada readers) from serious readers. Then, he categorises serious readers into the dominant group of “in-it-for-the-story” readers, the “serious thoughtful” readers who like both a story for the story’s sake and for the story’s “moral, philosophical, psychological, social,

political, and other theses”, and the “serious structural” readers: the only type of reader to take account of a text’s aesthetic features (32-34). Although again he has a strictly novelistic focus, the taxonomy easily fits film viewers from the non-serious (i.e. those party to the growing—and, frankly, deeply disturbing—“Netflix and scroll” phenomenon (Scott 2021: online)) to the serious filmic aesthetes. After ending my last chapter with a brief mediation on the commercial pressures that impact female authors and especially female directors as still the vastly gendered minority, this informal nomenclature points out the obvious: if almost everyone is in it for story and very few are in it for formal pleasures or reflections, then how can the appeal of these texts be understood, considering that many of them are in fact popular.

The two core texts that will be my focus here sent Coppola and Cusk to critical and popular acclaim (notwithstanding their detractors, who I shall address in the following subchapters). *Lost In Translation* grossed over \$118 million USD for Coppola at the box office and saw her win Best Original Screenplay at the 76th Academy Awards. And *Outline* was a finalist for a host of lauded awards like the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction while also being on the best book lists of institutions like *The New York Times* and of arbiters of more popular taste like *Vogue* and *Glamour* magazines. Perhaps what Kivy’s taxonomy misses then, is addressing what has been dubbed the fiction or reading gap: the fact that men statistically read far fewer fiction novels in comparison to women, and that they statistically read fewer books of any kind (Bucaille 2021: online). Everyone from psychologists to cultural commentators to bloggers have sought to understand the phenomenon and its genesis. Do men lack the empathy to engage substantially with fictionalised characters? Do they lack the attention spans as children? Are they culturally conditioned out of enjoying fiction, as the less practical cousin of informative non-fiction?

The answer remains elusive, and it is not my intention to weigh into it here. The reason I delve into this gap is to suggest that recognising women as the clear driving consumption

force for literature, it seems unsurprising that works which defy the male logic of story are growing. And that, as the previous chapters have similarly heralded, women are now re-envisioning the terms of these two mediums, which were both in their incipience produced by (and in many senses for) men. Although, as I have previously attested, women's hold in the film industry is still sadly marginal, considering these two movements as being akin, and as being influenced by the same broader cultural and media landscape, the same desire to discover film outside of plot (for both creators and viewers) can be posited. Likewise, the same potential for audience engagement, fulfilment and identification in texts that move beyond plot and that focus on formal and aesthetic features and experiences can also be advanced.

This dissertation (and especially this chapter) is, in a sense, based on a very old binary. To return to Kivy's words, those which I detailed in my introduction, I have argued that there is "the 'sensuous', 'phenomenological', structural" and "emotive properties of artworks", and then there is their "narrative and other 'content'" (2011: 14). This dichotomy is in many senses analogous to the formalist-anti-formalist divide that I have drawn attention to in the preceding paragraphs. This divide is also analogous to the style versus substance or style *as* substance debate (which I weighed into once more in my post-postmodernism chapter), which is also analogous to the McLuhan medium versus message or medium as message premise. But perhaps rather than dichotomy, dialectic would be a word which serves better in the case of these works which privilege the sensuous, phenomenological, and emotive using what have become two hugely narratively directed longform mediums. Taking that Hegelian-inspired spiral image of the thesis-to-antithesis-to-synthesis process that any current or prior humanities student today can conjure, these films and novels can perhaps be understood as a kind of evolving synthesis of the formal and non-formal potentialities of art.

Although when he is drawing the diving lines of his precis, Kivy puts a bracketed "(perhaps)" before emotion (14), I argue that formal structure and the emotional affect of a text

are inextricable in a way that goes beyond narrative content, something that the works at hand here make plain. I am moved here to think of Hustvedt's notes on looking at art. She recognises that her perception "is not exclusively *visual* or even purely sensory. Emotion is always a part of perception, not distinct from it" (2016: 19, original italics). As such, while still life texts may predominantly abnegate plot, they enshrine emotion, but of a rather subtle kind. In Ghosh's exploration of literary aesthetics, he considers how fictional emotion works and in doing so returns to this notion of organic unity, of the wholeness of fiction. In trying to make sense of the vigour and intensity of emotion elicited by fictional works he surmises that:

In one sense perhaps, art appears more real than life. Each detail or element in it is completely relevant and significant to the whole work. In responding to a work of art, we respond to the whole structure in terms of all its elements in their relationship to each other, *inter se*. But in real life, our responses are mostly to individual elements/incidents without necessarily having to reconstruct a whole context to it. And, what is more, even when we imaginatively reconstruct a whole context, it necessarily lacks finality or a closed form. (2018: 27)

Although a relatively elementary thesis, it helps to explain how this type of text transmits feeling and meaning. Instead of relying on what has been established as the masculine doctrine of plot, action and exposition, the women of this chapter communicate through the organic unity of their aesthetic expression. This attenuation of narrative in place of form, may seem superficially akin to the current male post-postmodern set, who in the preceding chapter I suggested often pursued aesthetic innovation above emotive ends. However, I find the words of Bryson on the realm of still life, in which he compares Caravaggio's still life paintings to those of his female contemporary Fede Galizia, to be a particularly illuminating parallel, worth returning to here. As he articulates, Caravaggio's domestic "space is intensified to the point of theatricality" whereas "Galizia sees no need to intensify the scene; it is engaging enough in itself" (1990: 164).

Similarly, today's incarnation of the still life is defined by its fundamental aesthetic, thematic and narrative softness, and by its interest in the surface textures and beauty of scenes. Although these works may 'deconstruct' narrative paradigms to a point, they still find emotion,

locating it in slow but richly dense moments, and ornate and intricate visual and literary worlds. Most of all, these are aesthetically pleasing rather than challenging texts. Galt's conception of the pretty is again of value in crystalising this distinction:

The pretty is self-evidently designed, refusing notions of cinematic chance, but it is also measured, stopping short of transgressive excess. By the standards of realism, the pretty image is "too much", but it is also not enough to be redeemed as radical excess. Not quite beautiful or sublime, it is also not camp or countercultural. (2011: 11)

In this, they seem distinctly postfeminist. As established, postfeminism has been derided by many (and not without merit) as a superficial movement that has neoliberally commodified what is female and the female potential for "corporeal perfectionism" (Negra 2009: 123). However, this still life movement, with its close attention to what is pretty, and what is, or can be, sensually and sensuously female, may reflect a deliberate desire to artistically manifest the postfeminist "turn toward an innate femininity" (122), without problematising it.⁷⁵

It must be conceded that postfeminism is inextricably linked with late-capitalist consumerism and certainly the postfeminist "production of 'the self'" is "tied up with the practices of beauty" (Wearing 2007: 287). Yet critiques, such as Negra's, that beauty masquerading as empowerment is in fact disempowerment may deny that there exists a gendered interest in what is beautiful, in being beautiful and in consuming things which are beautiful that does not necessarily have to be problematic. As these works demonstrate, the artistic cultivation of the pretty and the beautiful over the cultivation of ideologically or narratively pointed texts perhaps isn't just an outpost of postfeminism's 'fantasy' of the reclamation of the female self (Negra 2009), but in fact may be a genuine reclamation. If prettiness is conflated with femaleness but they are both states relegated as being lesser, prettiness as an artistic intention is, as Galt attests, deceptively subversive (2011).

⁷⁵ In this way, the still life text may have something in common with the colour of millennial pink, as an emblem of 'post-prettiness', and as a generational wish that 'prettiness can be de-problematised' (*The Guardian* 2017: online). Perhaps, in fact, these texts prove that prettiness can be de-problematised; that its terms and implications can be reframed and renegotiated, especially as an aesthetic concept.

SOFIA COPPOLA, *LOST IN TRANSLATION* (2003): DESIGNING NOT DIRECTING

Deceptive may well be a perfect word to describe Sofia Coppola's oeuvre. Born into filmmaking royalty in 1971 in New York as the youngest child and only daughter of filmmakers Eleanor and Francis Ford Coppola, Coppola has created a slate of works of deceptive simplicity. Like the other filmmakers and writers established in this chapter, Coppola has chosen to wield her chosen medium primarily in the pursuit of aesthetic and emotive textures. She creates texts built around intricate, beautifully arranged images and equally elaborate and artful multi-sensory environs, rather than building them around more conventional or complex narrative arcs. Yet, her films are not as simple or singular as they may appear to an undiscerning eye, and through her pretty pastel cinematic dreamscapes she creates a deeply affective weight through mood and tone. Across the course of seven key feature films—*The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006), *Somewhere* (2010), *The Bling Ring* (2013), *The Beguiled* (2017) and *On the Rocks* (2020)—Coppola has developed a defining mode of cinematic expression which emblemizes the aesthetic tendencies explored in this chapter. It also emblemizes what Handyside, in *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood* (2007), identifies as an “expression of female subjectivity that embraces rather than rejects femininity” (2017: 13). Woodworth agrees, suggesting that “Coppola’s trademark slow pacing, privileging of impression over plot, and development of emotional texture and mood constitute a kind of feminine aesthetic” (2008: 151).

Backman Rogers, in her monograph devoted to Coppola, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (2019), describes her as a filmmaker who creates “deeply serious and engaged work”, distinct from the playful and quirky realm of female metamodernism, and from the irony of the male-associated smart cinema, despite the appearance of a blank style in her films

(8). She is a director who “*thinks in images*” and demands we “take images and the affect and effect of images seriously by reading surface in order to reach depth” (8, 2, original italics). As

Backman Rogers expands:

In order to extract meaning from Coppola’s films, we must take their pleasurable properties seriously. In reading Coppola, it is not a matter of listening intently to what is said—after all, very little is articulated—but in remaining alert to the multiform, highly complex nature of her production design and what this connotes philosophically. Coppola, after all, is known for using images and sounds as the point of inception for her work and rarely starts with dialogue. (7-8)

Because they are “not exactly” stories, “the depths of her movies come more in their overall visual and narrative composition than from specific characters or performances” (Fox Mayshark 2007: 177, 172). As such Coppola’s images are complex and layered, typically redolent with multifaceted meanings and feelings like nostalgia, ennui, and yearning. Backman Rogers would add to this list bittersweetness, which she aptly identifies as being at the centre of a Coppola work. As she elaborates, because “bittersweet is not a quality that is easily defined; it is felt”, this is “the magical territory that defines Coppola’s work”: that which “externalizes the turbulence of the inner life” (2019: 16). Although Coppola wields a veritable panoply of cinematic apparatus and is, in some ways, unrivalled in her cinematic awareness, her careful aesthetic orchestration is only gently felt, and an oneiric quality is typically cultivated in her films, which are discursive and drifting in their pacing. Fox Mayshark describes them as possessing a “spectral gauziness”, suggesting that her films are “a little airy”, they “float” (172).

Handyside identifies the same airiness, pointing to the “light-filled, ethereal image(s)” that dominate a Coppola film, and the way they “dazzle and sparkle” (60). More specifically, given Handyside’s focus on girlhood (a postfeminist emblem of equal interest to Coppola as the millennial creators I discussed in my first chapter, though approached differently), she articulates that the luminosity of Coppola’s films and her recurrent deployment of “sunlight, lens flare, haze and glow creates a politics of dazzling girlhood” (69). Beyond the strictly

cinematographic, Handyside also concisely summarises two of the other key meaning making dimensions of a Coppola *mise-en-scène*, fashion and music:

Attention to the material textures of clothing is part of the way she undermines a purely visual approach to femininity through a haptic approach to filmmaking, her camera playing over fabric enabling the tactile sensuality of varying textures of silk and fur. Her films also feature soundtracks that feature evocative and empathetic use of music, and linger on both the preparation and consumption on food, so that altogether films become charged with attention to touch, hearing and taste as well as sight in the experience of girlhood. (27)

In doing so, Coppola's films become much more about how it is to simply *feel* and exist as a girl or woman, than they are about any particular narrative of girl or womanhood. Handyside continues that her "emphasis on the inchoate, embodied and disordered world of emotions" speaks to the fact that part of the broad cultural appeal of postfeminist rhetoric lies in the fact that it gives "attention to the ineffable and the inexplicable nature of emotion as a prized rather than despised part of the feminine world" (27). Her emphasis on the world of emotions also situates Coppola squarely within the non-narrative realm of this chapter, as does her deep consideration of every facet of a film's aesthetic. Perhaps only comparable to Wes Anderson, whose aesthetic has spurred a wave of design and social media interest like the @AccidentallyWesAnderson Instagram page-come-book, 'Sofia Coppola' has become a design style with entire blogs and magazine segments devoted to her "sumptuous pastel hues", "impeccable" colour palettes and more (Woodward 2017: online).

However, as Fox Mayshark summarises, this attentiveness to design has led critics to commonly accuse Coppola of being "frivolous", stating "that her movies lack heft, that they look good but communicate little" (2007: 163). He himself suggests that her ethereal style is "sometimes to the point of insubstantiality" (163). Fox Mayshark continues, coming to the heart of this chapter, when he evaluates *The Virgin Suicides* and says: "Not that 'narrative' per se is the movie's strength, or Coppola's" (171). The line could be read as a critique but in the light of this chapter feels more like a commendation. As he adds, Coppola:

specializes in atmosphere, conveying ideas through a combination of beguiling images, gliding camerawork and artfully deployed music. Her films feel designed as much as

directed, which is not intended as a slur. She has a fashion photographer's eye for composition and suggestion (...), and a striking sense of the use of light. (171-172)

Of course, to refer to her films as designed typically *is* a slur. Much of the criticism which is levelled at Coppola's films is that they are voyeuristic candy, too feminine, too pretty and too visually based, exhibiting only shallow and vacuous qualities. The standard assumption is that, because her cinematic style is overwhelmingly visual, placing highly composed, decorative images at the centre of her communicative process, Coppola's work fundamentally lacks depth. However, as is typical of this still life mode, she favours images over dialogue, and ephemera over rigorous plotting.

Critics imply that there is little complexity of thought or profundity of idea beyond Coppola's technical flair. Frequently eviscerating, they contend that her use of visual pleasure is "self-indulgent" (Vonder Haar 2006: online) and employed to mask the fact that she, as McCarthy claimed, "can't pull off anything too complicated" (2006: online). In light of the still life framing of this chapter, it is no doubt already apparent that all of this criticism is deeply gendered.⁷⁶ For a more expansive analysis of this phenomenon, Backman Roger's book (2019) is indispensable (and depressing). It may seem strange to begin with all the critique that has been heaped upon poor Ms Coppola. However, as Kennedy—who touts her specifically as a 'feminine auteur'—suggests, the fact that she has chosen "to develop her own feminine film form", with an aesthetic that is "wholly feminine" and interested in the "feminine pleasures of consumption", simply confounds critics (2010: 38, 40), as does the aesthetic prettiness of her film form (2010).⁷⁷ It is an interesting observation. This dissertation opened with Maggie

⁷⁶ By comparison, the design-oriented Wes Anderson's ability to pull off 'complicated' is never questioned by critics, nor have his own credentials directing commercials for fashion houses and chains like Prada and H&M drawn any opprobrium in the way Coppola's have.

⁷⁷ In reality it is generally male critics who are confounded by Coppola's feminine film form and aesthetic. However, given their systemic privilege in the industry their voices have often been the louder. Even today, according to an ongoing study by San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, men are still responsible for 74% of all film reviews, and women only 26% (Rubin 2022: online).

Nelson's proclamation that not enough had been heard about the female gaze, and as my riposte to McCarthy and Vonder Haar—and to all the other male critics who make the “misogynist implication” that “Coppola's ‘pretty’ and decorative mise-en-scène” signifies “nothing beyond its pleasing surface” (Backman Rogers 2019: 4)—I would argue that certainly not enough has been understood either.

Not simply meretricious, Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, which she also wrote, embodies, for a brief but formative moment, the lives and mindscapes of Bob and Charlotte. The former is a washed-up actor on a publicity junket in Tokyo played by Bill Murray, the latter a young Ivy League graduate accompanying her celebrity photographer husband on assignment in Japan played by Scarlett Johansson. Adrift in the hotel Park Hyatt, by nature a transient space—and one particularly subsumed in the film by the trappings of celebrity artifice—Charlotte's post-graduate delirium intersects with Bob's middle-age lassitude and, in the other, the two discover something of real value. As they traverse the buzzing streets of Tokyo and ensconce themselves together in the liminal world of the hotel, they become able to bare their souls to one another and seek to find both in and alongside the other what is missing. Although Bob tells Charlotte that “The more you know who you are and what you want, the less you let things upset you” (*Lost in Translation* 1:09:41-1:09:49), the price of his wisdom is, in part, a resigned detachment to his own quasi-permanent state of sadness. Charlotte, who solemnly reveals to Bob similar fractures in her much newer marriage and life, is also lost in her fear that “I just don't know what I'm supposed to be” (1:09:54-1:09:57).

However, in the presence of the other their collective fog of ennui is pierced, and the film makes way for tenderly captured glimmers of spontaneity, joy, genuine connection and understanding. None of these transformations are seismic, or at least they are not depicted on such terms. As Backman-Rogers rightly identifies, *Lost in Translation*, like all of Coppola's films, is a paean “to the fleeting and ephemeral moments in life that are nearly impossible to

capture, centred and grounded as they are in subjectivity and embodiment, but that nonetheless come to define the course of a life” (16). Fox Mayshark articulates that the film evinces Coppola’s signature lightness, “it glides and buzzes even when (as is often the case) nothing much is happening”, yet it remains “grounded in the solid ache of daily life” (2007: 174). This is a layered texture she achieves by observing her characters “in the in-between places that movies rarely pay much attention to: riding elevators, taking baths, lying around half-dressed and indecisive” (174), and by her willingness to hold on scenes and moments with her focused long shots, lengthy takes and careful silences. This also works to balance the poised and posed visual beauty of her designed frames and visual worlds with a powerful form of naturalism. As Fox Mayshark concludes, given that “the delicate balance of a new friendship” is “a slight thing to hang a movie on”, “a less talented and self-assured filmmaker would have been tempted to liven it up with subplots, action, or intrigue” (174). Not Coppola however, who trusts to her auteurial vision and therefore “trusts her story to unwind at its own gentle pace” (174).

As it is, the film is structured around a series of gentle recurring cycles: Bob and Charlotte in the bar, Bob and Charlotte in the elevator, Bob and Charlotte struggling to sleep, Bob and Charlotte silently observing their surrounding; the young woman especially is the vessel of Coppola’s iconic ‘looking out of windows’ tableaux. These measured yet ultimately fugacious moments come to us in washed and muted yet warm hues nostalgically and tactilely reminiscent of the grainy look of a Lomography film camera. Coppola makes distinct use of a shallow depth of field and diffuse light to create a softly scintillating homage to Tokyo’s neon streetscapes, where her quintessential employment of the droning, introspective Shoegaze music of artists like *my bloody valentine* and *The Jesus and Mary Chain* adds to the film’s dreamlike ambience and the quietly reflective headspace of its protagonists. Bolt suggests that the film “constitutes a marked Irigarayan ‘space between’” (2011: 126), by the way it invites an open spectatorial meditation on the characters and their trajectories. Visually I would

suggest it does the same, as Coppola makes abundant use of blank space in her wide shots—which alternately mark Bob and Charlotte’s respective alienation from the world around them or reflect their connection to one another—allowing for painterly compositions of various interior and exterior scenes throughout Tokyo. Likewise, as it passes through the city Coppola’s often handheld camera tends to be angled (I would articulate, hopefully) upwards, cultivating even more open space in the frame.

Bob and Charlotte similarly float through the city, allowing it, and life, to unfold both quietly and at times chaotically around them. In a nice connection to Chambers’ loiterature, Murphy identifies Charlotte as a female *flâneuse* (2006), placing her in the Baudelairean tradition of the “passionate spectator”, a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness” who reproduces “the flickering grace of all the elements of life” (Baudelaire 1995: 9). I choose to quote from Baudelaire here because a ‘kaleidoscope’ of the ‘flickering grace’ of the world feels like the words any given film reviewer might use to describe Coppola’s visual style. It also feels like a rather apt metaphor for the mode, which deliberately and decoratively yet somehow still naturally renders the world in layers of aesthetic beauty, without being blind to *all* the elements of life. The image of the *flâneur*, or in this case *flâneuse*, also returns us to these texts’ interest in periphery. As O’Malley describes, Coppola’s cinematic gaze is like that of the *flâneuse* because “her interests lie in the peripheral; in what happens when things get quiet; in the way bodies arrange themselves in the frame” (2017: online). Although “these moments don’t ‘lead anywhere’”, they still have “enormous resonance” because they have a unique capacity to “linger” with the spectator (online).

Like other women operating in this mode, Coppola finds something by slowly ‘perambulating’ through this periphery and renders this into a piece of emotional complexity and unified aesthetic beauty. Also, despite Charlotte’s young age, and Coppola’s ongoing interest in the feelings of girlhood, the character is hardly an ingenue. Her measure of wistful

optimism and world-weariness earmark her as a thoughtful observer in the style of many of Coppola's girls. I'm moved to include Cecilia's opening words in *The Virgin Suicides*, which Coppola adapts from the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides. When a doctor tells her she's "not even old enough to know how bad life gets" (*The Virgin Suicides* 2:07-2:09), she replies sagaciously with "Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a 13-year-old girl" (2:10-2:14).

Despite male critics' protestations, I argue that Coppola's films possess great emotional gravitas: not in spite of but *because of* their still narratives and engagement with aesthetics. As mentioned above, a key dimension of a Coppola mise-en-scène is performance. As is common amongst auteurs, Coppola favours certain actors (Kristen Dunst and Elle Fanning in particular), and though she tends to immerse herself more so in the subjective experiences and psyches of women, Bill Murray has become her quintessential leading man (seen in *Lost in Translation*, *A Very Murray Christmas* (2015) and *On the Rocks*). Peberdy notes that in *Lost in Translation*, Murray gives an emblematic performance of his now iconic minimalist mode of acting, and in doing so enacts Higson's notion of externalising emotion (2011: 75). That is, Murray renders emotion in the slightest and most subtle textures, contours and movements of his eyes, face, and body. In harmony with her favoured slow takes and distanced tableaux compositions, Coppola's directorial choices, especially regarding Murray's performance, further reflect her commitment to a style of filmmaking that privileges the "restraint and containment of action" by seeking a "doing nothing" style of reacting rather than acting (68).⁷⁸

While this chapter has pointed frequently to the way that various schools of academic thought deride the surface of things, Coppola again seeks to find meaning there, this time in

⁷⁸ Scarlett Johansson's performance in the film is similarly quiet and subtle. In his analysis from 2007—which is now quite dated in the context of Johansson's career—Fox Mayshark cites her most notable earlier work, her role as a foil character in the Indie black dramedy *Ghost World* (2001). He describes Johansson as "a potentially interesting actress who, like Charlotte, doesn't feel fully formed" (2007: 175), and it is an apt observation. Fox Mayshark likewise states that Johansson easily "fills" the "room" Coppola gives her, but it is her tangible unformed quality that allows her to embody the film's expanses so naturally and to give "wistful scenes of her exploring" greater meaning and affect both with and through their structured cinematic quietness (175).

the literal surface aspect of her performers. And through this surface aspect she creates an evocative and moving portrait of male angst, using Murray's distinctive physiognomy in a way that allows her to eclipse dialogue and narratorial confines. Despite her attention to form, Coppola avoids rigidity, and in accordance with her preference for image over dialogue, it is telling that the content of the film's most poignant moment, when Bob and Charlotte finally part, remains a mystery. The last words spoken by Murray to Johansson are unknown to all but the pair and Coppola. In Murphy's study of improvisation in 21st century independent cinema, he suggested that "spontaneous behaviour has a sense of immediacy that is compelling" and "comes closer to capturing the richness of human behaviour" (2019: 56). Although it is not a device Coppola frequently turns to, as a director she is exceptionally careful not to stifle the natural "given-ness" of her performers (King 1985: 31), and her films are enriched by their openness and breathing space. Because they are oriented to feelings, sensations, experiences and living textures more than plot, they often bleed out beyond their edges in such a way that they cease to be hermetic.⁷⁹

As Bryson articulated in his examination of still life painting, "for the male viewer to admire the sensuous detail of painting is to fail in the masculine virtues of mental labour and abstraction" because there are:

two distinct modes of vision, divided between the sexes at birth: to the male, vision under abstraction, rising above mere detail and sensuous engagement to attain the general overview; to the female, vision attuned to the sensuous detail and surfaces of the world, colour and texture, rich stuffs and silks. (1990: 177)

I hope that by this stage of this dissertation the fallacy of this paradigm has been exposed, and the merit of sensuous detail to subjective representations of femaleness and femininity has been

⁷⁹ In her study of feminist cinema, which I foregrounded in my introduction, Kuhn makes a distinction between feminine and masculine texts, and even between feminine and feminist texts. As she states openness is "a defining characteristic of the feminine" and it is "something very different from the closure, fixation or limitation of meaning implied by the tendentious text" (1994: 17). Despite their aesthetic orchestration, Coppola's films are characterised by this same feminine openness that Kuhn proposes, and it is a formal principle she uses to cultivate meaning without confining it.

asserted. In opposition to this sentiment, I contend that because Coppola's films so artfully render the world of feeling through the sensuous textual elements described by Bryson, they showcase the value of the still life mode as a new form of feminine expression. To return to Sobchack's conception of concrete materiality briefly, she proposes that the way films are described connects to their material body, stating that "certain films have been described as 'physically handicapped' by, for example, their silence or lack of colour"; 'physically handicapped' being a bodily category ontologically marked as "disfigured", as 'female' also is (1991: 162, 160). To mark Coppola's films as female evidently connects to a description of them as 'sensuous' and 'surface-oriented', which traditionally would earmark them as a failure, a reflection of the female lived-body, which is an 'object' that exists for simple visual pleasure. Here, however, this 'female vision' can instead be lauded as a new mode that can produce both mental and sensual pleasure in such a way that reminds us of the "manifold ways" in which female subjectivity can be "inscribed within a text" (Backman Rogers 2019: 10).

Despite the femaleness that feels distinctly embedded in *Lost in Translation*, and in similar works by Coppola and her contemporaries, interpreting Deleuze's notion of the 'becoming-woman', Kennedy articulates that postfeminism liberates us to understand that gender can be understood in more rhizomatic terms. As she explains, "'woman' cannot merely be described as part of a binary, but a part of an assemblage of processes connecting and forming in new alignments within culture", one which exists "across the social, the libidinal, the material, the psychological, the biological, and the personal spaces of our existences" (2002: 94-95). Although she therefore advocates for an understanding of the sensory qualities of cinema beyond gendered subjectivities, she nonetheless posits that there exists "the 'becoming-woman' of the cinematic", an affective process which is born of something feminine but which, for her (and I concur) is now available to "a variety of bodies" (104-105). This is an aesthetic of sensation that concerns itself with "movement-image, affect, haecceity,

synaesthesia and kinaesthetics” (104). Because of its interest in ‘becoming’, it also uses sensation to define life’s ephemerality and ineluctability (105). In this light, Roberts suggests that Coppola’s cinema is one of “eternal becoming”, more interested in a “a girl’s potential” than a “woman’s reality”, because this is a space where there is “only feelings and experiences and being” (2017: online), where, in a very postfeminist way, reality, endpoints and direction need not intrude.

As Kennedy expands, it is hard to “call Coppola’s films ideologically feminist” (2010: 41). And yet, “her films are very interested in depictions of the feminine as source of both pleasure and consumption” (41) in a way that complicates the standard spectatorial pleasure inherent in the male gaze. Or in other words, her feminist (or postfeminist) “form of politics is precisely ‘bestowed’ via visual pleasure” (Backman Rogers 2019: 7). As Backman Rogers continues:

Coppola adamantly feminizes her cinematic worlds not in order simply to create a pleasing aesthetic (although her films frequently spur specious use of her visuals within the glossy innards of fashion magazines, proving perhaps how easily she is misconstrued), but in order to characterize vision (that of director and spectator) as female. (15)

Handyside similarly attests that Coppola changes the visual vocabulary of film by using painterly compositions of beautiful women in close-up and in repose (such as in the opening image of *Lost in Translation*, which captures Charlotte’s backside as she lays on a bed in sheer pink underwear) in a way that “disrupts the voyeuristic gaze at the women’s body as pure spectacle” (2017: 25). Handyside suggests that she achieves this through her films’ fundamental slowness and stillness, which forces the spectator to become aware of the passage of time. Through this, “the very weight of time pulls these women from being pure empty iconic spectacle and into the material matter of history itself” (25). Her words deliberately echo Mulvey’s when she argued that “the look of the camera” could be freed “into its materiality in time and space” (1999: 844).

In the case of *Lost in Translation*, it is also the harmonious connection between her camera and Johansson-as-Charlotte that Coppola attains, which ensures that her interiority is evoked meaningfully alongside, and as inextricable from, her haptic beingness. Bolton agrees, suggesting that Coppola's meditative camera can be seen as a kind of Irigarayan speculum in the film (2006).⁸⁰ Coppola visually constructs Charlotte's immanence, and how it overlays her world, by visually conveying her "inner life and experience through her exterior" (2008: 145). She constructs modified point-of-view shots that converge with Johansson's physicality and the way she occupies the physical world. Woodworth suggests that this new type of shot "asks us to both look at Charlotte and with Charlotte" (149). In this way, Coppola depicts a female gaze that acknowledges female's immutable 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1999), but without trapping her in it.

I mentioned earlier Coppola's visual motif of women looking out of windows, which also calls to mind once more Sobchack's and Young's writings about "feminine spatiality". This gendered relationship with space exists as a natural extension of the "modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility" (Young 1989: 62) that result from the ways that patriarchal society inhibits and encloses the feminine (Sobchack 1991: 158-159). Young offers that because women are more aware of the boundaries of their own body, there exists for them a space 'here' and a space 'yonder'. The space yonder is one in which "feminine existence projects possibilities", but it is one in which she is only "looking into, rather than moving in" (1989: 63). Coppola's films poignantly evince this desire for the space beyond, while revealing

⁸⁰ Irigaray's idea of the speculum has been deeply influential for much feminist gaze theory, and continues to resonate in cinema studies. In essence, she proposes a "mode of specularization that allows for the relation of woman to 'herself' and to her like" (1985: 154-155). As she expands, this mode: "presupposes a *curved mirror*, but also one that is *folded back on itself*, with its impossible reappropriation 'on the inside' of the mind, of thought, of subjectivity. Whence the *intervention of the speculum and of the concave mirror*, which disturb the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters" (155, original italics). On these terms—as Bolton likewise contends—Coppola's camera sees Charlottes subjectivity and reflects her own varied ways of seeing.

that distanced yet detailed observations of the textural appearance of the world is concomitant with the uniquely female position as a quiet, and often domestic, observer. While not typically privileged in art, ultimately this mode reflects that this may be a position and a gaze which grants a far more beautiful view.

Gleiberman describes Coppola as an “experiential” filmmaker with an “immaculate” cinematic “voice” and a gaze so distinct he simply calls it the “Coppola Gaze” (2017: online). “There’s something almost cosmically passive about her point-of-view”, he continues, “she’s gazing, enraptured and absorbed, at the characters she creates, and she wants you to partake in that trance” (online). And, beyond the way that her filmic gaze contemplates the spectatorial pleasure of women, its ‘cosmically passive’ nature challenges our perception of what art should do. If we are to follow Bryson’s logic, still life paintings by women could counter the “sovereign gaze” of artworks, which “subordinates everything in the scene to the human observer” (1990: 143). This is because the objects they depict, in their “persistence”, immemorial quality and permanence, can invite a “a radical decentring that demolishes the idea of a world convergent on the person as universal centre” (144-145).⁸¹ Coppola’s films are not so radical as to break the gaze altogether, nor to break our position in the universe. However, as Gleiberman offers, despite her aesthetic orchestrations, her film’s resist the sense that everything within them has been subordinated and her observational gaze feels restrained in a manner that seems uniquely female.

⁸¹ With this comment Bryson also addresses the meaning inherent to the Dutch word from which the English term arrives, *stilleven*—as well as the other names the mode is associated with, like *natura morta*—which more explicitly reference the intertwining of death and life inherent in still life painting. As Bryson explains, as these paintings depict “individual avatars” of the material world, they are also inevitably shaped by notions of “creatural frailty” and fragility (1990: 144-145). Although I am careful not to stretch the still life affinity too far between this original mode of plastic arts and a contemporary movement of literature and film—neither in philosophy or aesthetics—perhaps the temporal interest and deliberate slowness of the works in this chapter, like Coppola’s, reflects a similar desire to make the ephemeral permanent by framing it and suspending it in an unhurried, languid, and drifting manner.

RACHEL CUSK, *OUTLINE* (2014): RENOVATING THE NOVEL

If one is to speak of designing, there is also an air of design to Rachel Cusk's works. *Outline* (2014), and the following books in its loose trilogy, *Transit* (2017) and *Kudos* (2018), have distinctly styled book jackets on both their Faber & Faber and Picador print and e-book editions. Designed by Rodrigo Corral and using images by Charlie Engman (a photographer renowned for capturing objects in acts of becoming) the books look like holiday polaroids from Sofia Coppola's personal collection. Framed in clean, muted buff off-white rectangles Engman's images are at once deeply ubiquitous but also somehow oneiric and unexpected. For *Outline*, a triton conch shell juts upright from the sand, the sea out of focus behind, like a modern photographic still life (the image in fact comes from one of Engman's popular series titled *Still Life*.) For *Transit*, a woman's arm is held aloft over the sea and, perched above that, a small *Iris Oratoria* (or Mediterranean mantis) is poised in place inside a plastic cup. Finally, for *Kudos*, the window of an airplane is viewed from an angle, offering a view to a small string of natural islands and a sea that is at once flat and shimmering. They evoke a look and a feeling so distinct that the publishers chose to publish her most recent novel *Second Place* (2021) and reprint Cusk's entire back catalogue in the same style; I particularly like *In the Fold's* (2005) lone white metal lawn chair and *Arlington Park's* (2006) suspended fish in a plastic bag. Her publisher's interest in developing this harmonious look speaks both to a recognition of the importance of style to Cusk's writing and to a desire to capture the very singular aesthetic essence of her writing.

Cusk's attentiveness to aesthetics and form has led to the opinion that the Canadian-born British novelist and writer has, across the course of her career, renovated the novel (Thurman 2017: online). Born in 1967, she began publishing in the 1990s with critical attention

arriving with the release of her first key Cuskesque novel *The Lucky Ones* in 2003. In the already mentioned works of fiction and in her complementary autobiographical works of non-fiction—*A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001), *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009), *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012) and *Coventry: Essays* (2019)—Cusk has developed a distinct style of tangential and passive storytelling in which her protagonists tend to be ciphers more than actors, and in which the real bleeds into the fictional, and vice versa. Often set in the domestic sphere, or with some relation to the domestic arena, her novels appear tightly personal and are typically intimate in scale. However, she has a diffuse approach to structure, with her books often presenting an interlinked and curated collection of stories or experiences rather than a more cogent or linear narrative. This openness allows them to drift rather than being drawn or directed towards a narratorial endpoint or resolution, and this structural intersection of the one and the many reflects a thematic interest in the connective tissue that creates community and kinship, although this is a subject she and her characters often approach with some ambivalence, her novels often feeling more like observations of distance than closeness. D'Hoker suggests, in her analysis of *The Lucky Ones*, that Cusk's novels can—to varying extents—be described as composite fiction. However, despite the fragmentation that is inherent to Cusk's works, given that they are often built around “short story cycles”, they still retain a holistic, novelistic and certainly aesthetic unity (2013: online). In this way, they become like literary mosaics.⁸²

Unlike *The Lucky Ones*, which features an eliding host of five narrative voices, in the case of *Outline* there is one core protagonist, a decision which unifies the text and perhaps more clearly asserts its adherence to the novel form. And yet, as Baker attests, despite the

⁸² Yet again Kristeva's (1987) words feel suitable and conceiving of Cusk's writing as possessing this mosaic quality also draws out another possible parallel with the post-postmodern mode. They seem to share an approach to expanding the parameters of teleological narrative, where style and aesthetic are used to harmonise moments of different narrative focus, tone, and voice, and whereby, in rearranging these narrative components, these creators find a new shape for both the novel and film.

novel's first-person narration, "the writer is only defined in opposition to other, more fully developed characters" (2019: 54). Nevertheless Faye—whose name is only mentioned once in the novel, on deeply inane terms, when a woman from her mortgage company calls her—is our way into the world of the novel, into her world. Despite being a cipher, she is also someone: a British woman, a writer, a creative writing teacher, a divorcee, a mother to two boys. These facts, however, these labels by which we usually define a person, are made deliberately elusive by Cusk and instead the most salient aspect of her being simply is that she *is*, and that, for a fleeting moment, she is adrift in Athens, a place which is not hers. Beginning "on the tarmac at Heathrow" (Cusk 2014: 4) waiting to fly to Athens, the narrator meets an ageing Greek man who is only too happy to unload his life to her, his multiple marriages, his family, his business ventures, childhood, children. Faye's takeaway from the interaction is that she is "dissatisfied by the story of his second marriage" (28). She thinks that "reality might be described as the eternal equipoise of positive and negative, but in this story the two poles had become dissociated and ascribed separate, warring identities", and we presume that she tells him so, for he concedes that she was "probably right" (29). And there, more or less their moment ends, the chapter shifts, and the novel is underway, because *this* is the novel. Faye's conversations with people around her make up the substance and the structure of the text, conversations in which she typically listens more than she speaks.

Kellaway says that there is "no conventional narrative arc" in *Outline* and that the novel "offers few of the standard expected rewards of fiction" (2014: online). Yet, she describes every word of *Outline* as being "earned, precisely turned, enthralling" and "achingly potent", expounding the novel as a "masterclass in tone" with "cumulative empathetic power" (online). A novel that, because of its very non-novelistic structure, can explore "complex" and "elusive" thematic territory (online) with rare depth. If Charlotte is a *flâneuse*, Faye is that and more. Not only an observer and wanderer, she acts as a kind of filter to her various confidants. Perhaps,

in the context of this discussion, Faye is Charlotte middle-aged, more worldly and wise, but also more weary. Thurman, who hails Cusk's "new design for the novel" her reinvention and renovation of the form, implies that the interactions that populate the novel are not simply aleatory; rather, as "these soliloquies unspool, a common thread emerges" (2017: online). Thurman offers that all of *Outline*'s "speakers suffer from feeling unseen, and in the absence of a reflection they are not real to themselves", yet "from the murk of their griefs and sorrows", Faye "extracts something clear—a sense of both her own outline and theirs" (online).

Blending the fictional form with the traditions of oral history, Cusk succeeds in creating a work of both thematic and aesthetic cohesion, and of striking depth. It does this, as I said of Coppola, not despite, but because of, its lack of forward thrust. As such, though they possess a common thread, the events that are retold in *Outline* still "don't build toward a revelation" (online), because that would be too narrative, too forced, and purposive. In this way, Cusk's layered writing balances an "unfixed framework" with "careful planning" (Rannou 2013: online) in a way that captures and holds the full textures of what Cusk described in *The Last Supper* as the fleeting "living moment" (2020: 51). Often Cusk finds the aesthetic beauty of this moment and her prose holds tinges of romanticist poetry. Like Coppola, she pays great attention to light and crafts gently drifting prose that gives the texture of places a distinctly living yet also dreamlike quality, creating a symbiotic relationship between the place and her character's perception of it. Extracts like the one below are so oriented to sight, touch and the oneiric quality of diffused light that they feel like a Coppola film scene transcribed:

At evening, with the sun no longer overhead, the air developed a kind of viscosity in which time seemed to stand very still and the labyrinth of the city, no longer bisected by light and shade and unstirred by the afternoon breezes, appeared suspended in a kind of dream, paused in an atmosphere of extraordinary pallor and thickness. (Cusk 2014: 90)

However, unlike in more didactic or deliberately edifying texts—a realm of expression which feels inherently at odds with the still life mode—Cusk (like Coppola) does not wield this beauty

for a thematic purpose or end; it is simply something she encounters and expresses with her writer's eye.

Her prose is oriented towards the surface details that spark beautiful imaginings, with descriptions like “where the glittering water whirled and retreated against a tiny curl of sand” (70-71) commonplace, but they seem to be included for the pleasing sake of the detail itself. Although I have only tentatively drawn this connection in my overview of the still life mode, in this way, Cusk's works remind me of the writing of modernists Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and Kate Mansfield. They are a wholly influential trio in the light of much 20th and 21st century fiction by women, who Wallace Hawkins in 1926 said, shared “the passion for beauty, and the sense of the enormous part played by sunshine (...) in any human consciousness”, stating rather beautifully that, despite possessing a certain “individuality in likeness”, “each draws in her separate star” (1926: 356); a gentle yet apt way of approaching the connections of my own research. Although the still life mode distinguishes itself from the shifting elisions and more scattered interiority of the stream of consciousness style developed and employed by Richardson, Woolf and Mansfield—given that consciousness by nature is peripatetic—there is a weight to the description in Richardson, Woolf and Mansfield's writing (and, arguably, in women's novels in general), that is taken up and amplified by Cusk and her still life contemporaries. Wallace Hawkins' reference to both beauty and the literal ‘sunshine’ of the human consciousness also strikes upon a key quality of the description in Cusk's *Outline* and comparable works, its luminosity.

In this sense, what may particularly be an influence is the association of Richardson, Woolf and Mansfield with the aesthetics of, not still life, but Impressionist painting—which may, as an artistic movement, above all represent an interest in how the play of light can depict a moment in time. To take Mansfield for example, as Reimer summarises, Mansfield's writing has a distinctly “pictorial quality, which demonstrates a heightened aestheticism and a desire to

realise painterly effects” through her prose (2011: 35). Ascari likewise states that her fragmentary and episodic writing is informed by the Impressionist principles like “visual juxtaposition”, framing, and light, and he describes that her characteristic vignettes often employ an “‘observer at the window’ technique”, yet remain “highly sensitive to the *light* that (falls) on the external world” (2014: 33-36, italics added). The following moment from “The Garden Party” seems particularly striking: “And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it” (Mansfield 1922: 64). Although in Mansfield’s modernist writing the tableau is quickly pierced, where Cusk would hold onto the moment longer, and would infuse this kind of meditative frame of observation throughout her whole text, the luminous painterly description and the pleasure of such descriptive detail points to a deep commonality.

Likewise then, Cusk’s writer’s eye reflects a deep interest in placement, with *Outline* featuring tableaux and moments that could only be described as tracing Galt’s ‘arabesque designs’. However, she does not make these scenes laden with a morass of metaphorical meanings. One such deeply decorative tableau—which likewise turns its attention to the sun’s embodiment in the textures of the world—occurs as Faye swims in that ‘glittering water’ and watches and describes a family on a nearby boat, who, as they “beg(i)n to stir”:

chang(e) their positions in the confined space as though they were little clockwork figures rotating on a jewellery box; the father bending and putting the child in its pram, the mother rising and turning, the two boys and the girl straightening their legs and joining their hands so that they made a pinwheel shape, their bodies glittering and flashing in the sun. (86)

Perhaps the image draws Faye in because her own family is now older, now disbanded, and she is to some extent jettisoned here, alone in all that water, even in its beauty, though perhaps the moment is simply visually arresting. Perhaps it is a moment in time that eclipses its mundanity and forgettability not by virtue of what it signifies but because of how it appears, how it looks,

and therefore it is worthy of narrative inclusion for the sensory pleasures and sense of personal experience it invokes.

If Coppola has her distinct *mise-en-scène*, then, as established, Cusk similarly has her “established stylistic penchant(s)” (Rannou 2013: online), in particular for the floating, extended simile. Mentioned no less than 58 times in *Outline*, including in the extract above, is the phrase ‘as though’. Mullan articulates that although simile is the word for the device, “really it is more like reverie” (2006: online). He suggests that Cusk’s (and her various narrators’) similes are based on “the mere force of a personal impression” rather than “intellectual logic” (online). These similes, whether regarding the external world or other characters, serve to both “estrangle as well as describe them”, pointing to the irrevocable quality of the world’s “‘as though’-ness” (online). It also showcases Cusk’s interest in the often-melancholy spectator or listener, the person who is interested in impressions, in the appearances of things, who recognises that “everything seems like something else” (online).

As Faye articulates, in another passage where she joins the ageing Greek man from the airplane:

He had removed his shirt, and his bare back faced me while he drove. It was very broad and fleshy, leathery with sun and age, and marked with numerous moles and scars and outcrops of coarse grey hair. Looking at it I felt overcome with a sadness that was partly confusion, *as though* his back were a foreign country I was lost in; or not lost but exiled, in as much as the feeling of being lost was not attended by the hope that I would eventually find something I recognised. His aged back seemed to maroon us both in our separate and untransfigurable histories. (Cusk 2014: 69, italics added)

This is a deeply intimate passage that emphasises the intricate layers of Cusk’s work, the way the intensely personal and private overlays the physical in a manner akin to Coppola’s aesthetic dreamscapes. Cusk simultaneously limns the physical (both bodily and worldly) and more intangible sphere of metaphysical existence and connects them through her ‘as thoughts’. In doing so she attains a structural harmony that finds balance between the visual and the verbal, and evinces how just one dimension of prose or one poignant image can effloresce

from something simple and surface into something manifold and substantial, if given the artistic space to bloom.

This extract also draws attention to Cusk's sensory interest as a writer. From the novel's outset, great tracts of *Outline* are devoted to haptic observation. Without prescribing, Cusk's narration frequently infuses quotidian sights with meaning, reminding us that the female still life artist not only sees but feels, and understands the depth that is available in the surface textures of people, things, places and moments. Marks describes how "small objects become tactile universes that have a visceral pull" (2000: 8) and this seems to be a governing principle in *Outline*, as well as in Cusk's other works. Much as Coppola makes space for the in-between moments of life and the sensory dimension of being, so too does Cusk charge her narration with close tactile attention. From Faye's earliest narrative digressions, Cusk establishes her as a sensory storyteller in her own right and showcases how beyond conventions of plot and narrative motion a sense of literary selfhood can be built through the way a character observes the world, rather than by anything in particular that they say or do. As Faye's Greek neighbour on the plane takes a small rest from delivering his story, Faye's gaze and thoughts turn to a man holding a baby walking rhythmically up and down the aisle of the plane. As she describes:

The plane seemed stilled, almost motionless; there was so little interface between inside and outside, so little friction, that it was hard to believe we were moving forward. The electric light, with the absolute darkness outside, made people look very fleshly and real, their detail so unmediated, so impersonal, so infinite. Each time the man with the baby passed I saw the network of creases in his shorts, his freckled arms covered in coarse reddish fur, the pale, mounded skin of his midriff where his T-shirt had ridden up, and the tender wrinkled feet of the baby on his shoulder, the little hunched back, the soft head with its primitive whorl of hair. (Cusk 2014: 15-16)

This passage gives us a way into Faye's essence, into her reflective and meditative way of seeing and being. It does so in such a way that demonstrates that novelistic intimacy, like real world intimacy, is cultivated much more meaningfully through shared moments of downtime, in-betweenness, and stasis, than in grand moments of transition or transformation.

This passage also reflects what Boileau describes as “Cusk’s anchorage in the real body” (2013: 43), meaning the biologically gendered body. As he attests, a great amount of the emotional and affective weight of *Outline* derives from the way in which Cusk “explores the construction of subjectivity through the female body” (48) in a way that again seems to make manifest Sobchack-via-Merleau-Ponty’s theory of immanence. That is, Cusk uses the word, where Coppola uses her cinematic apparatus, to overlay the subjective bodies of her “omnipres(ent)” female characters and reflect them in the “highly feminised world(s)” she creates (47-48). Much as Coppola is often located by critics in her writings, Cusk is also seen in *Outline*. Baker describes the novel as the “most ambitious and innovative work of autobiografiction produced in recent years” (2019: 54). Given that Baker is a man, it would be easy enough (despite his complimentary tone) to relegate this comment to the annals of the lazy patriarchal discourse that all women’s fiction is fundamentally autobiographical. However, to do so would be missing his valuable insight that because of the opaqueness of the ‘protagonist’ and narrator, the book finds “a new way of considering the relation between self and others” (54). Contemplating the nature of appearances and the difference between “living in the moment and living outside it” (Cusk 2014: 75), Faye muses that she was “beginning to see (her) own fears and desires manifested outside (her)self” (75). Taking Baker’s theory of Faye as narratorial surrogate for Cusk, it is an image that testifies to Cusk’s interest in the somatic experience of women and her interest in evolving a mode of aesthetic expression that renders the uniquely female ‘overlaid’ phenomenological immanence in a suitably tender, textured yet tensile manner. It is something she achieves in part through her distinct fusion of first-person perceptual narration and free-indirect discourse, which allows us to see Faye, see through her and see ourselves in her, much as Coppola allows us to see Charlotte.

Boileau suggests that “by choosing an introspective mode of narration” Cusk “reinforces the feminine aspect of her work”, suggesting that her main narrative techniques (“probing into

the characters' inner thoughts, a plotless novel, a study in human relationships") are inviolably feminine (2013: 40, 47), points I have also affirmed here. And Cusk's anti-novelistic expressions of stillness certainly return us to the notion I introduced earlier in this chapter: that the novel form has been developed by and for men, and judged on those terms since its inception. As Virginia Woolf said so iconically in *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

And since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life. But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail (...) This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. (2015: 54)

In a different but not entirely unrelated way to Heti's rally cry for the millennially self-focused novel of 'low importance', Cusk also champions literature that deliberately forgoes the values of male literary culture to deal with the feelings of women in the drawing-room. As I have done with other creators in this dissertation, it is worthy to take into consideration Cusk's own words. In an essay called *Shakespeare's Daughters* (2009), Cusk draws on Woolf's writings to articulate that "the form and structure of the novel, the perceptual framework, the very size and character of the literary sentence", are "tools shaped by men for their own uses" (online). She therefore advocates that 'women's writing', so often a pejorative term, "would not seek equivalence in the male world. It would be a writing that sought to express a distinction, not deny it" (online). *Outline* certainly fits the "more concentrated" and fragmented style that Woolf proposed may become women's aesthetic of fiction in the future (2015: 57) and takes the authorial "risk" of making "femaleness and female values as her subject" (Cusk 2009: online).

One of Cusk's revelations in this essay seems particularly striking. She suggests that though postfeminism has given women the freedom and "right to dissociate herself" from her gender, "hers is still the second sex" and that when she "look(s) at her own body" she will understand the iterative nature of the female experience (online). In this way, although Cusk's

fiction is not easily categorizable as feminist (her non-fiction isn't particularly ideologically codified either, despite its interest in motherhood and marriage), it navigates the complex authorial tension faced by many contemporary female filmmakers and writers: to find a way to embody femaleness without essentialising, mystifying or solely politicising it. In today's complex gender milieu, Cusk feels that femaleness has become "occluded, scattered, disguised" (2009: online). Yet, she offers that this enacted acknowledgment of de Beauvoir's famous aphorism that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2011: 514), has opened the full "potency" and "mystery" of women's broad avenues of "becoming" (Cusk 2009: online); something made strikingly evident in *Faye*, the at once totally known and unknowable narrator.

Sykes articulates that in a quiet text, the reader must work to connect it to its political and/or historical context because "the cultivation and representation of reflective states will often appear to be apolitical" (2017: 35). This quote applies validly to *Outline*, and yet beyond *Outline*, it makes me think that if the novel form is judged against male values, so too is the representation of politics within the novel form. Perhaps then, like with Sofia Coppola, the politics of Rachel Cusk's works lay in her aesthetic fabric, in her cultivation of a reflective state, of that form which expresses a distinction. As such, through this distinction she offers a new form of hegemonic dissension, a political representation available only to those who are willing to femalely 'entangle' themselves in her texts' details.

Cusk's gaze in *Outline* is a deliberately meticulous one, alert to fine details and deeply close to its subject, despite *Faye*'s amorphous presence. Valihora suggests that her writing highlights "the patience, the difficulty, and the discipline the distilled conversations of fine art exact", and that, therefore, the novel elevates "careful listening and reading (...) into art forms" (2019: 34). To that list I would add careful looking, sensing and feeling, but the point remains, that Cusk's gaze, like that of Coppola's is that of a careful observer attuned to the subtlest

textures of the world around her and who reads the surface for depth. It also a passive one. Faye herself ruminates on and espouses the “virtues of passivity” (Cusk 2014: 170), and in a literary sense Cusk’s gaze floats, slowly enmeshing itself in its characters and gently feeling its way into its world. It, as Vermeulen would describe it, shows a measure of “feminine self-restraint” (2021: 92). If Coppola observes attentively but openly, in a ‘trance-like’ manner, and if she seeks to hold audiences alongside her as equals in that gaze, Cusk likewise involves her readers in her art and in her gentle frame of observation.

Just as “other people’s stories trace the outlines of Faye’s psychic life”, so to do theirs and hers trace ours (Valihora 2019: 21). As Valihora expands: “These stories, told by others, recounted by Faye, and overheard by the reader, refract across the series of novels and connect; their elements echo and repeat like slant rhymes. Each is inflected by the next and places in a slightly different light something that has come just before” (21). In this overhearing, Cusk creates a shared frame in which readers become involved in their narrative act, become constructors of their meaning. Yet this confident openness does not belie the text’s unity. As Valihora concludes, “the series of refracting echoes of thoughts and ideas detailed in the conversations” that run through *Outline* and its loose trilogy create “a sense of connected thought, and the unity and harmony of a work of art” (35) so that “Cusk’s sentences read at times as one’s own thoughts testifies, paradoxically, to this art” (35). By imbuing her novels with breathing space, like Coppola imbues her films, Cusk finds a harmony between a naturalistic *isness*, capturing “what seem to be conversations with strangers, struck up by chance” with aesthetic constructedness, turning them into “meticulously crafted artworks, jewel-like in their precision” and “capacity for refraction” (21). In this way Cusk’s deliberate slowness, like Coppola’s, fosters an authorial gaze and voice that sees, senses, reflects and includes, taking a position similar to that of a spectator.

In other words, works in the still life mode use their capacious pacing, phenomenological attentiveness, muted narratives, and dreamlike, meditative quality to interpolate spectators into their worlds, intermingling their female gaze with that of their readers or viewers. Having begun this dissertation with Felski's sentiment that feminist aesthetics were, to an extent, a "chimera", I have tried to avoid the "abstract dichotomy of 'masculine' versus 'feminine'", whether in language, aesthetic, spectatorship, or genre (1989: 181, 66). Instead I have sought to explore women's artistic and "communicative practices" (66) on contextual grounds, and consider the spectatorial pleasure of women through an unprejudiced and anti-essentialist lens. Ultimately, as Felski may conceive of it, a feminist aesthetic is not my line of inquiry in this dissertation per se, but a female aesthetic, and more specifically in the scope of this chapter, a feminine one.⁸³ Given this, Cusk's novels, like Coppola's films, seem to attest to the existence of a new female and feminine mode of artistic and communicative expression, one which looks for an affinity with its female spectators in its decorative, detailed, pretty and non-narrative assemblages of female experiences.

This is not to say that this still life mode operates to the exclusion of men (notwithstanding the misogynistic minefield a Sofia Coppola film frequently faces), nor that feminine traits and aesthetic tendencies exclusively overlap with the female gender (neither in terms of the biological body nor the cultural sex), nor that all women prefer stillness and all men prefer action (this is a polemical position that would clearly be debunked by my next chapter on female-led thrillers). Nor is it to propose that this mode presents something utterly and entirely new, because in a postfeminist epoch the notion of expunging what is artistically or aesthetically 'male' and shedding all vestiges of masculine authorship feels dated and

⁸³ This is, as I foregrounded in my introduction a complex and interconnected triad, but the feminine as a distinct aesthetic and even phenomenological category is made more definite by the works in this chapter, which interweave what is generally considered feminine into their formal fabric.

unhelpfully divisive. Instead, as I arrive to the end of the final nascent mode I am examining in this thesis, I simply postulate that one outpost of 21st century female aesthetics belongs to a pool of critically commended and popularly received filmmakers and authors who are making a still kind of sensuous pleasure their goal, and who, in doing so, are elevating and enriching the aesthetic possibilities of art.

FEMALE-LED THRILLERS



THE POSTFEMINIST POST-MORTEM OF CRIME
AND PUNISHMENT

FEMALE-LED THRILLERS THE POSTFEMINIST POST-MORTEM OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

“The whole question here is:
am I a monster, or a victim myself?”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

The aesthetic foil to the works of slow beauty and inner reflection that populated my previous chapter, may well be the world of rigorous plotting of the thriller. As will be expounded upon in this chapter, the world of the thriller is a world of tropes, a generic heightened-ness second only perhaps to the world of horror that I will explore in my following chapter. It is also a world which intersects with that very un-postfeminist concept: morality. A key component of contemporary postfeminism is that, ostensibly, it takes a blameless and unjudgmental view of women’s choices, as my first chapter on the messy millennial woman has demonstrated. And, without wading into the abundant criticism of that statement, it therefore broadly places itself in opposition to feminism, which postfeminism perceives as being mired in “reactionary, anti-sex” and “morally backwards” as well as anti-feminine values (Ringrose 2011: 112).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ This is a theme that has been subtly developed across my chapters—and that makes itself apparent in many of the texts I have featured in this dissertation—that feminism requires a kind of ‘anti-feminine’ position in which women must be agentive, fiercely independent and politically active. This is the same form of thinking that assumes that feminism is inherently against men, masculinity and sex. Although this is not a position I agree with, most postfeminist commentators recognise that it has become a dominant cultural paradigm and a source of ongoing anti-feminist cultural backlash. It is also one of the most formative paradigms that ushered in the more commercially palatable (and sellable) GRL PWR form of 21st century postfeminism that exists today. And while I do not support any kind of broad anti-feminist standpoint, it is also certainly true—as previous chapters have intimated, and as this one will

However, whether it positions its audience on the side of good or bad (or occasionally on both), the thriller has longed asked us to make moral judgements—or as Dostoyevsky would say—to know who is a monster and who is a victim, and what does it mean to be one or the other (or occasionally both). Although not a thriller itself, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) feels like an excellent jumping off point for this chapter because it reminds us that the dramatic stake of the thriller often derives closely from society’s sense of morality, its understanding of what is a crime and how should that crime be punished, as well as from the spectatorial ‘thrill’ of waiting for and watching that crime unfold. As this chapter will posit, it seems that, in the thrillers produced in the kind of moral grey space that is 21st century postfeminism, both those questions and their answers—and this process of waiting and watching—have become more complex and compelling.

THE THRILLER IS BORN:

A NEW NARRATIVE OF THE OUTSIDER OR OTHER

The female-led thriller that I seek to explore here has its roots in a knotted field of genres and subgenres that have splintered and reformed throughout an almost two hundred year period that ostensibly begins with Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), the first modern detective story. As a highly popular and commercially successful realm, the evolution of detective and crime fiction has been broadly documented, but for foundational context I will recount its essential pith. From Poe, most notably, came Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, the ‘master of observation mystery’, in the late 1880s,⁸⁵ with texts like Wilkie

similarly explore—that at the heart of earlier waves of feminist literature were typically aspirational women who, to some extent, modelled the figure of this ideal agentive, independent, and political feminist.

⁸⁵ Sherlock Holmes first appeared in print in the short story “A Study in Scarlet” (1887), and was the subject of four novels and 56 short stories by Arthur Conan Doyle. He made his final (original) appearance in a short story called “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” published in 1927.

Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) furthering this evolving mode's ability to 'thrill' its audience by delaying the occurrence of the crime and shifting the ongoing stakes of the investigation to elicit greater spectatorial suspense and closeness to those personally involved in the mystery. Subsequently, the Golden Age of Detective Fiction and the classic murder mystery novel—the 'least-likely-suspect mystery' or the proverbial 'the butler did it mystery'—was ushered in by Agatha Christie in the 1920s.⁸⁶ As the style spread from the UK into America in the 1930s the increasingly gritty, cynical and dark realm of hardboiled detective fiction popularised by Raymond Chandler began to take hold,⁸⁷ the 'sordid booze-soaked mystery'. This aesthetic also found a new outpost in the screen interpretations of film noir, a film movement which swiftly followed and had "its roots" in the hardboiled literature of the 1930s and 40s (Conard 2006: 2), the two modes possessing a deep shared visual vocabulary.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Christie's first published book was *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), which introduced readers to her longstanding lead detective Hercule Poirot, who appeared in the popular *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *Death on the Nile* (1937). *And Then There Were None* (1939), Christie's most acclaimed and bestselling novel represents her at her authorial zenith, and it also shows a shift in her own writing. *And Then There Were None* is arguably both her most murderous and least resolved novel, one which removes the mediating influence of the detective, thus paving the way for generic changes.

⁸⁷ Alongside Chandler, who released his first hardboiled masterpiece with *The Big Sleep* (1939), there are several other key figures. The hardboiled style was arguably first popularized by Dashiell Hammett, whose most significantly enduring work is *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), and equally canonical is James M. Cain with entries like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936), all of which were turned into film noir adaptations. *The Maltese Falcon* was adapted most notably in 1941 by John Huston into a, now emblematic, work of film noir starring Humphrey Bogart—Bogart also starred in the 1946 adaptation of *The Big Sleep*. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was first adapted in 1946, and was also later remade into a more violent and more sexually charged film during the peak of the neo-noir movement in 1981. *Double Indemnity* was released in 1944, directed by Billy Wilder and penned for the screen by Wilder and by Raymond Chandler himself.

⁸⁸ There are many excellent summaries of film noir, but Conard's in *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (2006) serves particularly well. As he describes, film noir involves a "constant opposition of light and shadow, oblique camera angles, and disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes" (1). It uses these expressionistic formal techniques, comparably to the literary obfuscation and darkness or hardboiled novels: to invert traditional values and create a corresponding sense of moral ambivalence, to evoke "the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and cynicism", to heighten "the presence of crime and violence", and, also critically, to disorient the viewer (1-2), thereby creating the 'thrill' upon which this mode depends.

Rather than parsing the differences between hardboiled, crime, detective and noir fiction (and many other akin labels)—and ruminating in depth on whether they would best be identified as “a genre, a movement, or a cycle” (Aziz 2012: 2)—I collocate them here. I have done so given that traces of all of these knottily intertwined yet distinct subgenres and forms may be located in later 20th and 21st century interpretations of the thriller mode. These, given successive generations of spectatorial engagement, now either demand a playfully nostalgic treatment of one of these originary forms (I’m thinking of the popular kitschy *Knives Out* franchise approach to the detective story and the numerous reimagined Sherlock Holmes books, television shows and films) or, more commonly, require sampling extensively from this broad formal legacy in order to create more aesthetically and thematically surprising and suspenseful texts. Many other critics have similarly used the designation ‘thriller’ to broadly interpret, evaluate, compare and unify these varied subgenres, syntaxes and tropes (Davis 1973, Palmer 1978, Roth 1995, Copley 2000, Aziz 2012). Using this designation affords one the ability to summarise the thriller on its most simple terms, as texts characterised by structural components like: “threats to the social order, heroes, villains, deduction, resolution and so forth”, which are simply “repeated in different guises by different texts” (Copley 2000: 3). It also means that critics, like myself, can look for broader formal and aesthetic unities and patterns rather than cleaving apart this rather tangled generic tree. However, what will become clear as this chapter progresses, and what I will still use as a guiding principle to define and distinguish the thriller in a 21st century context, apart from other comparable forms, is that a thriller must evoke a ‘thrill’ in its spectators.

My last chapter touched on the work of film theorist Deleuze, and phenomenologists like Sobchack, and their thoughts on the tactility of cinema and its relationship to the phenomenological or lived-body. Likewise, in my own analysis, I also delved significantly into the skin of both cinema and literature, and the affective potential of its sensory images. Taking

up the work of those aforementioned critics who have used the term thriller as the overarching label for an extensive panoply of works, one made up of overlapping genres and subgenres, and one which is popularized across mediums, it seems to me that this decision has also been made because the term thriller speaks to the “emotional, sensual, carnal *experience*” (Hanich 2010: 15, original italics) that this mode can produce; not just thriller cinema but also thriller novels. As Hanich explains, “meaning-locating” is just one part of the thriller, and he weighs its “experiential characteristics” and “bodily excitement” as being of equal importance to a spectator’s engagement with the text (16). As is often more colloquially designated, if it doesn’t thrill, it’s not a thriller.⁸⁹ Aside from shared plot points, themes and stylistic penchants, this seems to be a fitting way to draw out the generic label and to understand both the thriller’s historical and contemporary evolution in this chapter; and likewise to understand its relationship to gender throughout time. Given that I have also established a connection between female authors and sensory expression in this thesis, this functional yet still fluid enough distinction of affective ‘thrill’ seems to serve well here—although I concede that this tentative unification may be undercut and that another critic may carve alternate lines between thriller, crime, detective, hardboiled fiction and other associated labels.

Therefore, just as I began my post-postmodern chapter with a heuristic definition of its predecessor postmodernism, whilst recognising that this approach may stifle the subtle contours of both the originary and contemporary movement, I make the same caveat here. I likewise acknowledge that although the term thriller is applied confidently as a generic label, which I will similarly do in this chapter, as my succinct yet heavily footnoted overview intimated, each text in the broad canon of the historical thriller (and coterminous subgenres)

⁸⁹ This same parallel between thriller as a genre, a mode and an affect will also be on display in my following chapter on horror, a form based on, to a large extent, cultivating feelings of horror in its spectators.

must also be considered as a text-in-history; for my inquiry into gender in the thriller mode it is especially necessary to do so. Cobley attests that as the thriller mode continued to evolve in the second half of the 20th century—a period of closer precedence given the 21st century focus of this dissertation—it became more intertwined with complex media and political scandals, conspiracies and espionage sagas, discourses that had become a part of the material fabric of ‘modern’ social life. What each evolution of the thriller therefore has in common, is that each broad formal and narrative trend has operated as a reaction to the social and demographic change and upheavals of its corresponding epoch, whether it be urbanisation, global conflict or shifting gender roles. Although his analysis ends with the 1980s, Cobley’s inquiry also evokes the critical point in the mid to late 20th century at which thrillers shifted from texts that concluded with a “restoration of ‘social order’” (3), to ones that often “constitute(d) a certain kind of criticism of the social order” (172). Inherently, even the earliest thrillers embodied a kind of tension between their endpoint—which historically saw the punishment of guilty parties and the reinstatement of safety, normality and the status quo—with their alignment with othered figures, social outsiders, and those operating beyond the pale.⁹⁰ As such, as the mode evolved into more noirish tendencies, embodying its “underlying mood of pessimism” (Porfirio 1996: 80) and nihilistic strains, the possibility of resolution or restoration seemed increasingly facile and fictitious.

Similarly, since Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), the thriller has also aligned itself with the structural device of the first person unreliable narrator and relished in destabilising

⁹⁰ The cat and mouse games played between famous detectives like Holmes and Poirot and their various ensembles of criminals were often based upon them being an unlikely suspect, and in being so they often avoided utter and even inexplicable villainy, since complex explanations of their complex motives was part and parcel of these texts’ resolutions. I am thinking here of *Death on the Nile*’s Jaqueline, a rather strange and piteous woman, who Poirot and the novel spends much time with, to the extent that he sympathetically allows her to take her own life and escape prison and the gallows. Both Holmes and Poirot are also deeply eccentric men themselves, whose distance from conventional society and the realm of propriety is key to their skills of observation.

visions of the truth and subjective experience. As such, despite their reliance on relatively fixed and, to an extent, predictable character archetypes and gender stereotypes, early detective fiction, hardboiled crime fiction, its cinematic counterpart film noir, and its later 20th century iterations, also wade into murky unknown morasses, finding moral grey spaces, unclear motives, conflicting information and shadowy societal forces. As Flory summarises, because thrillers often depict “unknown” forces “that are far more powerful than their protagonists”, characters who are in some way “marginalised from mainstream society”, these figures are often “lured into unjust fates from which there seems to be no escape” (2008: 4). As such, the mode often encourages “sympathetic or empathetic responses from (its) audience for morally ambivalent characters” (4). Which is to say, in short, that despite its commercial popularity and adherence to formal tropes, the thriller often realigns our perspective to that of an outsider or other, making it a mode inherently open to anti-hegemonic deconstructions and useful for reappropriation by disenfranchised groups.

THE 21ST CENTURY EVOLUTION OF THE THRILLER: FROM RESTORATIVE WHODUNNITS TO NEW STYLES OF SUSPENSE AND MASCULINE ACTION

This is something that particularly comes into fruition by the end of the 20th century. When Bertens and D’haen speak of crime fiction and thrillers in the 1990s they speak of works that sharpen the mode’s characteristically “‘thick’ description of details” into ideologically pointed symbols that “signal certain qualities about the characters and their world” and are often inflected with judgements of those qualities (2001: 8). They also speak of works that create characters and worlds that are more heightened than naturalistic, and that serve to underscore contemporary society as “grotesque”, as “a hellish vision of almost uncontrollable perversion, greed, and weakness” (122). Accordingly, Bertens and D’haen also chart the various development of politicised crime writing by non-cisgender white male ‘others’ during the

decade, including women. These are works they broadly associate with a reversal of the genre's standard gaze and the creation of "narrators who are aware of their narratorial power and subject it to scrutiny" (15).

Coevally in film, the thriller also continues its evolution. In particular at the end of the 20th century, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the neo-noir thriller begins to define its terms more clearly. From this epoch, Rubin identifies primarily the noir pastiche. These are films with plots that evoke classical noir but offset its standard "dark, oppressive visual style" with a "brighter" and "glossier" aesthetic that uses "a patina of noirlike eccentricity" to create more visually and conceptually challenging images of crime and societal decay (171).⁹¹ Rubin also identifies what he terms the analogue neo-noir. These are films that reconceive "the noir impulse at a more fundamental level, linking its elusive sense of anxiety explicitly to contemporary sources" (172).⁹² Both outposts, (as with other similar iterations of the cop, crime, stalker (etc.) thriller film that proliferated in the decade), serve to unsettle the societal veneer and produce formally and narratively transgressive visions of the "vulnerable, morally ambiguous" thriller (anti)hero (176).

In this light, the 1990s begins to usher a new sense of reflexivity to the thriller, one which begins to pastiche and subvert generic expectations, and opens its narrative to new demographic groups. If thrillers have always been ascribed as a popular rather than critical art, the late 20th century and early 21st century reinforce their potential for aesthetic innovation and

⁹¹ Rubin cites films like Bob Swaim's *Masquerade* (1988), Wolfgang Petersen's *Shattered* (1991) Harold Becker's Aaron Sorkin-penned *Malice* (1993), which as a modern female viewer all feel very masculine and very dated.

⁹² Here, Rubin illustrates his argument with Ivan Passer's *Cutters Way* (1981), a film which is born of the post 1960s disillusionment period in the United States, and traces political lines through its noir thriller beats. Although Rubin suggests that this 'analogue' mode of updating the film's social context is a deeply interesting one, he suggests that it was not strongly pursued by (male) neo-noir filmmakers in the 20th century, who retained the original film noir's "indirect and abstract" relationship to social issues (174), something which—as will be seen—the women who work in this mode (and who have previously worked in this mode) challenge in interesting ways.

intellectual insight in this vein. In particular, this mode of the thriller seems best encapsulated as the post-*Mulholland Drive* (2001) epoch.⁹³ Many critics, Grossman among them, have lauded Lynch's reconception of the thriller as a genre-defining moment, and his "heightened perception" and "intractable realities" (Grossman 2009: 135) can be traced across a wave of texts that wrap the darkness of murder and crime and its concomitant realms of jealousy, betrayal and revenge in more strange, surreal and tonally mixed packaging. Although not only a trend in cinema, this intelligent, yet distinctly off-key thriller can be traced in films like *A History of Violence* (2005), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *The Lobster* (2015) and *Under the Silver Lake* (2018). Although each deeply unique, when considered together David Cronenberg, Joel and Ethan Coen, Yorgos Lanthimos and David Robert Mitchell's films provide insight into the aesthetic fabric of the contemporary thriller.

Despite its moments of more conventional thriller action, *A History of Violence* (based on the graphic novel by John Wagner and Vince Locke), is above all a visual testament to the "dynamic relationship" Cronenberg draws "between an unsettling and clinical visual style and bizarre narratives" (Bruzzi 2013: 64). Likewise, the Coen brother's neo-Western come neo-noir thriller *No Country for Old Men* fuses their cinematic predilection for weirdness and their distinct brand of deadpan humour with the pessimistic severity and brutal tension of Cormac McCarthy's eponymous thriller. In his growing canon of startling films, *The Lobster* demonstrates Lanthimos' blank effacing visual style as the director plays with the jarring contrast that is elicited in the intersection of his cold visuals and nasal unsentimental narration with his increasingly unsettling, distressing, and disturbing thematic content. Mitchell's *Under*

⁹³ David Lynch's neo-noir psychological thriller is an oneiric and surreal thriller than takes some of the most overwrought tropes of film noir and uses his Los Angeles Hollywood location to amplify them to create a reflexively, aesthetically and thematically surprising work that generates a much stranger visual encasing for a story of desire, murder and broken dreams than the standard thriller employs. Moreover, through its deliberate narrative strangeness, *Mulholland Drive* likewise fully disrupts the sense of closure and narrative resolution which once defined the originary works of crime fiction.

the Silver Lake is also cut from acutely similar thematic and aesthetic cloth to Lynch's work, playing with the eerily pastel pools, palm trees and interiors of Los Angeles bungalows in an increasingly artificially patterned, destabilised and dangerous vision of Hollywood. In short, these four works reflect what could be termed, the 21st century 'art' thriller. That is, the thriller that uses some form of unreality effect and aesthetic-thematic discord to invoke the mode's standard adrenalin and tension-driven spectatorial experience alongside critical reflection.

It does not escape my notice that these four (or rather five) noted directors are all men. Bruzzi, in her attempt to understand how *mise-en-scène* can be understood as telling a male story, aligns noir and neo-noir films, and similarly thrillers, with a distinct realm of male visual storytelling. Briefly summarising the well-known traits of the mode's distinct visual vocabulary—it's "chiaroscuro lighting, disorientating camera angles, wide angle lenses, disconcerting close ups", as well as its visual interest in the labyrinth and the mirror, or better yet, hall of mirrors (Bruzzi 2013: 47)—Bruzzi articulates that this aesthetic is fundamentally male-centred. She suggests that in noir thrillers it's "through visual style, rather than the more direct means of plot or dialogue" that viewers are aligned with their male protagonists and that their distinct masculine anxieties are evoked. It is an interesting assertion. All four of these films are centred around various types of 'anxious' men, and structurally and thematically they inhabit a man's world, occupying spaces like a late night diners, high rise offices, remote gas stations and shooting ranges, all visually populated most obviously by men. Purely on aesthetic grounds, as Bruzzi attests, there is something masculine at work in their disconcerting and disorientating visual worlds. Mulvey would likely suggest this 'something' is these text's cinematic gaze, as arguably all of these films, given their alignment with male protagonists, draw on the thriller film's predominating subjective camera. As her influential female gaze essay first proposed, since Hitchcock, the modern thriller has been filmed from the "view of

the male protagonist” so tightly that it draws “the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze” (1999: 841).⁹⁴

Much like the feminine aesthetics that I have defined in the preceding chapters, drawing this distinction feels challengingly subjective, and yet, when I read Bradshaw’s review of *No Country* it seems irrefutable. As he states, the film is “a dark, violent and deeply disquieting drama, leavened with brilliant noirish wisecracks, and boasting three leading male performances with all the spectacular *virility* of Texan steers”, and, “all of it *hard and sharp* as a diamond” (2008: online, italics added). It’s almost impossible to fathom any text by a woman being touted for its virility or for its hard, sharp quality. That the masculine legacy of hardboiled noir film and fiction persists in today’s literary and cinematic forms is hard to deny, given that contemporary texts operating in the thriller genre must, by nature of their very being, exist in an aesthetic discourse with a stylistic vocabulary that was pioneered by male authors and filmmakers.

Despite the overall skew of this thesis towards texts of a more literary and filmically rigorous ilk—something I have replicated here in the four texts I have briefly cited—I must be cautious here not to fall into the trap of addressing only the highfalutin, given that the thriller was born, and remains first and foremost, a commercial genre. As such, this foray into the generically subversive thriller, is not to discount the thriving realm of the popular thriller in the 21st century. Yet, if I am to continue with the line of analysis I have been building, it is apparent that the mainstream thriller is typically more masculine than its art cousin. When Bruzzi works to define the masculine aesthetic she analyses canonical male films like *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Dirty Harry* (1971), all fundamentally action thrillers of different themes and subgenres: western, heist, etc. In doing so, she draws out key

⁹⁴ This masculine subjective gaze applies especially when there is a woman to be looked at, but I would suggest that is equally observable in all scenes of action and tension in thriller films.

aesthetic aspects that can be interpreted as being masculine and that continue to contribute to the aesthetics of men's cinema in the 2000s. Citing Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, Bruzzi describes a distinctly male pace and editing style that is defined by "the extreme brevity of the shots" and the "splic(ing) together fragments of unrelated action", "features that have heavily influenced subsequent men's cinema, specially how action sequences are cut" (2013: 80). This is a legacy she identifies in later action thrillers like the *Die Hard*, *Mission Impossible* and *Bourne Identity* franchises, all of them exceptionally high box office grossing films. I would argue that this editing style also exists in blockbuster thrillers that repackage some intellectual/art thriller dimensions in an effort to join popular with critical acclaim. I'm thinking of films like Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), Todd Phillip's *The Joker* (2019) and even a post-2000s Scorsese like *The Departed* (2006).

This frenetic manner of cutting and crosscutting action scenes has two key masculine dimensions. Firstly, as Bruzzi identifies:

The feeling of exhilaration engendered by watching these sequences stems from their pace, their visceral energy, but not necessarily from their comprehensibility at the level of detail; their emotional, as opposed to 'intellectual', impact is just as much a result of the fact that it becomes impossible, when viewing them at full speed, to take in what each individual image is about, a coupling of excitement and confusion that remains particularly influential. (80)

Given that this dissertation has hitherto established a female relationship to detail, and in the last chapter in particular to slowness, this visceral unstoppable, un-processable energy feels very masculine. Secondly, as Kinder argues, the violence that is part and parcel of Peckinpah's action sequences and further embellished by the way they are edited also carries a sexual slant, whereby violence is "orgasmic" and "erotic rather than revelatory" because Peckinpah "positions the spectator to desire rather than fear its eruption" (2001: 66). Given the fundamental alignment of male spectators to male protagonists that has been cultivated in the franchises and standalone films created in *The Wild Bunch*'s image, combined with the standard

thriller depiction of men as the perpetrators and preventers of crime, and women as its victims, the equation of action with sexiness seems, as Bruzzi and Kinder educe, undeniably male.⁹⁵

Though now a dated film, as Bruzzi contends, the stylistic devices innovated by directors like Peckinpah have remained deeply influential. She suggests, however, that the masculine mainstream thriller is now increasingly defined by a lexicon of “flashy, hyperactive editing and computer-generated gimmickry” (2013: 89). This is an aesthetic choice as evident in *Inception* as it is in any given *Bourne* film and it is one which, differently to the aesthetic (and thematic) subversive unrealities of the male art thriller set, removes their crimes, violence and thrills from any paradigm of reality. Bruzzi suggests that this flashy camerawork and post-production has created a men’s cinema “centred on affect and spectacle” (89). Spectacle I certainly agree with, but affect is a more imprecise term here. I would suggest that the affect produced by this masculine cinematic language is a bodily sensation that is visceral and fleeting, and does not need to be tethered to a deep sense of emotional engagement or personal identification with the character at hand, an important distinction that will, I propose, distinguish contemporary male and female thriller creators.

GENRE, GENDER AND THE FEMME FATALE: UNDERSTANDING THE THRILLER’S INTERSECTION WITH MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY THROUGH ITS MOST MALIGNED FIGURE

What all of this has alluded to, but is still yet to explicitly address is the thriller’s indisputable relationship to women, and their relationship to it. To do so, it seems fitting to travel back again in time to that more ordinary realm of hardboiled and noir. The claim that the figure of the femme fatale, one of the 20th century’s most iconic literary and filmic female figures, is a projection of both male anxiety and desire is now well established. Kaplan said it most

⁹⁵ Kinder’s ideas, in particular, also hint at the masculine pleasure-to-pain viewing principle that is inherent in the thriller, but which I will unpack more closely in my following chapter on horror.

concisely in her pioneering and influential text, *Women in Film Noir* (1978), when she argued that, “men need to control women’s sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it” (1998: 49). In literature, referring primarily to Chandler’s writings, Abbott adroitly summarises how traditional crime thrillers clung to the binary figures of the ‘good’ woman and the femme fatale, in order to compartmentalise and control women’s agency. And yet, as she argues, the portrayals of this kind of bifurcated, relentlessly heightened (often hysteric) femininity were always unstable because the line between the two patriarchal archetypes was constantly proven to be too thin; also, because hardboiled masculinity was fundamentally precarious and ultimately utterly reliant “on the femme fatale for its own existence” (2002: 54). This is a claim insightfully echoed by Bruzzi in her contention that masculine anxiety and its concomitant identity crisis find “expression in the elaborate and extreme visual style” of noir (2013: 50). In this light, Chandler’s Marlowe—perhaps the most famous hardboiled male figure of all time—can ultimately be seen to evince a “a house-of-cards” type of masculinity that must remain hermetically sealed from anything and everything that is feminine (Abbott 2002: 54).

There are some critics such as Forter, who suggest that there were male crime fiction writers as early as the mid-20th century who not only incidentally but deliberately probed masculinity (and its fragility) and questioned the “pleasure” of hard-boiled fiction—as a mode that “inheres in our identification with an invulnerable agent of male power and mastery”—by undercutting the “appeal of male power” with “the appeal of its repudiation” (2000: 11, 5). He argues that crime writers like the aforementioned Dashiell Hammett and James Cain, as well as Jim Thompson and Chester Himes, understood, in a psychoanalytical vein, that masculinity could not be “killed without first being embodied” (5), and that this understanding informed their portrayals of gender and violence. This is certainly a valid interpretation. However, Forter’s inquiry does not extend to a particularly concerted consideration of the women and femme fatales of these texts, nor does it consider whether they were given greater credence or

complexity than in a standard hard-boiled text; from my personal readings of these texts, I would suggest that it is unlikely that this was the case at all.

Nevertheless, today, re-readings of the femme fatale as a cultural ideation—in both more socially critical and conservative texts—have led to the dominant perception that she ultimately reveals herself to be either a failed “misogynist projection” or (more positively) an “transgressive female force” (Grossman 2009: 5). Thus, a certain subversive potentiality can be located in and ascribed to the femme fatale in all of her manifestations. However, as Grossman articulates, both of these dominant contemporary readings still relegate her to the status of an “opaque” figure, an object defined by her relationship to sex, sexuality, desire and, above all, men (5). Therefore, instead, she proposes the title the ‘*femme moderne*’ (25, original italics), an independent woman who is subversive because of more than her sexiness, and who is a toughened, hard-boiled figure herself. While the *femme moderne* must often be located through a counter-reading of mainstream texts, I believe the conception is still a valuable one. It is one that helps to understand contemporary female writers’ and directors’ interest in re-envisioning the terms of one of fiction’s most famed yet illusory figures, and in plunging into a realm of fiction with, arguably, misogynistic roots.

From the late 20th century feminist critics have considered what the genre affords women. In her brilliantly titled chapter “An Unsuitable Genre for a Woman?” in *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (1994), Munt suggests that the thriller structure can in fact be considered as formally compatible with feminism (193). She suggests, as I have similarly established in the preceding discussion, that despite its mainstream formal preference for “the central hero, the single viewpoint, the linear sequential narrative neatly closed by a natural conclusion”—which can be referred to as the genre’s “standard *masculine* devices”—the genre is ultimately a mutable one (195, original italics); its mutability “rests with its ability to combine elements of other forms such as realism and satire which have their roots in a radical

sensibility” (202). As such, tracing female authored works of the late 20th century, such as those by Mary Wings, Gillian Slovo, Sarah Schulman and Helen Zahavi, Munt shows how crime fiction can “manifest feminine novelistic forms” by swinging simultaneously towards both its realist and parodic poles. In other words, female/feminist novels of the epoch feminised the figure of the hero (or antihero) through parody while focusing the crime form on “the internal effects of the criminal event” (199), supplanting the singularity and simplicity of the standard male thriller with the “realism that crime can never be excised” (192). Further fusing the aesthetic conventions of the mode with the ideological pursuits of third wave feminism, Munt incisively summarises that where traditional crime fiction inherently “exonerates society by apportioning blame on to an individual”, feminist crime fiction “makes guilt collective and social, and the need for change structural” (193), a dialectic that the more individualist postfeminist framework makes particularly interesting.

FEMME FATALES TO GUILTY GIRLS: THE POSTFEMINIST REFRAMING OF THE ‘GIRL’ WHO HAS HER REASONS

Although a more popular analysis, Rafferty’s evaluation of female crime writing in recent years showcases how the push for structural change evident in late 20th century feminist thrillers has fused with contemporary postfeminist paradigms to produce works that operate on individual terms, whilst still effectively speaking to the general character of women, men, gender relations and society in the 2000s. The aesthetic and demographic trends of this epoch have been made manifest most dominantly in a slate of cool (as in both icy and modish) tales of passive-aggression, self-validation and pettiness. As Rafferty explains, unlike men, who “appear to need a hero of some kind to organize their stories around”, female writers—likely (as he theorises) because of men—:

don’t believe much in heroes, which makes their kind of storytelling a better fit for these cynical times. Their books are light on gunplay, heavy on emotional violence. Murder is

de rigueur in the genre, so people die at the hands of others—lovers, neighbours, obsessive strangers—but the body counts tend to be on the low side. (2016: online)

He suggests that in many current texts by women, “the lethal blow comes so quietly that it seems almost inadvertent, a thing that in the course of daily life just *happens*”, making death “chillingly casual, and unnervingly intimate” (online, original italics). Rafferty also identifies a distinct ‘girling’ of the crime thriller, evident in titles like Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), one of the central texts of this chapter.

The postfeminist interest in the figure of the girl has become well established in this thesis, but it must be noted that it has received a distinct and compelling treatment in the realm of the thriller. The 21st century female-led thriller seems to offer the ‘girl’ firstly as an alternative to, or as a reimagining of, the femme fatale. The ‘girl’ who is at the centre of these texts feels like an extension of Grossman’s *femme moderne*. She is often paradoxically youthful and jaded, conventional and beyond the pale, innocent and guilty. If the thriller could traditionally be distilled into three basic camps—one which aligns with the victim of a crime, another which aligns with the perpetrator of a crime, and finally one which aligns with the investigator (or prosecutor) of a crime—women’s works today work to complicate this kind of cleaved identity by often incorporating all three of these narrative gazes and all three of these corresponding character archetypes into one. This both expands the complexity of women’s identities in thrillers—a welcome change from the one-dimensional treatment they have historically received—and also deliberately further complicates the binary of innocent and guilty. Or, as Dostoyevsky would put it, the binary of monster and victim; that line which has long created tension and instability in the thriller mode. This unsettling of the ‘good woman’s’ status as a virtuous victim may seem an interesting choice in an epoch in which the victim-shaming of women has become common tabloid fodder for any number of right-wing news media institutions, but I think it is in fact a particularly effective one.

Where earlier feminist outings reversed the thriller's gendered position by highlighting the aspirational figure of the female detective, today postfeminist texts tend to explore the guilty woman. What differs, however, from the male-driven figure of the guilty or sinful femme fatale is that these girls are not seductive, hardened women, at least not exclusively. Rather, today the guilt of the postfeminist girl who populates contemporary thrillers tends to be up for discussion. Not unlike her messy millennial sister, the guilt of the postfeminist girl is both deeply specific and yet feels startlingly universal. It often feels as if she is guilty in the sense that all women are guilty: of being too emotional, or of being too unemotional, of being too passive, or too aggressive, too demanding, too acquiescent, too sexually liberated, too sexually repressed, too feminist, too anti-feminist, too independent, too needy, of fighting back too much or of not fighting back enough. These antithetical categories, these traits and behaviours which girls should supposedly avoid at all costs, are necessarily heightened in the world of the contemporary female-led thriller, but the gendered critiques and assumptions that underscore them are also portrayed as being decidedly normal. An irrefutable truth that inheres in 21st girlhood and womanhood seems to be that there is still no identity position a woman can occupy which is free from judgement and from self or societally-imposed guilt; and no identity as victim she can occupy in which she will be blameless. As such, as Rafferty explains, the women who are writing these "velvety and pitiless" thrillers (online), have departed drastically from the Agatha Christie mode of 'the butler did it' murder. Instead, as he describes, these female crime writers "know better": "The girl did it, and she had her reasons" (online), and it is this socio-culturally and politically loaded yet ambivalent and amoral stance that makes these texts particularly interesting.

THE FEMALE THRILLER AESTHETIC: DEVELOPING A GLITTERY AND 'GIRLY' STYLE WITH A JAGGED HARD EDGE

In accordance with this evocation of the postfeminist 'guilty girl', I opine that a distinct aesthetic has evolved which is used, to varying degrees, across thriller films and novels crafted by women. In short, this is an aesthetic that I would describe as being an oxymoronic dark gleaming look. Thrillers have often wavered between a cold, flat tone which evokes the narrator's cynicism and detachment from society and an obsessively detailed almost histrionic tone that still often positions the narrator as an outsider, but an outsider who is fascinated by society, even in its darkness and depravity. The female thriller aesthetic of the 21st century seems to synthesize these two positions, these two gazes. Without neglecting the female attention to aesthetic detail that Bovenschen (1986) posited—and which has been enshrined in this dissertation's previous modes—these works find an aesthetic mode in which histrionics and a densely believable gritty yet muted realism coexist. And similarly, they balance this requisite cold or cool detachment from a flawed world with emotional attachment to those who exist in it.

In fact, the female thriller film and novel of today seems to be bound up in aesthetic juxtapositions. Building narrative worlds that feel deeply real—in a way that those of many of their male counterparts and predecessors fail to—these works are often located and grounded in spaces that believably conjure the gendered and often mundane, domestic realities of 21st century women (that is, shopping malls, salons, the workplaces of feminised professions, the home). Yet, their creators, (perhaps a little like their metamodern sisters), consciously destabilise these worlds aesthetically with the inclusion of slightly surreal visuals and imagery; stylistically turning the obvious artifice of the commercial thriller back in on itself. In this vein, they seem to have honed the noir pastiche aesthetic, pitting the darkness of the genre against not only something 'bright' or 'glossy', but something feminine. Without slipping into a

Mulholland Drive-esque escapism, thriller texts by women often shroud their dark truths in pastel, neon, glittery and ‘girly’ worlds in a way that rewrites the look of crime on female terms. This heightened aesthetic of very female/feminine darkness also strikes a chord with influential feminist filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s words, as quoted in Bovenschen’s essay on the feminine aesthetic:

Of course, you still hear, ‘Oh, a woman did that’, and ‘women are soft and sweet as honey.’ But when women concretise their modes of seeing, the result is very vehement, very violent. It is just that this violence manifests itself differently than it does with men. Women’s violence is not commercial, it is beyond description. (in Bovenschen 1986: 35)

As Bovenschen suggests, in response to Akerman, since women are the daily recipients of “extraordinary and ordinary” violence and “destructivity” (35), it is logical that they would develop their own vocabulary for its expression.⁹⁶

This glittery and ‘girly’ aesthetic also seems to reflect the postfeminist interest in the feminine that has now been prefaced. As Genz and Brabon state, the girly stance of postfeminism “restyles the feminist message of female agency and independence by addressing an (often adolescent) female subject who is self-assured and comfortable with her femininity” (2009: 92). If taken positively, the Girl Power sensibility which has become central to the movement’s dynamic has created “more expansive forms of femininity” (78), that challenge the scripts of feminine “passivity, voicelessness, vulnerability and sweet naturedness” (Aapola *et al.* 2005: 19). However, thinking more critically, Girl Power can easily be decried as empty rhetoric that, in its excessive interest in the construction of femininity, “conceals a trap of conformity and disempowerment” (Genz and Brabon 2002: 79). Considering the aesthetic that I have just foregrounded, it seems that such ideological instabilities may in fact be where the contemporary thriller’s stylistic urge has derived. In its aesthetic juxtapositions, the female

⁹⁶ The expression of violence in art is a phenomenon beyond genre or mode, and it is something—like the pain-to-pleasure viewing paradigm—that I will also expand upon in my next chapter on horror.

thriller seems to stylistically embody this tension between postfeminist femininity as a trap and postfeminist femininity as subversive strength.

In my last chapter, I reflected concertedly on the style-substance binary in the light of conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Extrapolating outwards, however, there is a much larger divide at stake: that between “science and mathematics” as “hard, rational, real, serious, and *masculine*” and “literature and art” as “soft, emotional, unreal, frivolous, and *feminine*” (Hustvedt 2016: 85, italics added). In her search to understand the qualities that mark a book or text as sexed, Hustvedt opines that an institutional perception now exists that the arts have been “*tainted* by the feminine”, by the “fey, womanly” realms of feeling (81-85, original italics). This is a position she wholeheartedly rejects, and yet it leads her to the understanding that consequently girls and women “have more leeway to explore masculine forms” than boys and men “have to explore feminine form” (60). She proposes that this difference has, at least in part, resulted in a slew of male authors (and filmmakers) who push back against the possibly inherent femininity of artmaking by rejecting any “qualities coded as feminine” (90) in the texts they produce; this is perhaps an explanation for the hypermasculine world of the action thriller that thrives today. To me, this seems to strike at something which is core to the female-led thriller. More than simply focusing on a female-centred narrative (although they also tend to do this), these texts highlight conventionally feminine aesthetic forms like softness and confidently transpose them over conventionally masculine forms like aesthetic hardness. As such, without eschewing what is feminine, and in fact often by paradoxically heightening it, they force spectators to deconstruct their alignment with femaleness as purely softness or sweetness.

I have hitherto espoused that there are ways of reading and re-reading even earlier thrillers (and similar texts that belong to the tangle of subgenres embedded within the thriller mode) to consider their representation of women in new lights, and I do not seek to argue that

only women can make thrillers that treat women as subjects, not objects. As such, I happily concede that, whether it is authored by a man or a woman, thrillers can positively centre and/or recentre itself around a female protagonist. In particular, the revenge narrative—that type of thriller to which both Flynn’s *Gone Girl* and my other core text, Emerald Fennel’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020) conceivably belong—can allude to not only the thriller’s “tendency to disorient the audience, creating an ambivalence that is a crucial part of noir cynicism but also the genre’s way of foregrounding the theme of alienation and isolation, which characterize the female avenger’s existential despair” (Aziz 2012: 106), thus constructing depth and creating an affective affinity for a female subject in her spectators.

However, even in a female-centred text (especially, arguably, in female-centred but male-authored text) typical aesthetic choices like “shadowy lighting, sharp camera angles, probing camera movements, rapid editing and relentless soundtracks” still “weave an erotic aura” around the female avenger (Holmlund 1994: 143), as do their literary equivalents with their reliance on visual tropes as shallow shortcuts to emotional identification, the detailing of graphic violence in vivid yet somehow normalised terms, abrupt narrative transitions (often from these scenes of violence), and a restless emphasis what Chandler would call “edge-of-the-chair writing” (1988: 8). The overstressed description of women’s appearances would also qualify here. I’m thinking of imagery like “a relatively clear picture, considering that it came from a surveillance camera, showed a short woman with (...) wide lips, and prominent breasts” (Larsson 2008: 677) and other (painfully) male-gaze sentences. This one belongs to Stieg Larsson’s novel with ostensibly positive gender intentions, *Män som hatar kvinnor* (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) (2004),⁹⁷ but it could just as well have come from any innumerable male-authored thrillers.

⁹⁷ The direct translation of the original Swedish title *Män som hatar kvinnor*, is ‘Men who hate women’. Interestingly, the English language market is one of the few where the title was changed so completely.

This means that simply giving a girl a gun may be a way to titillating her spectators more than it is a way to empowering her, reminding us that the genre's "visual status is volatile" and can easily fall back to "its exploitation root" (Aziz 2012: 107), despite a thematic alignment with a female figure. With this in mind, I propound that, in the 21st century, women who are working in the thriller mode are seeking to find a new, distinct visual vocabulary. One which can elicit the mode's affective properties, including its intensity and suspense, but under new terms. As established above, the aesthetic that appears to be being developed is one that finds a kind of harmonious discord between openly feminine or 'girly' aesthetic touches and the standard masculine hardness and darkness that has hitherto defined the mode. Munt suggested that "on a pragmatic level verbal rather than physical violence is a safer bet for women" (1994: 190), and this sentiment also seems to hold some sway. These works do not necessarily abjure or abstain from violence, however, as Rafferty says so playfully, rather than the standard Chandler-ascribed method of having "a man come through the door with a gun in his hand", today's female crime writers and directors have "a woman come through the door with a passive-aggressive zinger on her lips" (2016: online). In more serious terms, what this showcases is that they refuse to aesthetically titillate violence or to develop violence through

This was done by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, who were responsible for the first imprint. There is no official reason given for the title change, the closest response is a small note made in a blog entry on their site about the book jacket cover designs, which seems to relegate it as purely an artistic choice. Regardless of the reasons, the original title is certainly a striking one and speaks to the book's, in my opinion, very obvious sexual politics. Yet despite Larsson's asserted condemnation of these men who hate women, the so-called girl with the dragon tattoo, Lisbeth Salander, who is a "popular culture fantasy—adolescent looking yet sexually experienced" (Stenport and Alm 2009: 168) is realistically relegated to an opaque persona, an object of the gaze of the book's true protagonist Mikael Blomkvist. Moreover, despite his narrative interest in the behaviour (and punishment) of these men—and in addition to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo's* less sterling portions of female bodily descriptions—many female critics and academics have observed that the book's neoliberal underpinning actually "seems to accept a misogynistic laissez-faire approach to violence against women" (176). It is one which presents male violence as a systemic social problem, but ultimately, and problematically, takes a resigned and detached view that makes it the individual responsibility of abused women to recover from the violence they have endured.

such frenetically delivered action sequences that it loses its gravitas and connection to real-of-the-world suffering and consequences.

THE AESTHETICS OF NEW FEMALE-LED THRILLERS: NEW STYLISTIC OUTPOSTS IN THRILLER FILMS AND NOVELS BY WOMEN

These new visual forms often manifest as a kind of aesthetic homage to the image of the urban female, aesthetically embodying the female figure of contemporary pop culture, such as in Lorene Scafaria's film *Hustlers* (2019), which she wrote and directed. Fusing a realistic verité style with a visual aesthetic that manifests the urban street style of female pop artists and rappers like Cardi B—who is featured both musically and in the flesh in the film—Scafaria straddles the “immediate gratification” of a commercial thriller and the “artful substantiveness” of a serious drama (Lee 2019: online). She does so by juxtaposing neon-drenched scenes, music-video stylings and “immediate pleasures and vicarious thrills” with an intimate and “intricate framework” (online) that turns a female gaze on that most male fetishized world of the strip club. Although not hypersexualised in the way Cardi B is oft accused of being, the film (at least in part) adopts her particular aesthetic mode of postfeminist expression, embodying a kind of hyper-postfeminist pop-culture style. Marisha Pessl's novels *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* (2006) and *Night Film* (2013) similarly adhere to this hyper-of-the-minute urban styling, with their use of multimedia forms (invented photos, websites, maps, interviews etc), their pop-culture references, energetic italicisations, scattered footnotes, strings of parenthesis and bright youthful prose, or what Hill calls the “giddy accelerant” to Pessl's “precision engineered”, “high velocity”, “summer blockbuster” equivalent thrillers (2013: online). Yet this formal boldness still makes room for unadorned moments and deftly subtle characterisation, and particularly in *Special Topics*, gives itself over to the messy psyches of complex modern girls and women.

At other times, the femaleness of a text's aesthetic expression comes in a softer and more pastel form, like in writer-director Julia Leigh's *Sleeping Beauty* (2011). The thriller projects its young central player, Emily Browning as Lucy, as "living anthology" of female thriller archetypes "ingénue, femme fatale, girl gone wild", but, away from the longing projections of men, finds her to be all of them and none of them at once (Scott 2011: online). Creating a work of principally understated and slow realism, Leigh contrasts ultra-feminine dollhouse interiors with blunt almost overexposed lighting to view the world of bought sex with a "dreamy detachment that is seductive and unnerving in equal measure" (online). Although it operates first and foremost in the realm of fantasy and sci-fi, Alice Waddington's thriller *Paradise Hills* (2019) and its pastel and floral-drenched world also seems to be apposite.⁹⁸ In literature, Emma Cline's *The Girls* (2016) similarly proves a fitting example. Without losing the historical momentum and dark horrors of the Manson family it reframes its fictional story around the "long-haired girls" who "seemed to glide above all that was

⁹⁸ Although she receives credit for the 'original story', the screenplay for Waddington's film was penned by two male writers, Brian DeLeeuw and Nacho Vigalondo. In general, in this dissertation, I have chosen to highlight the work of female writer-directors working in a more auteurial tradition. Although I have cited this fact in my analysis of these texts it is not a point I have particularly drilled into, though it is a significant one. From a pragmatic perspective, highlighting the works of writer-directors allows me to approach their texts with a more hermetic view, taking the writer-director as the defining voice and gaze of the film—as auteur theory similarly proposes. However, just as millennial filmmaker Greta Gerwig first drew acclaim for the way critics felt she humanised the treatment of women in early mumblecore films, film as a collaborative medium can be the product of both genders. Thus, when speaking of the thriller mode, which has long masculine roots, it is also interesting to consider how these cross-gender collaborations look. *Paradise Hills* is Waddington's only feature, however a similar aesthetic is on show in her short thriller *Disco Inferno* (2014), which allows us to make a certain judgement of the qualities she brought to DeLeeuw and Vigalondo's script. In my opinion *Paradise Hills* is an average thriller made better by its feminine aesthetic, and many reviewers seem to have made a distinction between the script and dialogue, which lacks nuance, and the overall stylistic experience. Harvey for *Variety* describes the film positively as an "ornate dream world of velvet-lined luxury and hidden menace" and a "pastel riot"—in accordance with the aesthetic terms I have proposed here—and he commended Waddington for her "distinctive, accomplished" aesthetic vision, and for her ability to make this aesthetic "world-building" (2019: online). However, in address to DeLeeuw and Vigalondo he is far less positive, stating that the film is "considerably less well thought-out on the levels of storytelling, character definition and suspense" (online). While, as Harvey similarly concedes, the film commentator can rarely gain access to the script, it seems that Waddington's influence on the aesthetic terms of the final product and its feminine quality—its stronger elements—are very much her own.

happening around them, tragic and separate” (6). Cline transposes this well-known swift-moving story of debauchery and murder into a more drifting introspective examination of the chrysalis of female adolescence, giving space to both the beauty of intimate female moments like one girl softly “walking her fingers along (another’s) scalp, drawing a straight part” as she braids her hair (Cline 2016: 1189) and the ugliness of that same girl’s “feral smile” as she “sweat(s) from the effort of butchery” (3518).

As with the preceding chapters, thriller texts by women also challenge the male-determined bounds of narrative, even in this ostensibly heavily (and often convolutedly) narrative mode. Claire Denis’ *Les Salauds (Bastards)* (2013), which she co-wrote with Jean-Pol Fargeau, comes to mind as a particularly salient example. The film doesn’t eschew plot by means of replacing it with frenetic action (as is often the case in male-led thrillers) but rather its disordered narrative is subsumed by its menacing atmosphere to the point at which Bradshaw calls it a film not to be “watched and understood in the conventional sense, but experienced or inhaled” (2014: online). Without disregarding the necessity of plot that conventionally makes a thriller a thriller or a whodunit a whodunit, Jane Harper’s moody debut *The Dry* (2016) feels comparable. Her slow-burning narrative of familial violence gains force from its cultivation of atmosphere, its ability to capture and sustain the “sundried desperation” of rural Australian life and to develop the dual sensibility of “romanticism and dread” that the country’s barren and endless landscapes evoke (Marsh 2020: online). In this vein, Lynne Ramsay, who I labelled Sofia Coppola’s darker still life sister in my last chapter, has also used her distinct oneiric sensibility in the development of distinctly female thrillers like *You Were Never Really Here* (2017) (adapted from Jonathan Ames’ novella by Ramsay). As Kermode describes, in the film “passages of lyrical beauty are interspersed with grotesque eruptions of violence” and “brilliantly chosen pop songs provide ghoulish counterpoint to the grim action”, giving the film a “surreal” and almost “overwhelming” quality (2018: online).

In Kermode's review of Karyn Kusama's neo-noir thriller *Destroyer* (2018), written by Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi, he compares the two films, finding a similar aesthetic in Kusama's juxtaposed "washed-out hues" and "vibrant saturations", and the "air of dreamy unreality" she cultivates to mirror her damaged protagonist's shattered state (2019: online). In his opinion, Kusama—a filmmaker who can blend "pulp convention with character insight"—creates something "broken, yet strangely beautiful" (online).⁹⁹ Even Campion interestingly developed an offshoot of her slow tactile cinema with 2003's *In The Cut* (adapted from Susanna Moore's novel by Campion), a film that confidently fuses "a mix of hazy, impressionistic soft focus and earthen tones with more startling bursts of bold primary colour and neon" and "bold formalist choices" like "slow motion (and) lens flares" (Vasquez 2021: online) in a way that makes the distinction I drew between the still life and thriller modes at the beginning of this chapter seem a little hasty. As Vasquez states, Campion doesn't disavow the thriller but chooses to "look at it from a new point of view", one that embraces its "pulpiness and prurience" but re-envisioning it on "unabashedly feminine, and indeed, feminist" terms (online).

To continue focusing exclusively on film for a moment, in the world of big blockbusters, Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* franchise seems to mirror this same feminine aesthetic—one reviewer described *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) as a "technicolour" girl power "romp" through "the era of Jazzercise, big hair, and even bigger shoulder pads" (Flanders 2020: online). However, in moving the thriller paradigm to a very obvious Girl Power platform and to the commercial world of vast action and fantasy, her films become big on big-budget tension, but they deliberately shed truly harrowing, confronting and unflinching kinds of violence and

⁹⁹ Kusama's film is another that has been penned by a male duo. However, where Waddington's example exposed, perhaps, a productive creative tension between script and film, in Kusama's case the trio previously collaborated on her 2015 horror film *The Invitation*, these two films forming Hay and Manfredi's most significant screenwriting credits. Again though, I would suggest that it is Kusama's confidently unconventional approach to genre filmmaking—something born, perhaps, from the intersection of her female sensibility with a heavily masculine visual grammar—that defines both films.

damage. This feels like a lack, because it is this unflinching gaze that seems to operate in an aesthetic and almost operatic tension with the feminine or more ‘technicolour’ dimensions of a text.¹⁰⁰ Alternately, there is another approach to crafting the female ‘box office appealing’ thriller; that which plunders the realm of unflinching violence without producing an obvious aesthetic feminine counterpoint, a method exemplified by directors like Kathryn Bigelow.

It would be impossible to speak of female thriller films in the 21st (and 20th) century without acknowledging Bigelow. Across an extensive body of work, that has collectively belonged most coherently to the thriller mode, Bigelow has made what she describes as “women’s action film(s)” that “men could also identify with” (in Peary 2013: 47). Interestingly however, Bruzzi (2013) associated her work entirely with men’s cinema and Brody, in his review of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which was written by Mark Boal, called it—despite its alignment with Jessica Chastain as CIA agent Maya—“conventionally vigorous, action-centered realism” with “rapid-fire editing and hand-held cameras, to ratchet up excitement, involvement, identification, suspense” (2012: online), the kind of kineticism now well-established with men’s cinema. Others, alternately, suggest Bigelow brings a “poetic style” and “feminine insight” to the action thriller (Johnson 2013: 50) that “pushes” its “tired formulas to a point of delirious frenzy through specifically cinematographic means” (Shaviro 1993: 1). And even Brody concedes that, unlike her male directorial counterparts (he names Ben Affleck, presumably in reference to 2012’s *Argo*), Bigelow “works harder to reproduce more thoroughly the events she stages” and “depicts them in greater detail and with greater energy” (2012: online). Bigelow can easily inspire a book-length study (and has) but here I think she best serves to showcase that although some of her films may adhere broadly to (male-advanced) Hollywood thriller conventions, they may also reveal themselves to embody feminine

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Jenkins cultivated this aesthetic tension in her only pre-studio film and feature debut as both director and screenwriter, *Monster* (2003), on serial killer Aileen Wournos.

characteristics by playing alternately with the reflexive possibilities of excess and understatement, not as obvious feminine counterpoints, but still there. Bigelow also serves to underscore that as new iterations of a long-established genre (or a collocation of alike genres), contemporary works by women—when taken together—show both aesthetic unities as well as a more malleable open quality that corresponds with the mode’s various historical incarnations.

THE BLACK FEMALE THRILLER: A DISRUPTIVE NEW ‘GHETTO FABULOUS’ AESTHETIC FOR A TRADITIONALLY WHITE MALE MODE

In a different way to the millennial postfeminist whiteness, which is both symptomatic of and somehow in accord with their narratives of self-centred relative privilege, one could suggest that a Sofia Coppola film or Rachel Cusk novel almost gleams with its whiteness. Despite the fact that the works of women of colour and of varied ethnicities have been highlighted in this dissertation thus far—Ottessa Moshfegh is a Croatian-Iranian American, Desiree Akhavan Persian American, Ruth Ozeki Japanese American-Canadian, Zadie Smith Jamaican British etc.—using the framework of colourblindness and colourconsciousness as proposed by critics like Smith (2013), the rather singular aesthetic line of my inquiry has tended to erase or minimise their colouredness. As such, my interest in placing these women alongside their white contemporaries in an act to establish generic trends, without distinguishing them, is an arguably colourblind approach. Without deconstructing the terms of my own work, it is fair to say that another line of inquiry would consider not only the influence of gender on aesthetics but the intersection of genre, gender, and race as first proposed in my introduction.

This approach would, for instance, evaluate the extent to which the aesthetic fabric of Chinese-born Chloe Zhao’s still life *Nomadland* differs from white New Zealand-born Jane Campion’s still life *The Power of the Dog*. It is true that my previous chapter did not address Zhao’s possible relationship to the aesthetics of Sixth Generation Chinese independent slow

cinema and the contemporary female Chinese filmmakers operating in it, like Shengze Zhu's with *Another Year* (2016). Nor did it explicitly detail the influence of the Taiwanese cinema of the 1980s and 90s that has informed this contemporary iteration, in particular the slow, naturalistic and episodic cinema of legendary auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsien. This would undoubtedly be a compelling, edifying and much more colourconscious approach.

However, since the modes that I have proposed and explored hitherto this chapter feel more generically nascent, and represent distinct aesthetic sensibilities located in the 21st century, their stylistic (and thematic) terms have not necessarily been drawn on racial lines; and seem available to intersectional women in an increasingly broad global milieu; perhaps outside of millennial speak, which at least in its incipience has presupposed a certain whiteness or 'white-ishness'. However, thrillers, a longstanding and commercially popular genre, certainly have a much more self-evident relationship with race. As established, the historic realm of the thriller—the Raymond Chandler world of white male private eyes and femme fatales—was just that, a white world, and the literary tough guy who was at the heart of hardboiled fiction was above all an “iconic model of *white* masculinity” (Abbott 2002: 3, italics added).¹⁰¹ And, although the linked cinematic modes of film noir and neo-noir also led to Black noir—a genre which Flory suggests uses the standard characteristics of noir to disclose “the inadequacies of racialized understandings of humanity, justice, and morality” (2008: 4)—its 20th century manifestations did not turn its empathetic treatment of the ‘other’ to the figure that

¹⁰¹ Breu may disagree, and his influential work *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (2005) is built on the premise that the white hardboiled male represented a “secret borrowing from the iconography of black masculinity” (2005: 2), including of cool Black masculinity. Breu describes the “eroticised” and “exoticized” representations of “black criminality”, and also virility, as “mutually antagonistic yet deeply imbricated” within representations of white hardboiled masculinity (28). It is a compelling argument, one that, for the sake of my own discussion, further reflects that the roots of genres, like the thriller, are rarely simple. Therefore, it may often be through these imbrications, these messy interlinkages and different readings—such as those I charted regarding the figure of the femme fatale—that marginalised groups like women and the Black community may reclaim the narrative and redirect aesthetics (that perhaps always belonged to them) to new outposts.

the thriller had arguably most marginalized: the Black woman, whose concerns were “often absent” (224).

Thus, although Fennel and Flynn are both white women, I also want to highlight a specific outpost of the 2000s female-led thriller, that authored by women of colour. As Hefner attests, genre is “complex” when “discussions of race are at its centre” (2021: 8). However, through his study of Black pulp fiction, he articulates that “Black genre fiction disassembles generic formulas saturated with racism”—like those belonging to thrillers, crime and horror texts—and “reassembl(es) those genres in the service of racial justice” (17). Leader-Picone, who studies African-American literature in a coeval post-millennium timeline to mine, seeks to define the ‘post-soul’, ‘post-Black’ and ‘post-race’ aesthetic, positing generically playful, self-referential and individualistic texts that acknowledge the persistence of racism and structural disadvantage whilst celebrating “the dynamic, the shifting, and the exceptional in order to trouble the boundaries of what constitutes Black identity and imagine a liberating Blackness” (2019: 15). Without having nearly as deep a knowledge of the topography of contemporary Black literary and genre fiction as Leader-Picone, the intersection of ‘post-soul’ Black aesthetics with the thriller genre seems to be fertile ground for an aligned, but distinct mode of contemporary female expression.

In particular, I am moved to mention novels like *The Other Black Girl* (2021) by Zakiya Dalila Harris, an “imaginative and audacious” genre-defying novel which is “part office satire, part thriller with a twist” (Porter 2021: online). With the pointed politicised verisimilitude of social realism, the novel charts the ordinary yet painful life of its protagonist Nella Rogers, an aspirational young Black woman who is locked in a stagnant position at her very white a publishing firm and, therefore, in a world of enforced codeswitching, microaggressions and isolation. Surprisingly, the arrival the eponymous other Black girl, Hazel-May McCall, also heralds the moment in which Nella starts receiving disturbing anonymous threats and by which

the novel's normality is slowly but surely pierced. An aesthetically experiential novel, Harris's prose is attuned to the sensory experiences of being Black and a woman, with careful attention given to the textures of Black hair and the smells of Black beauty products, something which plays into the novel's carefully plotted and very female endpoint: Nella's hair product orchestrated brainwashing and downfall. Harris's prose is also deftly light, rich with the vernacular of now and with "Black woman speak" (Braithwaite 2021: online), despite the novel's increasing thematic darkness. Oyinkan Braithwaite, the Nigerian-born British writer who penned her own slightly surreal, disconcerting and darkly comic crime thriller *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018), says that the novel disrupts the assumption that a text's genre should be immediately evident by shifting in its final third to a more destabilised fantastical thriller, a deliberately "disorientating" choice that 'troubles the boundaries' of both Black social realism and generic fiction in the 2020s (online).

Comparably in film, Janicza Bravo's pulp-factual *Zola* (2020), disrupts and unsettles the terms of the thriller, infusing it with a filmic manifestation of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic. The film was adapted by Bravo from dancer A'Ziah "Zola" King's viral twitter thread from 2015, a thread which began with the iconic line "Y'all wanna hear a story about why me and this bitch here fell out????????? It's kind of long but full of suspense" (*Zola* 1:20-1:27) and charts an increasingly sordid tale of sex work, crime, violence, and a Florida road trip gone wrong. In the film, Bravo creates a mise-en-scène that channels the "vibrant" and "so-called 'gaudy' colours", and the "laid edges, long acrylic nails, mink coats (and) intricate braids" look of this "unique" style (Sanusi 2020: online). The adaptation of this aesthetic seems to be a recognition of the fact that this equally derided and revered, contested and white-appropriated aesthetic "represent(s) young black women expressing themselves unapologetically", a powerful act of identity reclamation in the face of towering systemic forces that seek to control that expression (online). Described by reviewers like Bradshaw as an "icily slick" urban thriller (2021: online),

Zola reimagines the aesthetic and thematic boundaries of the crime thriller, developing this ‘ghetto’ style which is at once luridly bright and pastel, and darkly gritty, and which, at its core, embodies the distinctly 21st century lens of social media self-documentation and self-absorption. As Lodge explains:

This is storytelling about storytelling, openly unreliable but told with conviction, and now filtered through a filmmaker’s questioning gaze. Rather than opting for video-based vérité, Bravo casts *Zola*’s story in a dreamy, near-surreal light—tilted and frayed by Ari Wegner’s gorgeously rough 16mm cinematography and the eerie, inhuman sonics of Mica Levi’s score—and tells one of her own. (2021: online)

O’Malley concurs, commending Bravo’s style—which is both “very free, very open” yet “specific and crystal-clear”—and her heightened “sensitivity to atmosphere”, which she describes as being “everywhere apparent” (2021: online).

Despite the malleability that I have foregrounded, if women working in the contemporary realm of the female-led thriller can broadly be seen to be using a heightened feminine aesthetic of a postfeminist milieu, often as a subversively saccharine wrapping for their tales of gender violence, then texts like Bravo’s and Harris’ elucidates that Black women are doing the same, with the added depth of embodying the 21st century female ghetto fabulous aesthetic into their disruptive texts.

WOMEN LOOKING AT WOMEN:

CHANGING THE DOMINANT GAZE OF THE THRILLER MODE

Ultimately, what women in the thriller mode are doing is shifting its traditionally hypermasculine gaze to a more feminine, or perhaps better said, a more open one. In the more clearly feminist thriller iterations of the late 20th century, Munt suggested that these texts gained their force and purpose through “the position of the gaze, which shifts from being held by the perpetrator to the victim” (1994: 194). As she explains:

The politics of the gaze is openly explored in feminist crime fiction, showing how it is not just sexed and gendered, but also implicated within racial paradigms. Because this genre is so crucially concerned with perception, this allows for a degree of reflective

interrogation as to the mechanisms of scrutiny. At a crude level, instead of being titillated by the abused female body, we are inscribed within it, and allowed revenge. (194)

In a postfeminist milieu and in the works I have described much of this remains true. In particular, there is a sense that today's women craft aesthetic worlds that inscribe us not only within the female body but within a kind of broader encompassing essence of femaleness. Although they do necessarily ascribe to the aspirational quality of earlier feminist outings they do gaze, like their millennial counterparts, both at *and with* their women (even their most complex and most criminal women) with a kind of empathetic candour, looking in ways that can both be soft and tender and frank and forceful. They look reflexively and critically and through their gazes encourage us to reconsider the ways we often look at women, both the victims and monsters, and everything in between.

EMERALD FENNEL, *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN* (2020): WEAPONIZING THE FEMININE

Emerald Fennell may take the prize for authoring the most equivalent or reversed male-gaze scene of this dissertation with her 'head spinning' club montage opening to *Promising Young Woman* (2020). As Charli XCX's dreamy 2017 summer girl pop anthem "Boys" plays out, the cooing of a woman who's always busy thinking about boys, Fennell's camera floats through the glowy, fractalizing neon lights of an unnamed club, settling on the hindquarters of various men as they bop, swivel, gyrate. If these were women the scene would be coded as sexy, but the truth is, there is no real precedent for ogling men's nether regions on the dance floor in film, and so the scene instead is coded as strange and unsettling, exactly the mood that Fennell cultivates throughout her entire motion picture debut.

Before *Promising Young Woman*, British-born Fennell (b. 1985) cut her teeth as an actor and as the showrunner and executive producer for season 2 of the BBC's *Killing Eve* (2019), for which she also has a screenwriting credit for six of the eight episodes. Under her helm, the thriller sank further into the growing and sexually charged obsession between female spy Eve Polastri, played by Sandra Oh, and female contract killer Villanelle, played by Jodie Comer. The series, particularly millennial juggernaut Phoebe Waller Bridge's first season and Fennell's equally lauded second season, re-codes its arguably sexist source material (Luke Jennings' *Codename Villanelle* (2017)) into a work in which "male dominance is resisted, satirised, and challenged" (Miller *et al.* 2021: 3). More specifically, the series is said to have "distinctly queer(ed) the trope of the femme fatale and thereby undermine(d) the heteronormative, gendered politics of crime genres" (Grübler 2021: 37). I would suggest the series did more than just queer the femme fatale, and like the other texts detailed in this chapter, it creates a far more rich and real portrayal of both the type of woman who does bad things and the type of woman who tries to catch that other type of woman, and the borders between them.

Certainly, some of the ideas and visual aesthetics that defined *Killing Eve* have informed Fennell's cinematic debut, and the core film of this chapter, *Promising Young Woman*. The film follows Cassie Thomas, played by Carrey Mulligan, a 30-year-old medical school dropout who works at a coffee shop that she quite openly disdains. We first discover her as (ostensible) drunk, alone and splayed on a tacky leather couch in the same club where Charli XCX is playing. After Fennell subjects us to an (almost unbearable) slice-of-life male work colleague conversation about what women should and should not do in the workplace (and everywhere else), Cassie is taken home by Jerry an (ostensible) nice guy played—in

genius bit of casting—by Adam Brody.¹⁰² Jerry, unsurprisingly, is not in fact such a nice guy, and after taking Cassie home, he begins to initiate sex with her despite the fact that she is both resistant and in a near-catatonic state. “What are you doing?” she slurs six times, as he repeatedly shushes and ignores her, before she sits up and says again in a straight voice, “I said, what are you doing?” (*Promising Young Woman* 06:57-07:00). As the film gradually teases out, Cassie dropped out of medical school following the sexual assault on her best friend, Nina, at the hands of one of their classmates. While Nina later took her life, Al Monroe, the young man who assaulted her, is now a successful doctor and husband-to-be living consequence free. Utterly disillusioned and seemingly alone in her deep distress, each night Cassie exacts her own form of revenge by becoming faux drunk ‘prey’ and forcing so-called nice guys to confront their deeply predatory behaviour and predilection for barely conscious women who can hardly give consent. When her path crosses with another previous classmate Ryan Cooper, Cassie begins on a more deliberate path of revenge against all those complicit in Nina’s rape and its subsequent coverup—and despite a brief interlude of happiness, when Cassie believes that Ryan may actually be a nice guy and begins to fall for him—Fennell’s film slowly crackles towards its sinister and violent conclusion.

Fennell develops her heady and increasingly horrible narrative in a style that epitomises that which I have sought to describe above. Pahle calls the film a “candy-colored and unabashedly girly” revenge thriller (2020: 80), Fleming dubs it a “genre-bending” revenge thriller that “ricochets” between affects “to radical and unsettling effect” (2021: online) and Buchanan “a tonal tightrope” (2020: online). Willmore says that the film’s “sugar shell of hyperfemininity” showcases that “girliness isn’t a contrast to darkness” but “incidental to it,

¹⁰² For those readers who were not tween-age or teenage girls in the 2000s, as director Fennel was, Brody came to fame as a fan favourite nice boy on *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), before moving onto greater fandom as the ultimate post-millennium nice boy Seth Cohen on *The OC* (2003-2007).

the two perfectly capable of coexisting” (2021: online). Fennell herself calls it “ultra-feminine” but also “uncanny” (in Pahle 2020: 83). From the film’s girl pop soundtrack to its artificial and out-of-time dollhouse sets, pastel costuming and even Cassie’s perfect rainbow manicure, Fennell’s aesthetic serves up a kind of weaponized femininity. Yet, in the film, much of that which appears so intensely feminine is actually a carapace, a shell that both protects Cassie from scrutiny and contains and hides what is “incendiary and frightening” about her (Fennell in Pahle 2020: 83), lulling those around her—mostly men—into a false sense of security. As Cochrane describes, “the disconnect between action and appearance is crucial to the film” and Fennell, via Cassie, “trolls the unthreatening femininity” that is “signposted” by certain types of clothes, colours and spaces (2021: online). Performance and artifice are embedded in the aesthetic of *Promising Young Woman*, its fabricated spaces and Instagram-filter hues encouraging us to confront the lies society tells us, and that we also often tell ourselves, about ‘nice guys’ and ‘bad girls’.

In this way, Fennell’s curated mise-en-scène is much more than one-note, and there is a certain irony to many of her directorial choices. In particular, what Barbeito calls the film’s “bubblegum” Britney Spears and Paris Hilton soundtrack (2021: online), challenges the standard sense of what a thriller sounds like; although it may superficially feel discordant with the film’s harrowing subject matter, it adds to its off-kilter experience and troubling, uncertain atmosphere. Moreover, Fennell’s interest in the style is earnest, and the choice of a highly-female soundtrack which prizes a brand of sugary pop which is normally critically derided is in and of itself an aesthetically subversive choice. Fennell’s mise-en-scène also reflects that she sees the world keenly for its jarringly contradictory hues. In the film, what is pastel and neon, has a way of turning hard-edged and acrid, and that which is rarely taken seriously, or taken as a provocateur of fear, demands to be taken as such. Moreover, not only does her avenging barbie-doll aesthetic make quick and disorientating shifts to dark conventional thriller

beats, with tense scoring and suffocating red hues, but equally, with abrupt precision, Fennell strips back all cinematic facades in some of the film's most confronting scenes.

Each one of the male bedrooms or apartments 'drunk' Cassie finds herself in are captured in naturalistic lighting and hues, the staged symmetry of Cassie's home and café abandoned and replaced with lived in and unarranged spaces. Likewise, in *Promising Young Woman*'s confronting agonal scene, the lighting is low, the room muted and brown, and there is no music (satirical or otherwise). There is only Al's self-indulgent whimpering and sniffing as he tells Cassie to "stop fucking moving" (*Promising Young Woman* 1:34:17-1:34:19) as he slowly suffocates her. It is worth stating that despite her volatile and even unhinged quality, the only act of physical violence that Cassie perpetrates is against the car of a passing man who finds her stopped in the middle of an intersection and whose response is to ask her, "You blow the entire DMV?" (*Promising Young Woman* 49:32-49:34). That is, before he snaps his fingers at her to get her attention and hurls a string of far worse misogynistic slurs at her. As McCann proposes, as the "prerogative of violence in civil society remains decidedly masculine" texts of gendered resistance must "develop a vocabulary for countering those that extract the violence" of feminised subjects "from their origins in the structures of patriarchy" (2014: 16). Fennell's treatment of violence, in a genre that demands it, seems to reflect this. As she herself states, thrillers, especially revenge thrillers, are typically "escapist", "cathartic" and "effective", but they're "not honest or real", in part because they use "titillating" rather than "uncomfortable violence" (in Pahle 2020: 81). This is an issue I will continue to explore in my following chapter, but it bears establishing that Cassie's own ruthlessness never compares to that of the utter carelessness of those she confronts, and the revenge that she enacts is typically psychological. Thus, when she herself is thoughtlessly murdered—thoughtless seems to be the best word to describe the little regard with which her life is snuffed out—the film has had no visual precedent for such a distressing act.

Given that Fennell, as with most women in this chapter, authorially favours substantiated psychological violence more than tawdry physical violence, her use of the thriller mode and her cultivation of tension hinges closely on her development of character. As Fennell states, she is “interested in the ways that women can be dangerous” (in Pahle 2020: 83), and Cassie *is* dangerous, albeit not dangerous enough to survive her dangerous liaisons. Yet despite her danger, and the way that possible danger drives the film’s action, we find ourselves aligned with her too, despite how alienating she can be and despite the gnawing dread her decisions often evoke. Although not a radical choice for the thriller mode—which, as established, has often aligned itself with outsiders—Fennell crafts a world that ultimately undercuts its own escapist potentiality by creating an ongoing visual and thematic tension. Fennell tends to place Cassie in front of glowing diffuse light—she also often erases the background in interior scenes, replacing the possible views that could exist through windows with blank light, creating a distorted almost fishbowl feeling—and she often poses Cassie with arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross, which cultivates a quasi-avenging angel martyresque portrait. Yet, Fennell’s camera frequently finds her in the dead centre of the frame in cold wide shots, and in a confrontational visual line with her opponent or opposite in the scene; she makes no effort to negate the fact that Cassie is fundamentally an antagonistic “miserable asshole” (*Promising Young Woman* 01:05:08-01:05:12). In doing so, Fennell makes a much more nuanced film. Cassie is good, but she is also bad, yet who is worse, the film asks us? Fennell casts a slew of actors and comedians with established repertoires playing likeable and non-threatening nice guys (Adam Brody definitely belongs in this category, as does Chris Lowell as Al, Bo Burnham as Ryan and Christopher Mintz-Plasse as Neil) to subversively play her host of not so nice guys. Unlike the taciturn Cassie who saves her words to use them as weapons, with the patter of real millennial speakesque conversation, Fennell’s men bloviate and almost babble in contrast; summoning up an endless well of everything from self-indulgent low-grade

crumminess to genuinely harmful misogyny as they gaslight, mansplain, give unsolicited advice, victim-shame, victim-blame, slur the entire female gender and most critically to the film's affect, deny any wrongdoing.

I have suggested above that texts by contemporary women are seeking to develop a new vocabulary for the thriller, but although it may be a female and in part very feminine vocabulary, it is not strictly a feminist one. Although Miller *et al.* analyse *Killing Eve* as a holistic phenomenon, that is, both within and beyond Fennell's influence—and although the show's thriller stakes are much more outlandish—their criticism forms an interesting starting point for understanding *Promising Young Woman* through both a feminist and postfeminist lens. Considering the show's use of parody as one of its key aesthetic strategies, or vocabularies—a device which, to an extent, the film also employs¹⁰³—they suggest that *Killing Eve* “ultimately offers an ambiguous language of empowerment” (2021: 3). As they continue:

While it resists the reduction of women to docile bodies forced into compliance by re-figuring the gendered dynamics of the gaze to focus on the changing and often gender fluid visual economy, it also perpetuates myths of monstrosity and, to a significant extent, equates female power with abnormality, disorder, and abjection. Therefore, in some instances *Killing Eve* is complicit in patriarchal metanarratives during the very moments it attempts to parody and subvert them. (3)

While I would concur that Cassie is also monstrous, or perhaps, rather, that she can behave in monstrous ways, she hardly qualifies as a figure of monstrosity in the sense that Miller *et al.* refer to because she is also a victim throughout the film and certainly in death. However, some, such as Dana Stevens for *Slate*, have suggested that the film presents a “muddled and counterproductive” treatment of “consent, accountability, and rape culture” because Cassie's (non-violent fake-out) violations of other women cause us to lose “trust” in her “as a moral

¹⁰³ There is a similarity here to the metamodern sensibility I have explored, in which female authors and auteurs are also navigating postmodern devices like parody in an attempt to rebuild sincerity from irony. Fennell's work can likewise be read in this way, as it also traces ironic and postmodern tools, including parody and tonal discords. However, to my mind, she uses them—like the female metamodernists—in service of affect.

actor” (2021: online). As Stevens expands, her vendetta is taken upon posthumously without the late Nina’s consent or her mother’s; this, I would counter, is part of the point. Cassie’s vengeance is selfish and sort of sociopathic, and certainly not politically productive or advantageous for victims at large, but although this may be a #MeToo era film it is not intended to be Kitty Green’s *The Assistant* (2019).¹⁰⁴ Yet Stevens’ words tap into the deep vein of social discomfort that an angry woman who chooses vengeance rather than forgiveness and agency rather than passivity provokes.

Stevens also finds herself dissatisfied with, what she terms the “crushing nihilism” of the ending, in which Cassie’s vengeance only succeeds at the cost of her own life and in which her vengeance is inevitably tempered by the sense that Al will once again get off scot-free because, the world being what it is, it is plausible (2021: online). Allison Willmore for *Vulture* concurs, suggesting that the film’s “unsettling” tensions are “unsolvable”, resulting in a work which cannot side with either reconciliation or retribution and so instead must “accelerat(e) off a cliff when what you’d really like to see is some kind of road forward, no matter how rough” (2021: online). I agree that the ending may be both too finished and too unfinished, a feeling that Flynn’s *Gone Girl* also leaves me with. By Fennel’s own accounts, her original ending was for Cassie’s body burning to be the final scene, but this was rejected by her financiers for being too bleak (in Aurthur and Donnelly 2021: online). Aside from the ending that Fennel ultimately gives us, the only other alternatives are the one in which Cassie never sets upon her path and instead chooses to skip through “daisies and delicious, beautiful candy land” (Fennel in Aurthur and Donnelly 2021: online) and the one in which she murders Al and goes to prison

¹⁰⁴ A claustrophobic drama film rather than a thriller, Green’s depiction of a day-in-the-life young female junior assistant, Jane, who works for a demeaning, belittling and sexually exploitative boss—she is only spared from the later, because she is not his ‘type’—has been generally accepted as the first #MeToo film, as it was released in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein abuse scandal breaking. A harrowing film in a different way, *The Assistant*’s treatment of protagonist Jane, its governing neorealist aesthetic and its understated yet suffocating accumulation of detail make the film a much clearer ideological work.

for life. The truth is they are all—to varying extents—unsatisfying. Yet, even if not deliberately, Fennell’s ending strikes at something Sisyphean. In dismantling some of the core aesthetic and tonal expectations of the thriller and revisioning such male territory, perhaps she inevitably creates a text for which there can never be a right resolution, because as Munt articulated, it’s impossible to excise crime (1994).

As a slight digression—even in an epoch of increasingly normalised gender fluidity and the (welcome) deconstruction of gendered norms and stereotypes—the reception of the film more broadly seems to showcase that the gaze as a phenomenon of looking and being, is still profoundly and immutably gendered. Overtaking any other commentary of the film, was the response of *Variety* magazine’s Dennis Harvey to Mulligan’s casting. In Harvey’s review he describes her as an “odd choice” for a “femme-fatale” role, saying she wears her “pickup-bait” like “bad drag” and suggesting that the film’s producer Margot Robbie would have been a more natural fit for the role (2020: online). Given that *Variety* has long been an arbiter of cinematic taste, the slur was a powerful one. Mulligan interpreted it as a veiled way of saying she “wasn’t hot enough” (in Buchanan 2020: online), which set off a viral explosion of think pieces and social media commentary that ultimately led to *Variety* adding an editor’s note that stipulated that “*Variety* sincerely apologizes to Carey Mulligan and regrets the insensitive language and insinuation in our review of *Promising Young Woman* that minimized her daring performance” (in Harvey 2020: online), although they left Harvey’s original words intact.

While critics are entitled to offer their critique, as Buchanan attests, in Hollywood, “the way women are viewed becomes something the whole world can watch” (2020: online). In a film so attuned to the way women are looked at, it is telling that a prized male reviewer would still unabashedly write that the objectively very beautiful Mulligan doesn’t fit the physical bill of a woman whom men would want to take home drunk, and/or who would engage in acts of vengeance, because that personage is reserved for the Margot Robbies of this world. Fennell’s

own reasoning for her casting choice makes the gendered nature of the gaze in contemporary film even more evident. As Fennell describes, Mulligan is so effective at countering the shallow, stereotypical image of female revenge as “a woman walking down the street in slow-mo with a fire burning behind her”, not because she isn’t hot enough to play that woman, but because as a performer she is “unfailingly truthful” and “grounded” in a way that allows Cassie to be multidimensional and real (in Buchanan 2020: online); it is on those terms that Fennell sees and portrays Mulligan as Cassie. Recognising what Entwistle proposed, that the “fashioned body” turns “nature into culture, layering cultural meaning on the body” (2015 p.143), Fennell dresses Cassie as the girly girl, the party girl, the girl next door, the career woman, all stand-in figures for real women that we are all familiar with and that society is comfortably placated by. Although Cassie knows she is none of these figures, “she’s fluent in how to present herself as such” (Willmore 2020: online). Much as Villanelle’s heightened costuming allowed her to fashion “her own hyper-sexualised and hyper-feminine narrative, consciously acting as both consumer and consumable” (Miller *et al.* 2021: 10), Fennell’s cinematic gaze works to see Cassie both for the manifold roles she chooses to play and in the human and complicated ways she exists behind that, something which is made possible by Mulligan’s grounding screen presence.

In Mulvey’s most recent study of the gaze in cinema, she frames her analysis around the idea of the afterimage, or the “the lasting nature of the image left on the eye by the impact of the real” (2019: 15); this is a poetic way of reckoning with the way that certain images linger in the mind’s eye and therefore overlay others. In doing so, Mulvey demonstrates that “when women make films, cinema mutates in their hands and through their eyes” (10). She says this is not to suggest that there is a singular, essential or coherent ‘women’s cinema’”, but rather, she offers that “a ‘women-inflected cinema’ can take up topics and perspectives hitherto neglected or simply not imaginable by a male-dominated culture” (10). I suggest that they can

also take up their images. Fennell doesn't just weaponize femininity through the mise-en-scène she constructs, but through the bold directorial choices that turn her aesthetic into a “candy overdose, stomach-ache of a movie” (Willmore 2020: online), and that provoke us to re-examine what it means and connotes to be or to look feminine, what qualities that includes and excludes. If Cassie is in fact ‘Vengeance Barbie’, as some reviewers proposed, she is like no Barbie we have seen before.

In taking up these new images and overlaying them over what has come before—as Charli XCX might phrase it—the film also finds a new way to be “thinking ‘bout boys” in the thriller mode. Before Fennell’s camera there are almost no traces of hypermasculinity and not even any Machiavellian machismo, but rather a performative male of another kind exists, a kind who pontificates “about David Foster Wallace and serve(s) kumquat liqueur and wear(s) fedoras and tell(s) women that they don’t need to wear all that makeup” (Willmore 2020: online). As Willmore contends, these men are condemned as much for their “*dickishness* as their predatory intentions” (online, original italics). It’s a fair assessment. Fennell’s frank camera fixes on these men in the moments they think that no one else is capable of seeing or judging them and invites us to consider how monstrous (and also perhaps how pathetic) they are, and what the punishment for that monstrosity should be.

GILLIAN FLYNN, *GONE GIRL* (2012): FORGING FEMININE-MASCULINE HYBRIDITY

Across the course of three novels, *Sharp Objects* (2006), *Dark Places* (2009) and *Gone Girl* (2012), US-born Gillian Flynn (b. 1971) has established a reputation as a writer who doesn’t “write the kind of women you want” (Flynn in Abbott 2018: online). As Gardner expands, Flynn is “renowned for her unflinching characterization of complex, disturbing, and abject

characters”, primarily women, “who simultaneously transcend and problematize traditional stereotypes surrounding abject female deviancy, manipulation, and the evocation of violence” (2022: 45). Gardner calls these women “liminal antiheroines”, emphasising that antiheroines are typically considered “terrifying, abject, and therefore strange” as they blur “the lines between binary notions of gender, sexuality, and violence” (45, 49). Yet in all three of Flynn’s novels, this “stranger-status/strangeness” can in fact be a path to empowerment and even ultimately a sort of wholeness, as she deliberately crafts women who both “invert” and “weaponize” the “violence aimed at them” (50). In her, respectively, Southern, rural and urban-suburban set thrillers, Flynn has crafted three distinct yet flawed, full female protagonists who occupy equally distinct flawed, full worlds. Worlds that are predicated on crime and violence, and yet are also deeply normal and texturally real. While each of her central women—Camille Preaker in *Sharp Objects*, Libby Day in *Dark Places* and Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*—loosely adhere to the conventional roles of criminal, victim and detective, they quickly complicate these boundaries because they themselves are complicated, and it is through this complexity that they, in particular, render the “victim/avenger status” as “ambiguous” (Marston 2018: 120).

Gone Girl’s Amy Dunne may be the most complex of them all, and certainly the most divisive. Unfurling slowly through a dual timeline and dual protagonist structure, Flynn’s novel charts the disappearance of Amy Dunne, wife to Nick Dunne, and the subsequent investigation of her disappearance. With the meticulous care of a crime procedural of the highest order, Flynn spins an increasingly complex and dark web of secrets, lies, philandering, career failures, credit card debt and marital violence as the search for Amy unfolds. Then, at the novel’s midpoint she deliberately upends her narrative and, with it, our knowledge of her central characters. With this narrative fissure, Flynn makes evident that, rather than the ‘crime’ of Amy’s disappearance, the novel is about a much more slippery and non-standard crime. One

perpetrated against “Real Amy”, the “much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging” woman than the societally sanctioned “Cool Amy”, the woman Amy was forced to become for Nick, not only by Nick but by rigid patriarchal standards and 21st century postfeminist failings (Flynn 2014: 3911).¹⁰⁵

As the novel makes its narrative and aesthetic U-turn from the flashbacks of “likeable” Diary Amy—and her portrait of a disintegrating marriage and an abused woman—to the real-time experiences of “Vengeful Scorned Wife” (4088-4100), Flynn exposes the careful plotting of the novel’s first half. As she does so, the novel’s “impending sense of doom and claustrophobia” amplifies (Christensen 2020: 97). The novel also begins to wade into even murkier territory of staged rape, murder and self-insemination as Amy’s plans for punishing her unfaithful and uninterested husband evolve after she “decides” she’s “not going to die”, well, “not *really* die” (4837-4849, original italics). Amy admits that it is “rather extreme” to frame your husband for murder, that it is “beyond the pale of what an average woman might do”, but she also deems it to be “so very *necessary*” (4055-4068, original italics). And, by the end of the novel, despite her worst actions—Amy has now returned home and forced Nick to reconcile with her after having framed her old high school sweetheart Desi Collings’ for her abduction (and murdered him for good measure)—Amy is right when she says it would too

¹⁰⁵ In short, for greater context, *Gone Girl* begins with the suggestion of a standard procedural crime thriller, a missing beautiful young woman, a philandering husband, and a small recession town American setting. This is the narrative of the first half of the novel, as it establishes, through present day narration from Nick and diary entries from Amy, the story of a New York couple who lost their jobs and returned to his family town to care for his ailing mother, and whose relationship began to disintegrate thereafter with Amy presented as too intellectual and exacting, Nick too lazy and fickle. After finding Amy missing on the morning of their fifth wedding anniversary, the somewhat hapless Nick tries to follow her fifth anniversary treasure hunt clues—an annual tradition he finds to be a torturous test of his affection—and, as he does so, he begins to suspect foul play of another kind: that Amy is torturing him from afar. While Nick follows Amy’s clues, so do the police, who increasingly set their sights on Nick as the perpetrator of Amy’s disappearance and possible murder. As the mystery unfolds and gains layers, Diary Amy tells a story of romance gone bad, infidelity, and abuse, pulling readers between these narrative two poles until Real Amy replaces Diary Amy and rewrites the terms of the story.

easy for both Nick and us to “write (her) off” as a “psycho bitch”, “to dismiss (her) so simply” (6735).

Much as in *Promising Young Woman*, Amy’s personality, and the duality of that personality, synthesises with the aesthetic of the text. In both iterations as Cool/Diary Amy and Real Amy, her voice is stronger, more defined than Nick’s messy and self-conscious masculinity, and so when it shifts it does shift the tone of everything. Osborne describes the novel as a work of “caustic and transgressive satire”, drawing attention to its uncannily heightened features like Diary Amy’s passages of “emphasised femininity” (2017: 4, 16). Flynn has Amy describe herself in love as “like some Technicolour comic of a teenage girl” (Flynn 2014: 238), and there is an undeniable girlishness and hyper-femininity attached to much of the first half of the novel, from its cutesy asides, embedded girly magazine personality quizzes, and whimsical scenes of romance, like when Nick “takes a single lock of (Amy’s) hair between two fingers” and “brushes the sugar from (her) lips” before he kisses her in the “sweet, white cloud” of powdered sugar outside her local bakery at a mystical “What Next?” hour of the morning (301-12). Like in Fennel’s film, this emphasised femininity is a shell that covers Real Amy, but is also a part of her, even in her darkest incarnations.¹⁰⁶ As such, although Amy’s ultimate performance as the Dead Girl frees her to forge her new self, the prose of Real Amy’s focalized first person narration retains a striking similarity to Diary Amy, exhibiting the same playful italics, brackets, exclamation points and small theatrics. It also reveals the same attention to the textures of being a woman, of the bodily experience of being a woman, a gender that must “Clean and bleed. Bleed and clean” (4599). As such, it displays the same believable idiosyncratic depth—even in the novel’s most acute of moments violence and tension. The same, just cynical, cruel, subverted and strange.

¹⁰⁶ Likewise, this pastiche of form and tonal (and character) discords can also be read as a kind of post-postmodern aesthetic device.

The paradoxical strange-reality of Amy's two selves aligns itself with the idea of her as a liminal character, as established by Gardner. As she describes, the strangeness of antiheroines is often "exemplified by their physical and metaphorical occupation of liminal spaces that expose and exacerbate the protagonists' abject, disturbing, and dynamic qualities" (2022: 52). In the case of Amy, she literally "occupies in-between space" (63) as Real/Dead Amy, in hiding from Nick and the authorities and first introduced to us in transit "look(ing) in the rear view mirror" (Flynn 2014: 3799) on her way out of Carthage. So too metaphorically, her liminality is stressed by her "existence as an unreliable narrator", and the fact that her "strangeness manifests not only via her liminal occupation of the text's narrative parameters, but also by her confusion of stereotype, characterisation, and symbolic relevance" (Gardner 2022: 66). In particular, in the context of the thriller genre, like Cassie, Amy "appropriate(s) patriarchal violence" (Osborne 2017: 24), and her, in turns, beguiling, coarse and uncanny, yet always female way of writing about herself and her experiences unsettles the genre's masculine way of understanding and crafting violence.

Although Stratton explores this in light of the character of Nick's sister Margo Dunne and the way she facilitates Nick's transition from a hypermasculine to a sympathetic figure, she articulates that Flynn's novel introduces a "successful feminine-masculine hybridity" (2020: 26). For background, as she summarises, the notion of the feminine-masculine has typically been framed as something "bad or incorrect so as to uphold male masculinity", but here, the reality that "female bodies can, and do, perform masculinity" is positioned as something which may ultimately humanize masculinity (21). Although this may appear to be a slight side-step from Amy's dualities, I introduce Stratton's thoughts as the thriller is—in the context of this thesis thus far—the mode with the strongest precedent of masculinity. As such, it is interesting to consider how *Gone Girl*—as with the other works foregrounded here—specifically present a kind of feminine-masculine hybrid on the aesthetic terms that I postulated

above. Diary Amy is couched in an aesthetic that is often girly on a cotton candy level and Real Amy is presented through a heightened crass and crude voice that feels undeniably manly. Yet, as established, both Amy's speak with the same diction, and, in this way, Flynn presents these distinct (feminine and more masculine) selves as two sides of the same coin. She also produces a broad stylistic palette in which the two affects can suitably coexist. Even Real Amy's passages, when taken as a standalone component, have features like their biological and forthright depiction of both women's and men's bodies that are sensory, smutty and mostly unsexy in a way that disrupts what a 'good girl' might say, darkens what a 'cool girl' would, and retains a female perspective while feeling almost like male locker-room banter. For example, "He couldn't believe I didn't love wax-stripping my pussy raw and blowing him on request" (Flynn 2014: 3893). As with Sally Rooney, I will not be embarking upon a comparison of Flynn's source material with the novel's 2014 film adaptation. However, it is worth briefly stating that although director David Fincher (with Flynn herself as co-writer) did a perfectly adequate job in crafting an above average thriller procedural with strong performances by Rosamund Pike as Amy and Ben Affleck as Nick, his is a much more tonally one-note text. It is also much more conventionally masculine with its very Hollywood sludge yellow-green cross stormy grey colour scheme and structurally intensifying action. As such, in the wake of such interesting works by women—and the perceptible stylistic hybridity in Flynn's original text—I can't help but wonder how a female-directed adaptation may have been made manifest, especially on aesthetic terms.

The novel's aesthetic depth, and this masculine-feminine hybridity, wouldn't be possible without Flynn's genre awareness and self-reflexivity, something exhibited by all the female creators in this chapter, but perhaps best encapsulated by Amy when she says "I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir" (Flynn 2014: 5507). Flynn's own brand of noir is distinct however, and as with Fennel, she eschews many of the features that have typically been

associated with male-authored thrillers, paring back locations to create something disturbingly domestic and intimate in scale, and devoting far more narrative space to slowly divulging the inner workings of her character's mind than to creating propulsive but inherently purposeless action sequences. Christensen labels the novel as a flashbulb text in the "burgeoning genre" of domestic noir (2020: 87), spurring similar highly popular texts like Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015). In particular, this female-led form distinguishes itself through its treatment of the new femme fatale. Christensen calls this woman the "millennial *femme* anti-heroine" (100, original italics), a suitable name for the extension of Grossman's *femme moderne* (2009) that I proposed earlier in this chapter (in what is also a nice connection to the 'mean-lennial anti-hero' of my first chapter). As Christensen expands, domestic noir "further complicate(s) and restructure(s) this character to match the complex intersection of internalised misogyny and feminist gains that define contemporary women's subject position" (93). In doing so, it "presents far more complex and nuanced character development" to explain this woman's actions "as well as more understandable motivations" (93).

Christensen describes this form of expression as being "analogous to popular 'chick lit' narratives", suggesting that they take similar female socialites or sophisticates and similar urban settings but recode the standard chick lit ambience through the generic darkness and moodiness of thriller to reflect "the brutal reality after a so-called happy ending" and "the jarringly ambivalent position contemporary women" are placed in (92). For this reason, the mode has also been dubbed chick-noir in popular circles. Presumably it is also derided as such outside of these circles, given that 'chick' is typically a pejorative prefix, as I established in my millennial chapter. Yet, as Thoma concurs, in the 21st century, even chick lit as it is most conventionally understood has tonally "refashioned itself" into "slightly less smiley narratives" and, therefore, has "found in the adjacent cultural form" of noir "a highly legible route to significantly renovate plot and residual affective impulses" (Thoma 2020: 200). Interestingly,

Modleski proposes that chick-lit novels may in fact “be called novels of disillusionment”, because their “cheerful, breezy tone” is often undercut by a “dark, sobering” element (2008: xxiv-v). As Thoma explains, chick lit’s “codified iconography, long established and highly legible narrative conventions” are not necessarily uncritical, and as such they often invite us to read them for their “emphasis on revision” of the promises of postfeminism (2020: 203). With this in mind, it becomes interesting to consider how the aesthetic and tonal features of chick lit and chick flicks may be an alloy to the darkly feminine style developed in 21st century thrillers by women.

In my last chapter, I dwelt substantially on the pretty, and there is another “customarily feminized” (217) aesthetic I briefly correlated there, but have chosen to address in this chapter, the cute. As Thoma proposes, “the coolness of chick noir, embodied in the figure of the Cool Girl who disavows intimacy, is not wholly outside or separate from the cuteness typically associated with feminized chick culture” (201). Theorized most completely by Ngai in *Our Aesthetic Categories – Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), she conceives of cute as a commodified postmodern phenomenon that refers to both the “sensuous quality or appearance” of ‘cute’ objects and the “feeling-based evaluation” of that aesthetic quality (2012: 2). More specifically, she suggests that cuteness revolves “around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening” (3). As she continues, cuteness is “not just an aestheticization but an eroticisation of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (3). Ergo, as with many aesthetic categories, cuteness is predicated on an affective duality, or the “clashing” feelings of “tenderness and aggression” (44). Channelling this notion, *Gone Girl*, like *Promising Young Woman*, effectively mines the saccharine sweetness or cuteness that is stylistically and thematically associated with chick lit and chick flicks, and ultimately locates within it what is dark and surprising, toying with the clashing feelings the

cute evokes. “Oh quite cute, it definitely won’t kill us in the night”, Amy’s diary states in the early part of the novel in a line that feel almost allegorical (2014: 139).

Thoma argues that “affective responses involve ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox” (2020: 201), particularly in the case of thrillers. As such, *Gone Girl*, a text structured through distinctly oscillating aesthetic layers, “plays” with our “feelings of empathy and constraint” (212). If postfeminism can be interpreted as a “double discourse” (Tasker and Negra 2007: 8), one, as Thoma labels, of “evocation and rejection” (2020: 201), then it is natural that Flynn, as with the other creators in this chapter, would create a text that is both harmonious and discordant with feminist ideologies and aesthetics. This choice seems to reflect that, as Breu and Hatmaker identify, *Gone Girl*—and other female-authored works of a similar ilk—create “a form of noir affect that dramatizes the absolute lack of a stable or non-contradictory space for the contemporary female subject” (2020: 22). As Marston expands, “the ambivalence of a feminist politics, or the inability to locate a coherent feminism” become the “potential tricks” in Amy’s “arsenal”, and he describes her as a female protagonist who communicates “through known gendered codes and the iconicity of popular feminism” (Marston 2018: 131). This thesis has increasingly posited a distinct kind of aesthetic femininity made available by postfeminism’s “taken into accountness” of feminism (McRobbie 2009: 12), a form of address and response that both engages with and dismantles feminism’s terms, particularly as it allows women to reengage with what may be girly, pretty, feminine and/or hyperfeminine. In part, the 21st century female-led thriller does the same. However, it tonally and affectively plays with the “infectious girliness” (12) that has become the marker of postfeminist culture and equally relishes and renders that which is ugly and conventionally ‘masculine’.

As with *Promising Young Woman*, *Gone Girl* intersects with a postfeminist sexual milieu in which, “postfeminist promiscuity” has been “packaged as liberating” and as “a long-

awaited antidote” to a social framework which suggests women are degraded rather than empowered by non-emotional sexual exploits (Gwynne 2013: 40). Concomitant with this, has been the proliferation of sex-positive rhetoric that allows women to freely editorialise their desire for types of sexual expression that have also previously been labelled as purely degrading to women. Given that it has long been considered natural that men would want to pursue and enjoy casual sex, this feels like a victory. Yet, the consequence of the ‘hypersexuality as liberation’ equation of postfeminism is that it “underplay(s)” the “potentially detrimental effects” of hook-up culture on women (40). This was a concern that was interwoven into the body of millennial fiction texts I studied in this dissertation. However, while those composers principally approached the postfeminist enshrinement of sex-positivity as a kind of immutable fact, in the realm of the thriller it appears in a much more disturbing and violent manner that encourages its deconstruction.

In *Promising Young Woman*, the consequence of a culture of transactional sex appears to be that the horrific violation of non-consensual sex and sexual assault is not so much underplayed as utterly downplayed as the inevitable consequence of young women making bad choices. In *Gone Girl*, the ubiquitous nature of what Levy termed ‘raunch culture’ as a “litmus test of female uptightness” (2005: 40) is interrogated through the motif of the ‘cool girl’. The hallmark of the “modernized, neoliberal version of femininity”, the figure of the cool girl reflects a “messy suturing of traditional and neoliberal discourses” that “(re-)present” achieving (hetero)sexual desirability as a “freely chosen”, “modern and powerful position” (Gill 2007: 261). Perhaps most famously through Amy’s anti-cool girl diatribe—where she mocks the fictive “hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gangbang while somehow maintaining a size 2” (Flynn 2014: 3859)—the novel challenges the 21st

century's dominant sexual availability-as-empowerment rhetoric. Real Amy's violent rejection of this position, like Cassie's rejection of socially sanctioned female identities, renders her a kind of gender warrior, but like Cassie her motives are personal not universal. Because of this, the two protagonists are not strictly the much-maligned "angry", "unhappy", "difficult" and "unpleasant" figure of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2010: online), but are perhaps something closer to a postfeminist killjoy.

In her description of the experiences of feminist killjoys, Ahmed uses a metaphor to describe how these women, having "become alienated" from the image, or "picture" of good and happy, can, through that alienation, "see what that picture does not and will not reflect" (online). The female gaze has always been an Othered gaze, and the female gaze of contemporary thrillers is a particularly Othered one, in a way that is both requisite to the genre's terms and original. Like Fennell, the female gaze in *Gone Girl*, seems to be a much more astute and knowing one than its male counterpart; and it comes with a harsh and aesthetically hard-edged clarity. In the film, Fennell's moments of deadpan realism work to frame figures like the "barely dropping panties" Paul—and his rueful indignation that us "guys" (meaning women) "have to ruin everything" (*Promising Young Woman* 53:47-53-51, 54:25-54:28)—as objects to be both loathed as much as mocked. Likewise, Flynn's balance of satire, cool styling and indelible social truths works to juxtapose Amy's cold yet frequently incisive way of seeing with the clueless interpretation of men, who "actually think this (cool) girl exists" (Flynn 2014: 3859). The fact that both women are personally and ideologically messy does not preclude their creator's overall alignment with their way of seeing because these women also showcase their ability to see themselves critically. Although Diary Amy is a mendacious creation, Real Amy sees herself clearly (if through her slightly sociopathic lens) and pays deeply close attention to the contours of her physical and inner self. In particular, she documents the difference in her own physical body as Diary Amy—with her "perfect economy" body, with "every feature

calibrated, everything in balance”—and Real Amy—with her “flesh rubbery as a seal’s” and her “bottom that move(s) sometimes, on its own” (Flynn 2014: 4312)—with a sensory specificity that feels very female.

Gill proposes that one of the main characteristics of the postfeminist epoch is “a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” that “represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification—one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (Gill 2007: 258). It’s a perspicacious insight that Thoma picks up on when she decrees that “*Gone Girl*, if not all of chick noir, imagines femininity (...) as a negative state of surveillance” (2020: 205). While I would not attempt to extol the virtues of a self-surveilling gaze (nor deny its existence)—and while I agree that “the primary affective force of surveillance” and the “the structure of feeling created by surveillance” are evident in Flynn’s aesthetic textures (207)—as in other texts I have presented here—Thoma’s conception glosses over how the presentation of constructed femininity can be both wilfully misdirecting and empowering. Although Amy’s specific brand of complexity is very much born of her postfeminist moment and much about her character offers a riposte to the terms of postfeminism, her ‘narcissistic gaze’ and intense self-scrutiny is more a path to self-knowing than an internalizing of hegemonic male gender politics. Moreover, it is her ability to both self-survey and to survey others/her society that allows her to inhabit a series of female guises like “Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe” and even “the Dead Girl”—a different sanctioned female identity category, one, Amy states, that “everyone loves” (Flynn 2014: 4087, 4046)—that she uses to, in short, get what she wants.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Some commentators critique the triteness of what it is that Amy wants, and it is true that the elaborate orchestration of her revenge plot feels unmatched by what she wants, particularly by her closing desire, and of her willingness to play a new role—that of ‘Reanimated Dead Girl’ come, perhaps, ‘Soccer/Yoga Mom’—in order to get it. However, others like Rafferty commend that “the most striking thing about Flynn’s cool, clever mystery, is the childishness of its main characters, Nick and Amy Dunne, the sheer

Perhaps the female figure that Real Amy most closely resembles is The Bitch, a powerful and intelligent woman who is not necessarily as “malevolent” as she is often construed, although she is “most definitely a threat to the social order” (Aguilar 2001: 6). Aguilar suggests that the figure of the bitch was conspicuously absent from the feminist literary canon of the 20th century (2). Yet, she argues that female-authored fiction that reclaims the bitch has great feminist (and postfeminist) potential, because female protagonists who “find that the bitch is, in reality, a necessary part of herself” showcase that “denying this crucial piece of her being in an attempt to conform to traditional standards of femininity directly results in her inability to maintain a meaningful existence” (6). As she expands: “a woman who does not acknowledge her own inclinations toward evil, unsavoury behaviour, flaws, failings, and downright nastiness may find herself as objectified as any other silenced heroine” (6). I began this section by testifying to the fact that Flynn deliberately writes about women who “live in the murk” (Abbott 2018: online) because she wants to provoke the “deep societal fear of female rage” and counter the perception that “women must *be* a certain type of person” (Flynn in Abbott 2018: online, original italics). Yet in adhering to this intention, we can discern that she still creates women (and girls) who are in almost equal measure nice and nasty, good and evil, savoury and unsavoury, and uses this to create tonally jarring yet still harmonious texts. In doing, like Fennell, so she moves us towards new understandings of what feminine may mean in the 21st century and what a coterminous feminine aesthetic may look like.

Also characteristic to Flynn’s thrillers is a lack of neat resolution. As has been established earlier in this chapter, female-led thrillers often work to trouble the typical thriller ending, in which everything can be wrapped up into a neat little bow and resolved, forgotten,

pettiness of the games they play with each other” (2016: online). As he opines, the female-led realm of the guilty girl thriller also creates a space in which “self-validation” is reason enough for murder, rewriting the genres prior moral codes and clear-cut motives (online). Moreover, the instability of the book’s ending, as I will discuss, is another way in which Flynn unsettles the formal terms of the thriller.

left behind. Like *Promising Young Woman*, readers often find the ending of *Gone Girl* unsatisfying. As Christensen states, the “the restless nature of Amy’s last chapter, which also ends the novel itself” leaves “much ambiguity for the reader and for the characters of the text” (2020: 106-7). Thoma concurs, extrapolating that this is “a pattern that bestselling chick noir texts share”, whereby “affectively speaking” they fail to “provide an emotionally satisfying ending” and instead “drift away as the plot flattens out and the presence of positive emotional words declines” (2020: 212-3). It’s true that the novel leaves Amy and Nick in an unsatisfying emotional gridlock in which Nick has almost been “reassembl(ed)”, that is to say broken, and in which Amy has escaped societal punishment but cannot escape the punishment of having “to wake up and be (herself)” every morning (Flynn 2014: 7037). The novel also ends in rather unclimactic fashion with Amy’s “I don’t have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I’ve earned that” (2037-48). While it is not without its flaws, like *Promising Young Woman*’s extended coda-like ending, perhaps *Gone Girl*’s extended postscript style ending, attempts to show the indelible and lasting consequences of the text’s lies and acts of violence, while also underscoring that any kind of ‘last word’ will be formally and thematically unsatisfying.

The struggle of the last word is also my own, as I come increasingly closer to the end of my theoretical examination of the aesthetic possibilities of postfeminist era texts. As with the previous chapters in this dissertation, it seems clear that there are certain aesthetic tendencies which can be observed in thrillers that have been authored by women in the 21st century. Arguably, my analysis of the contemporary has been muddied by the rich history of the mode, by the fact that there are almost 200 years’ worth of thrillers that have either aesthetically initiated and invigorated the mode, or alternately conformed to and been conditioned by its dominant tendencies. Yet, it feels incontestable that both the formal features and subject matter of the texts discussed in this chapter would be impossible without the ripe

backdrop of postfeminism and the vision of new/old femininity that it has ushered in. The texts I highlighted in this chapter are deeply atmospheric and aesthetic but tonally incongruous ones, mashing up feminine and masculine elements, understated realism and melodrama, violent action and interior introspection, commercial and critical appeal, and the pretty and the ugly. This works in service of their own ideologically muddy narratives, which expunge the good girl/woman and bad girl/woman binary and replace it with a constantly sliding spectrum of behaviours by girls and women that their creators ask us to consider by a new system of judgement or perhaps beyond judgement altogether. Aguiar proposes that “morality itself may reside in the heart and mind of the bitch” (2001: 6), and, as I contemplate the legacy of female protagonists like Cassie and Amy, indeed, she may be right. In the end, the female-led thriller of the 21st century creates something which—like its characters—is distinctly female/feminine, but it comes with a hard edge.

HORROR AND HURT



THE POSTFEMINIST RECLAMATION OF THE
ABJECT

HORROR AND HURT

THE POSTFEMINIST RECLAMATION OF THE ABJECT

“It is women who love horror. Gloat over it. Feed on it.
Are nourished by it. Shudder and cling and cry out
—and come back for more.”

Bella Lugosi in “Women Love Horror” (2019)

It seems fitting that I should close my discussion of women’s writing and filmmaking here with horror, a realm of art and narrative mode that is often painfully hypermasculine. Certainly, it appears to be a mode destined to reflect the most troubling dimensions of the male gaze, of those violent urges for control that Sartre equated to sexual desire. While, at this late stage of my dissertation, it has been established, to a certain standard, that modes and genres, like all Bordieuan fields of cultural production, are simultaneously containable and uncontainable things, at its simplest, works of the horror mode are unified by their “intended capacity to raise a certain *affect*” (Carroll 1990: 14, original italics). This affect principally being horror, but also terror, panic, fear, shock, disgust, and dread.

Perhaps one of the most self-evident elements of horror is its sadism, the kind of perverse pleasure it finds in suffering. However, what is of key import in this chapter is that the suffering, and the pleasure derived from viewing that suffering, typically display a masochistic skew. Although Clover in her seminal work of horror criticism *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) spins a highly complex web of analysis of the nature of the male gaze in conventional horror, she establishes her exploration under the premise that there is “no doubt” about the pleasure of masochistic voyeurism in horror cinema (2015: 18). As she articulates, there is a pleasure which male viewers “may take in watching, from some safe vantage or other,

women screaming, crying, fleeing, cringing, and dying, or indeed the pleasure he may take in the thought of himself as the cause of their torment” (18-9). Further, as Clover also concisely identifies, the “causal gaze” or “doing gaze” of typical horror cinema, the one functionally serving the narrative present, is commonly hyper-masculine to the point of being “predatory” (173). That is, the gaze normalized by horror cinema—and it can be likewise contended horror literature—is an “assaultive” and “phallic gaze” (173).¹⁰⁸ As Williams likewise envisions in the opening sentence of her essay “When the Woman Looks” (1984)—a direct extension of Mulvey’s writings—“whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honour to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the eyes of their dates” (2015: 17). While this is a very gendered and dated image, as Williams goes on to state adroitly, if the woman wishes not to look it is because she is being asked to “bear witness to her own powerlessness” in cases of intense degradation and cruelty. Moreover, it is because the horror genre amplifies the look of the dominant male to such an extent that it “leaves no place for the woman’s own pleasure in seeing: she exists only to be looked at” (17), and, in turn, to (frequently) be hacked to pieces.

As Welsh concluded in a 2009 study of the slasher horror film—a subgenre of horror that amplifies its core traits and tropes—women are categorically more likely to be the victims of violence than men, and are generally the only victims of sexual violence.¹⁰⁹ As the study

¹⁰⁸ Clover’s study unpacks a vast number of horror films from both its ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ poles, and in doing so she explains that, in more open, progressive, and critically interesting texts, this masochistic voyeurism can also allow for the rare “representation of ‘feminine masochism’ in female form” (2015: 231). Likewise, it can afford men the ability to invest “in the victim-hero position” that is generally occupied by women in these films (235). These are broadly positive evaluations that, as this chapter evolves, will help to explain women’s interest in picking up the horror mantle. However, I find that her analysis stresses that it is only *some* horror films that encourage male spectators to feel “not only *at* but *through* female figures” (235, original italics)—which in the context of my thesis can also be interpreted as the ability to not only look *at* but *with* female figures—with more brazen and strange independent films able to achieve that which slicker, or more generic and derivative commercial films often cannot.

¹⁰⁹ Welsh’s analysis of 50 randomly selected slasher films is broken down into four different categories of violence: psychological, moderate, serious and sexual aggression, and it determined that women were the victims in 90.2%, 61.5%, 41.5% and 100%, respectively, of these violent interactions (2009: 13-

ascertained, the aesthetics of the violence they are subjected to is also different. These films showcase an “increased cinematic focus on depicting close-up states of prolonged terror” experienced by women and relish the violation of the female form to the extent that female characters are “likely to be featured as partially or fully naked and, when sexual and violent images are concomitantly present” (18). In essence, violent presentations of female suffering are both “significantly longer in duration” than those of men—which given the subgenre are also on offer in abundance—and are more likely to be filmed in close-ups to emphasise “the victim’s reaction and suffering” (19). If we are to speak of the male gaze in horror the fundamental level of voyeurism seems inviolable.

Horror also provides a fitting conclusion to this aesthetic study because, simply speaking, horror is aesthetics. Beyond its content, which can often be trite or rote, or even poorly conceived, horror flourishes in its manipulation of the medium, through its aesthetic qualities. Although audio-visual horror and print horror are generally perceived as being quite different, with the former often relying on the mode’s basest affective possibilities, its jump scares and now ubiquitous body horror, and the latter often tending towards the psychological frame and more gothic, ominous mood building, they share both affective and aesthetic tendencies. Hawkins describes horror as a genre which deliberately traffics in images that “violate” decency and are liable to cause “offence” (2000: 215), and which are designed to operate in direct opposition to the “homogenizing and harmonic universe of bourgeois visual culture” (212), something apparent in both books and films. It is interesting to recall here that this dissertation began with a correlation of aesthetics and beauty, and of course much art is

15). These are interesting results, which reflect that women are subjected to much more violence than men, and are—in the films sampled—the only victims of sexual violence. However, “more serious levels of physical force” are often “used in violent presentations involving male characters” reflecting their slight dominance in the category of serious aggression (15), and pointing to a strange phenomenon apparent in the slasher film, where men’s suffering is often gory but swift, and emotionally blank. This points to the paradoxical use of women’s pain in horror films, as both a tool for voyeurism and for emotional investment, another aspect of the mode that will be picked up on by female creators.

and has always been borne of the notion that its beauty may “suppress the horrors of the world” (Schoolman 2001: 93). Yet, as Schoolman notes, this is only ever an “illusion” (2001: 93) because art can only offer us ephemeral glimpses of beauty whilst the horrors of the world remain constant. In fact, in his compelling extension of Adorno’s work on art, reason and aesthetics, Schoolman describes art as a “missionary from a world of darkness unseen and unknown” (122). This is a striking image and one which I particularly enjoy. In this primarily aesthetic study, I would suggest that horror also proves to be of particular interest for women because of its unique disregard, even its disavowal of beauty. This is a mode which uses art not to ‘supress’ but to plunder the horrors of the world.

In this chapter, as with my previous chapter on thrillers, it should be noted that I will attempt to address horror both as a mode—that is, as an overarching category of ‘general poetics’ that can be made manifest across genres (Todorov 2014)—as a genre (one with particular rich and extensive aesthetic and thematic tropes), and also as an affect. Horror has long been considered as an affect, particularly alongside its twin cousin terror. As Anne Radcliffe argued, horror and terror, although often considered together, may be quite distinct:

Terror and horror are so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them (...) and where lies the difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity that accompany the first, respecting the dreading evil? (1826: 150)

This is not necessarily a universal taxonomy, although it has been adopted by horror giants like Stephen King who generally rank terror—this higher affective experience—above horror, but rank horror above revulsion. However, it is a way of thinking about the mode/genre distinction and the texts to follow by women, which I suggest harness both the faculty expanding terror affect and the viscerally annihilating horror affect in compelling and distinct ways.

Considering horror as a mode, genre, and affect also moves me to foreground Kristeva’s work in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), an influential analysis which frames much of the discussion that is to follow. For the sake of this discussion the abject is best

understood as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982: 4), including that between subject and object. As it pertains more explicitly to horror, the abject reflects an unsettled or liminal border between life and death made real by the materiality of the body. In other words, the “wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay”, reminds us that we are “at the border of (our) condition as a living being” (3). Interestingly, for Kristeva, in a binary this chapter has already touched upon, the abject is associated with both fear and *jouissance*—thus explaining the certain aesthetic and affective pleasures it may produce when made manifest in literature and art—however it is described as “a passion” of a “violent and painful” kind (9). For Kristeva, the abject is a defining feature of literature, with much of it rooted “on the fragile border” where “identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (207). As such, horror literature, with its “nocturnal power” and “power of fascination”, and which “decks itself out in the sacred power of horror”, seems to speak to us precisely because it involves “not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection” (208). In the mode as it exists today, these tensions between fear and pleasure certainly have gendered implications that this chapter will unpack. More than that, they speak to the complexities of the aesthetics of horror and remind us why it continues to deserve critical attention.

THE AESTHETICS OF HORROR: EXPLORING THE UNSETTLING LIMINAL IMAGES OF THE HORROR MODE

To an extent, we are all familiar with the principal images of horror and can evoke them in our minds eye: dark spaces, isolated spaces, haunted spaces, basements, derelict buildings, mental asylums (particularly abandoned ones), the uncaring wilderness, creatures lurking in the shadows and sometimes plain sight, the safe and known subverted, stormy weather and

flickering lights, disgusting insects, human beings literally stitched together to be the equivalent of disgusting insects, blood, gore, butcher's knives, phones beeping incessantly off the hook, hooked hands, deformed bodies and the all-important protracted suffering of a pretty, young, typically white girl. I could continue, but beyond such specific images it is more useful, as Carroll does, to provide a framework for the structures of horrific imagery. Though he concentrates his discussion purely on the figure of the horror monster, I believe the list of characteristics he develops can be extrapolated out to form a broader picture of the aesthetics of horror. Firstly, he identifies fusion (for example, the figure of Frankenstein) and fission (the dual figures of Jekyll and Hyde), or the transgression of boundaries and distinctions, as characteristic of the genre. He describes both as being "symbolic structures that facilitate—in different ways—the linkage of distinct and/or opposed categories, thereby providing vehicles for projecting the themes of interstitiality, categorical contradictoriness, and impurity" (1990: 47). I would suggest, however, that not only horror's monsters challenge and dissolve boundaries but the aesthetic of the genre itself.

As Kristeva's writing similarly establishes, horror relishes the collapsing of standard oppositions to live in liminal spaces. For instance, those between alive and dead, safety and danger, victim and victor, human and monster, sane and insane, dream state and wakefulness, normality and abnormality; likewise, between subject and object, and pain and pleasure. Carroll concurs that, beyond monsters, the "condens(ation) of different ontological orders" is a key horror aesthetic feature used to evoke ontological instability and thus fear and uncertainty. As he primarily addresses film aesthetics and *mise-en-scène*, Carroll also observes that "through such elements as editing, camera angle, lighting, and set design, the horror film problematizes the clarity and duration of the image in order to throw doubt on the viewer's perceptions and thereby throw knowledge into question" (155). However, this can also be easily applied to literature which applies narration, imagery and symbolism as its unsettling

tools of obfuscation. Beyond this, Carroll identifies other two linked structures, that of magnification (for example, gigantic spiders) and massing (hordes of zombies) (48-50), which are relatively self-explanatory. Carroll also introduces a final framework, which he calls horrific metonymy or the concomitant existence of the monster and a “*surround(ing)*” of “objects that we antecedently take to be objects of disgust and/or phobia” (51, original italics).

One aspect of the horror aesthetic that evokes this danger and disgust, as Kristeva’s writings on abjection also establish, is the way it resides in the body. This is a point best explored by Xavier Aldana Reyes in *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (2014), a text which reminds us that graphic imagery in horror is not the sole domain of cinema in the 21st century but in fact is made manifest in a collocation of literary horror subgenres including splatterpunk, new avant-pulp, and the slaughterhouse novel. Although interesting, I will not delve into the subtle intricacies of each of these styles, rather I include them here to underscore that while body horror has, to some extent, become ubiquitous in the genre—and, perhaps in ever-increasingly gory and visceral terms—“grotesquerie and explicitness” have always been “part and parcel of the gothic” (Reyes 2014: 2-3), even in its most circumspect, conservative and classic texts. Moreover, as Kristeva’s writings presuppose, the body and its margins, liminalities and transgressions is key to the affect of horror, including its bodily affect upon audiences. As Carroll identified with his horror metonymy, the corporeal quality of horror resides not only in the mode’s gothic bodies but in its “mise-en-scène and setting” and in the “structural manipulation of action in literature and of specific shots in film, especially in correlation with the generation of sympathy, empathy or somatic ties between fictional and real bodies” (170-171). The body is typically a very philosophically contested and aesthetically graphic site in horror, and as this chapter will explore, these representations of corporeality are intertwined with sexuality and gender.

It must be said that, beyond these conventional aesthetic features—and the ideas these aesthetic features may represent—horror has also given birth to a certain surrealism, a certain uncontainable and undefinable strangeness. Particularly cult horror cinema and its forays into the realm of the aesthetic/thematic bizarre and uncanny has come to emblemize the genre’s fluidity, its reflexivity and ultimately its instability in the face of any fixed lines of analysis. As Hawkins elucidates, horror operates as a kind of paracinema or paraliterature, one which deliberately fuses aspects of low and high art culture, not unlike the thriller mode that preceded this chapter. As a mode of paracinema/literature, horror can then also be understood at its core as a “reaction against the hegemonic and normalising practices” of “mainstream” and “dominant” forms of production (Hawkins 2000: 7). I’m drawn here to works like Dario Argento’s *Suspiria* (1977).¹¹⁰ This is a filmmaker who said—by all accounts completely unashamedly—“I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man” (in Clover 2015: 42), and in whose slasheresque works, Clover’s ‘assaultive gaze’ is on full display. And yet, there is also much more on display in these works. Argento is an undisputed aesthete and as Knee similarly observes, even *Suspiria*’s most masochistic moments—like the opening double murder—are so aesthetically rich and astounding in their eccentricity and artifice that “sadistic spectacle” becomes rather “sensory overload” or “pure sensual immersion” (251). Argento’s cinema is also one in which the image takes primacy, where the plot, which is typically—and rather gleefully—convoluted and often nonsensical, becomes subsumed by the aesthetic.

¹¹⁰Luca Guadagnino remade the film in 2018 into a work equally more visually gruesome and politically heavy than the original, trading Argento’s playful chaos and saturated, throbbing and almost uncontainable *mise-en-scène* into something still very stylistic but much more cold, calculated and wintry. The film divided critics, but for me Bradshaw evaluates the film best when he describes it as more an “MA thesis than a remake”, a film that loses “the spark of pure diabolical craziness of Argento” by being “determinedly upscale and uppermiddlebrow” and adding “indigestible new layers of historical meaning” (2018: online). With these remarks, Bradshaw places the film amongst a growing number of recent horror texts by men that arguably overintellectualize the mode and as such stifle its much richer and stranger qualities, a gendered distinction that I will evolve across this chapter.

Anything from David Cronenberg's corpus of body horror—a man I mentioned in my preceding chapter for the aesthetic tendencies exhibited in his masculine art thrillers—also evinces the undeniable oddity of horror. Although his body of work can also equally and easily be critiqued, as many feminist writers have, for its “misogynist” construction of the “monstrous female” (McLarty 2015: 259-260), this takes a too unilateral view of films which defy singularity. Ultimately much of the surface gendering of his films can be negated by the, to put it plainly, weirdness of his concepts. For instance, Geena Davis is both a screen beauty, a classic feminine foil and victim in waiting as Ronnie Quaipe in *The Fly* (1986), but Jeff Goldblum as Seth Brundle literally turns into a malformed fly who has to vomit on his own food to consume it, who picks off his own fingernails and whose ear, at one moment, just falls off unannounced mid scene.¹¹¹ One often gets the feeling when watching an Argento or Cronenberg horror film that that you are watching something right at the margins, something which utterly defies expectations and taste; and this is a space, as I will go on to suggest, in which female composers can, and have, also tapped into. Even Clover, who problematizes much of the genre from a feminist perspective still champions its “moments and works of great humour, formal brilliance, political intelligence, psychological depth” and its “kind of kinky creativity that is simply not available in any other stripe” of artmaking (2015: 20).

¹¹¹ Using a framework of male abjection following Kristeva, one can also interpret Seth Brundle—like many of Cronenberg's other male protagonists, including in his most recent organ growing performance artist Saul Tenser, played by Viggo Mortensen, in *Crimes of the Future* (2022)—as a manifestation of the dyadic tension between the male infant's repudiation of the maternal body and his dependence upon/fascination with it and, by extension, his own maternal (creators) lack. As Kristeva establishes, early in her analysis, abjection preserves the “immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be”, and the dissolved boundaries that her theory of abjection entails, in which the “other sex, impure, defiled”—meaning, the feminine/female/maternal—may “carve out” a presence on the male sex, provides an interesting counter reading of Cronenberg's male body horror (1982: 10, 100). More broadly, the way in which a theory of abjection proposes a “violent, clumsy breaking away” of the male ego from the maternal, and an ongoing process of “repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting” (13), speaks to the value of the body in body horror in representing complex psychoanalytical and biological tensions.

THE ROOTS OF FEMALE HORROR: CREATING SHARPER, CLEARER AND WEIRDER LITERARY AND FILMIC WORLDS

While this remains a primarily aesthetic rather than a thematic study, beyond this rich aesthetic strangeness, horror has also always been used as a social instrument. When distilled to their core many archetypal novels of the genre like *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897) represent that unwavering human fear of ‘the Other’ and how the other threatens to tear apart the very fabric of society, whilst other canonical works like *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James (1898) represent that no less potent fear of the other within ourselves and how it may equally threaten stability, security, predictability. As Gelder indicates, in the cases in which the horror genre is lauded, it is typically because the aesthetic of disturbance it “wilfully produces” is ultimately part of a much grander “disturbance of cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted” (2000: 3).

Female creators have, therefore, historically—and likewise more recently—used horror as feminist critique. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or the Postmodern Prometheus* (1818) is perhaps one of the most famous examples. Resembling more closely a pantheistic Romanticist-Gothicism aesthetic than a macabre, jump scare brand of horror, *Frankenstein* crafts a sterling feminist condemnation of men’s transgression of the natural order and the maternal power of women, and creates a mythos of a monster which has arguably been unsurpassed in Western literary culture. Another of the earliest works of distinct female horror is the atmospheric and hallucinogenic “strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths” of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s eponymous yellow wallpaper (1998: 33). Published in 1892, her suffocating vision of the isolation imposed upon women by a patriarchal medical system has become, as Nadkarni suggests, a kind of urtext for American feminism (2012: 218) that “cast(s) the narrator as a heroine who chooses to become mad rather than assume her proper place in the patriarchy” (219). Gilman’s aesthetic has also become equally influential, and her closing

symbolic image of her protagonist “creeping” “behind the pattern” (2008: online) exemplifies another liminal space, that between the real and the imagined, that horror, particularly female-authored horror, has come to occupy in Gilman’s wake.

However, throughout the 20th century there were also highly influential female horror writers who didn’t sharpen their thematic and aesthetic horror tools so overtly in the face of the patriarchy. Daphne du Maurier, whose work would become the bedrock for early horror cinema’s most famous name, Alfred Hitchcock, comes to mind, especially in her iconic short stories like “The Birds” (1952), notwithstanding her enduringly popular gothic novel *Rebecca* (1938). Shirley Jackson, who wrote the rulebook on contemporary haunted house horror with her 1959 classic *The Haunting of Hill House*, also stands as a salient example. The featured horror author of this chapter, Carmen Maria Machado, said candidly about Jackson’s novel that “it scared the shit out of me” and then, more academically, that its “particular brand of surreality” and its “careful prose” capture a world which is “sharper and clearer and weirder” than the one which we occupy (in Fassler 2017: online). A book of mixed critical reception but enduring popular recognition, Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), also helped to expand the scope of female horror in the 20th century, moving it in pulpier and both more violent and erotic directions. It is undeniable that all contemporary female writers and filmmakers owe, to at least some extent, a creative debt to their trailblazing predecessors. Yet, given that texts like du Maurier’s and Jackson’s are not feminist in nature, at least not conceptually, but are deeply influential, they helpfully pose the question of whether—beyond the heavily masculine legacy of the mode and high feminist era contrarian paradigms—women operating in the horror genre innately see differently and accordingly, represent that sight differently. And critically, if that difference in innate sight and perception can be fundamentally classifiable, can be ascertained and analysed, a concern which I have contemplated and grappled with in my preceding chapters.

In cinema, the list of female creators working in the genre of horror has tended to be a lot smaller and a lot more recent. Nevertheless, there are several directors whose aesthetic and thematic contributions to the 20th century canon are not to be ignored. One of the earlier films of note is certainly Amy Holden Jones' *The Slumber Party Massacre*, which, given its 1982 release date, occupies a constantly oscillating space between standard slasher flick and ironic feminist parody, a space not seen before and rarely seen since. Lamentably, however, the film has been rather unceremoniously relegated to the annals of B-grade cinema history and abjured by the critical community.¹¹² This is a sad indictment of the difficulties endured by female horror directors in the late 20th century, most clearly the struggle to strike new ground in the face of male-driven expectations of plot and aesthetic, especially taking into account the near immutable male hegemonic power structures at play in the film industry.¹¹³ Coevally, Kathryn Bigelow's solo directorial debut *Near Dark* (1987), a genre defying neo-Western vampire horror, has since attained cult status and drawn greater critical attention in recent years for its subversion of genre tropes and its infusion of a female subjectivity into the horror mode, or as Travers describes it, its ability to be a film that is equally "gorgeous and gory" (2002: online).

REFRAMING WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO HORROR: THE FEMALE GAZE FINDS ITS FOOTING IN A TRADITIONALLY MASCULINE MODE

In a dissertation that began with the tightly personal world of millennial expression, then shifted to the philosophical realm of metamodernism and the oneiric and pretty sphere of still

¹¹² Until some very recent, yet still exceptionally brief excavations of the film (Paszkievicz (2018) and McCollum and Clarke (2022) the closest preceding academic reference I found to *The Slumber Party Massacre* was in a footnote in Nowell's article about female viewership of slasher films (2011: 117).

¹¹³ This is not to discount women's power as the deliberate consumers (or not) of films, including horror films—which, although a less structurally entrenched form of power, does invariably exist in a dialogue with the studio system. Women's position as horror spectators exists also in a dialogue with women as horror creators, a point I will further develop in this chapter.

life texts, the shift to horror may seem at first to be particularly harsh or decidedly different. However, as with my prior chapter on the female-led thriller, despite the common masculine attachment to the genre of horror, there ultimately appears to be not such great stylistic dissonances between the nascent forms I have traversed and these latter, reimagined ones. Female-authored horror in many ways crystallises what my previous chapters have tried to understand about the nature of the 21st century female gaze and how it is made artistically manifest. While the male gaze has hitherto been, and arguably still is, the dominant gaze of horror—both within texts themselves and in the popular and critical discourses that surround these texts—the female gaze is increasingly finding its footing.

Before I begin to unpack how this transformation is taking place, it should be noted that this comment presupposes a certain heterosexual, and even a white male perspective. This observation can be applied to many of my references to the male gaze, although the problems/limitations with this generalisation call attention to itself more self-evidently here. At the outset of my research I said I would attempt to understand the female gaze and aesthetic beyond and even away from the shadow of the male gaze, and, as a consequence, I have arguably been less attentive to the nuances of the male gaze. However, in horror, I—like other critics—have thus far drawn a much more evident counterpoint between the dominant male and the (reactive or responsive) female gaze. As such, especially here, when I speak of the dominant male gaze in horror it should be affirmed that this has generally been a cisgender and heterosexual male gaze. However, just as the horror mode's inherent strangeness, abjectness and interest in aesthetic expression and affect makes it fertile for feminist, postfeminist, female and feminine reframings—a point I am only just beginning to establish—the same can be said of its usefulness to queer expression. There are several excellent very recent critical texts (both academic and popular) that unpack the relationship between horror and the queer community, including Elliot-Smith's *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the*

Margins (2016), Vallese's *It Came From the Closet: Queer reflections on Horror* (2022) and Waldron's *Queer Screams: A History of LGBTQ+ Survival Through the Lens of American Horror Cinema* (2022). As the early part of this chapter has established, this arguably historically misogynist genre—much like the thriller—has equally been availed of to develop subversive and feminist readings. So too, has horror often been outwardly homophobic and transphobic, yet with its body possessions, costumed villains, and general aesthetic of uncanniness, made itself equally accessible for queer counter readings and gazes.¹¹⁴

Both this rich possibility for counter readings and the surging prominence of the female gaze in horror first became most apparent to me during a re-watch of *Jennifer's Body* (2009), a film directed by the increasingly prolific thriller and horror director Karyn Kusama.¹¹⁵ Although Kusama's film is self-evidently weird and off-kilter, perhaps by the singular virtue of Megan Fox starring as its protagonist, it was—back in 2009—still heavily marketed as a kind of horror sex romp for heterosexual male teenagers, despite the also heavily marketed

¹¹⁴ Vallese's edited collection, in which featured queer author Carmen Maria Machado is also a contributor, suggests that "the threads between queerness and horror have never been this tightly knit nor this expansive" (Vallese 2022: 19). However, Vallese recognises that it is still often a process of queer readers and viewers "*reading (them)selves into*" the horror genre because "queerness in mainstream horror is permissible as long as it's determined by and filtered through the male gaze" (18, 16, original italics). What these recent critical texts attest to is that even for an Othered group, one marginalized by the dominant cisgender straight male gaze of horror, there can still be a paradoxical pleasure gained through the consumption of the mode. As a result, as Elliot-Smith's research showcases there are new completely queer horror subgenres evolving in the 21st century that take-up the queer pleasures that have already been associated with the horror genre, such as gay slasher horror, a subgenre which Elliot-Smith summarises as a field of "devil daddies and final boys" that both flips and maintains the genres more longstanding tropes (2016: 136). Thus, it could also be stated that, alongside the female gaze, the queer gaze is increasingly finding its footing in horror.

¹¹⁵ Kusama began to draw more critical acclaim and interest with her newer horror feature *The Invitation* (2015), and likewise with her thriller *The Destroyer* (2018), as mentioned in my last chapter. Her prior directorial credits include for her independent boxing sports drama *Girlfight* (2000), which she also wrote, and her adaptation of *Æon Flux* (2005). Both films evince her interest in strong female-centred action, although in the wake of studio changes she was removed from the latter by Paramount—who would go on to recut the film—for having made it into an "art film" (Vary 2016: online). Interestingly while *Girlfight* was generally well received by critics, *Æon Flux* was resoundingly panned.

attachment of up-and-coming female writer Diablo Cody to the project.¹¹⁶ However, *Jennifer's Body* is actually, arguably, constructed almost entirely for young female viewers, a romp yes—in its own twisted way—but also a bitter portrayal of the pitfalls of female friendship, of sexual violence, victimhood and of the social structures which typically reinforce this victimhood, in sum a revenge fantasy rather than a sex fantasy.

Now, *Jennifer's Body* is being revisited by critics and social commentators, and it tells a different story. Despite being an un-academic analysis, it is challenging to find a better summary of the resurgence or reclamation of *Jennifer's Body* than Grady's 2018 *Vox* article *How Jennifer's Body Went From a Flop in 2009 to a Feminist Cult Classic Today*.

It's become a case study in what we value in movies and what we dismiss, and how those values can shift over the course of a decade (...) In 2018, other critical voices have gotten louder and more prominent. The straight male gaze is no longer the default gaze (...) other voices are in a position to set the conversation. And that means stories that are designed first and foremost for women, that strive to create a female gaze, aren't assumed to be failures as a default. These movies can be taken on their own terms. So nine years after she arrived and was rejected, Jennifer is back. She lives again. (online)

To say that *Jennifer's Body* is a 'feminist cult classic', isn't to say that its content or message is built upon a profound condemnation of rape culture and the systemic cultural and political forces that work to marginalise women's experiences of abuse because, at its close, it's hard to assert that that's exactly what the film is doing or is universally about. To claim it is 'feminist' in our postfeminist milieu is to say that there is something distinctly female woven into the film itself, something feminine in its aesthetic. To take a brief tangent, it is interesting to observe that, even in this still heavily masculinised mode of artmaking, in little over a decade—half of the timeframe that forms the parameters of this dissertation—such a noticeable generic and audience reception evolution has occurred, leading to an utterly altered reception of *Jennifer's Body*. Much as with the millennial speak mode—which has evolved and reached a

¹¹⁶ Prior to *Jennifer's Body* Diablo Cody had drawn acclaim for her memoir, *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper* (2005) and her academy award winning script for *Juno* (2007), both of which—like *Jennifer's Body*—reflect her sincere yet quirky and dark comedic voice.

state of peak popularity and production even within the short number of years this dissertation has been being written—the very recent changes to horror about and by women suggests that, in the 21st century, genres and aesthetics may experience only the most ephemeral periods of stasis before they evolve again.

There is then, typically, an overriding perception—one which in part I have similarly given some credence to in my opening paragraphs—that horror is an almost emphatically male genre. It is only more recent studies such as Pinedo’s memorable *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997) which have condemned this dominant gendered critique of horror. Pinedo suggests that this essential equation of horror with maleness, has almost exclusively “center(ed) the male” audience and “neglect(ed) the question of female audience pleasure” in the horror mode to the point which it has become a “structuring absence” of horror criticism (70). Pinedo decrees that she wants her analysis to disrupt the “facile assumption that the genre does not speak to women but only about them, and that it does this in a degrading manner” (70) and she certainly achieves this. Pinedo opines that the pleasure experienced by female consumers of horror operates on a thematic level, whereby certain horror texts restage the relationship between women and violence “as not only one of danger in which women are objects of violence but also a pleasurable one in which women retaliate to become the agents of violence and turn the tables on their aggressors” (6); this can, through figures like the ‘final girl’, also explicitly lead to a reversal of the gaze to the extent which hers dominates the antagonists (76).¹¹⁷ It is also through the aesthetic plane that female

¹¹⁷ Following Clover’s introduction of the final girl, there has been a wealth of research into the figure. In short, the final girl is the girl who remains alive at the end of a horror film. Normally she is the sole survivor. In Clover’s original conception, she read the final girl as a “boyish” figure, an interpolation of feminine and masculine traits, and a spectatorial source of identification for the genre’s majority young male viewers (2015: 40). However, since Clover’s original analysis the final girl has evolved significantly in horror novels and films in the 21st century, and now exists as a character trope that is both vital to the horror genre while also existing beyond it. Today, the final girl—whose identity has often been positively broadened to encompass new gender, sexuality, race, and class intersections—remains central to its spectatorial alignment and experience and therefore “demonstrate(s) the horror

viewers may gain pleasure. The preoccupation of the genre with gazing and with the voyeuristic act of looking is unchallengeable but Pinedo suggests that the locus of “the pleasure of recreational terror” is in fact at the point of “tension between not (fully) seeing, the pleasure of recoil, and seeing (more fully), the pleasure of the gaze” (54). In this vein, she suggests that while other critics, such as Clover and Williams, whom I have previously cited here, assume that “women are either absent or cringing in distress” (70) they can rather gain the same carnal pleasure of viewing as a man—much like, she correlates, with pornography (60-5)—although their pleasure is generally considered taboo.

Short, working in Pinedo’s legacy, likewise suggests that this doggedly held belief that the male gaze and male pleasure overrides all else in horror has become a kind of “intellectual impasse” (2007: 12) which has prevented a meaningful exploration of the potential for a female gaze within the existing horror paradigm. Specifically, she suggests that critics have failed “ask what images have been produced, in what context they have developed, and what they might mean to women” (12). Although curiously neither Short nor Pinedo make a particular distinction between the gender of the writer or director of the films they explore, which tend to be men, as Short articulates, even male-authored horror—especially contemporary works which tend to be more female-centric and sympathetic (2)—may offer transgressive potential for, as she terms it, the female misfit. Further, her idea about the interpretability of images, or the female subjectivity which can be brought even to texts constructed by men, is useful in understanding the space which women creators have increasingly taken in the world of horror. Short declares that “women take precedence in horror” (3) and for all the misogyny and degradation and hyper sexualisation which exists in male-authored horror—and is not to be

film’s potential for ideological renewal and reinvention” (Paszkievicz and Rusnak 2020: 8). For a more complete study on the various contemporary iterations of the final girl Paszkievicz and Rusnak’s edited collection *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture* (2020) is indispensable.

swept under the rug—she is right. In many ways, if Bela Lugosi is to be believed, as per the epigraph of this chapter, they always have.

Beyond a subjective affirmation that women can and have occupied a central position in horror—at least in film—verified and measured proof substantiates what Short attests. The aptly titled Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient (GD-IQ) is a technology which is capable of ascertaining, not only, a film character’s gender but of measuring to a fraction of a second how long characters of each gender speak and appear on-screen.¹¹⁸ In a recent Google study, this technology was applied to a study of the 100-highest grossing American films of 2014-16 and quantified that “men are seen and heard nearly twice as often as women” in mainstream cinema (Google 2020: online). While this statistic comes as no great surprise, it came at least as a surprise to me that there is actually one genre in which women are at least seen if not necessarily heard on screen more than men: horror.

Books like *Woman in Fan* (2022) coordinated by Mónica García Massagué on behalf of the Sitges Festival Internacional de Cinema Fantàstic de Catalunya also remind me that—although I have built this dissertation with an the authorial underpinning of auteur theory—film should still be understood on collaborative terms. Thus, although female film directors have been (and continue to be) far fewer in number than men, particularly in genre filmmaking like horror, there is a great precedent for female contributions to the field, particularly in makeup, costuming and art direction.¹¹⁹ In literature is less easy to algorithmically quantify the

¹¹⁸ The GD-IQ is a technological innovation of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The actor’s non-profit research organisation studies gender representation in media, particularly in film and television, and conducts advocacy work that promotes the equal representation of women on screen.

¹¹⁹ This book also reminds any academic that, especially when it comes to matters of genre fiction and film, cultural commentators, film festival directors and film reviewers like García Massagué can often offer an alternative encyclopaedic picture of the genre which far surpasses a text like mine in its density and fan-like knowledge of the minutiae of the field. In my case, *Woman in Fan* (2022), makes reference to many of the 21st century female writer-directors I do, and upholds many of my suppositions in this chapter, although it also features and proposes many more films, which—given the focused nature of my analysis—I have been unable to include. McCollum and Clarke’s edited collection *Bloody Women: Women Directors of Horror* (2022) also gives significant space to “the importance of female-centric

participation of women (whether as victims or as protagonists), and preeminent horror writers often write about women in contestable ways (or not at all). For example, in interviews, Stephen King has described his iconic female lead Carrie as a stand-in for his own adolescent *male* angst, furthering Clover's argument that that the "adolescent males hold pride of place" as the key horror spectator (2015: 6). However, taking the aesthetic crossovers that this dissertation has hitherto posited, and I believe, upheld, even those male-authored novels which don't reflect a particular interest in women may still reflect images of horror—its monsters, locations, ambience—that have been informed by the contributions of women in the medium of film, which may thus reflect women's interest in the mode in a 21st century context.¹²⁰

THE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE HORROR AESTHETIC: CRAFTING GENERICALLY PLAYFUL TEXTS OF HIGH ART, LOW GROTESQUE AND CHILLING NORMALITY

How are then female creators in the 21st century transforming women's role in horror and what are the aesthetic features they are using to do so? As Barbara Creed proposes in her influential essay on the monstrous feminine, horror is, as I earlier attested, a genre more obsessed with *mise-en-scène* than any other (excluding perhaps the Sofia Coppola and Rachel Cusk realm of still life); she describes it as fundamentally "a *mise-en-scène* of desire—in which desire is for

horror film festivals, horror curators, and industry champions", as a kind of adjunct to the growing body of female horror that helps these new voices to flourish and find new audiences (Bogutskaya 2022: 167). As Paszkiewicz adds, "women have historically been excluded (from horror cinema) both industrially and through film criticism" (2018: 9), underscoring the fact that there is a certain reciprocity between industry structures, which can either support or—as it has been historically—silence female creators working in horror. This also furthers Bogutskaya's assertion that, therefore, it is often female fans, festival directors, and similar (like García Massagué) who can challenge these hegemonic structures and find new female-centric spaces for the creation and appreciation of female horror. Spaces in which the genre will undoubtedly continue to aesthetically evolve in coming years.

¹²⁰ The same goes of the men of cinema who have likewise worked behind and beyond the camera to craft its monsters and settings, such as Tom Savini who worked in special effects and makeup on George A. Romero's most notable horror entries (including his *Night of the Living Dead* series), as well as for cult horror films like the *Friday the 13th* franchise. Indisputably, Savini can be said to have contributed to the visual vocabulary of both horror films (and horror novels) that exists today, in particular working as a contributing influence for its new outposts of body horror and its representation of gore.

the abject” (2007: 154, original italics), taking up Kristeva’s assertion. Although again without particular consideration of the gender of the composer, only the spectator, Creed suggests, however, that most self-aware or self-reflexive contemporary horror rather “sets out to explore the perverse, masochistic aspects of the gaze” (154), that is, that these images can have more than one function. Certainly, I would further her notion to propose that this level of meta-gazing, this interrogation of the masochism inherent in horror is particularly evident in contemporary works by female artists. Given her line of research into monstrosity, Creed also focuses on the “*femme castratrice*” who “controls the sadistic gaze” thereby making “the male victim (...) her object” (153). This reversal of the fundamental premise of most horror: with woman as monster and man as prey, and the requisite shift in gaze which accompanies this narrative shift, it is perhaps the most obvious choice of device by female composers, particularly those with more typically feminist intentions, and it is both a useful starting place and an oversimplification.¹²¹

Firstly, contemporary female horror—as with the other genres of this dissertation—abounds in pastiche and fluidity. As Schubart claims, “like postmodernism, postfeminism has a playful engagement with styles and performances” because it rejects the notion that there is a singular “‘essence’ of femininity” (2018: 115); a correlation which has now been well established in my research. Likewise, given that horror has always been a genre predicated on the dissolution and dismantling of borders and taste, and with this—as previously discussed—kind of curious dimension of cult oddity, I contend that female writers and directors have seized upon the possibilities of the aesthetically rich and open playground of horror. I use the word

¹²¹ In fact, few works by women have female antagonists terrorize men because, as many critics identify, their relationship to horror as spectators is more complex than that. Paszkiewicz appropriates the title of Williams’ essay—that which I featured at the start of this chapter—stating “we need to ask what happens not only *when the woman looks*, but also *when the woman directs*” (2018: 150, original italics). In her answer, she proposes that, rather than “*undoing genre*”, or literally flipping the script, women in horror instead tend to productively include “a female perspective” and a female gaze that “provide(s) women spectators with an aesthetic access to violence and anger” (171-182, original italics).

playground here because of Schubart's compelling interpretation of horror as play, and likewise suggest that women use horror as play, just as men have and do (111-2). Thus, it can be proposed here that female-authored horror deliberately invites complexities and blurred boundaries. Although Schubart, like Pinedo and Short, doesn't explicitly delve into the gender of the composers of horror texts either—and as such more broadly discusses the precedent of what she terms “creative horror”, texts with self-referential elements of meta-play or meta-emotions (146)—I would take upon her notion to suggest that in the still limited pool of female horror, this interrogation of the aesthetic of horror itself has become characteristic. The superb Iranian film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) serves well here. A genre defying mixture of spaghetti western, vampire horror and expressionism filmed in stark black and white and with intensely minimal dialogue, Ana Lily Amirpour's film is not only an aesthetic marvel, but one in which the monstrous feminine manages to eclipse the dominant binary of predator-prey and as such her own gender. Similarly, Helen Oyememi's whole oeuvre, but particularly works like her 2009 novel *White is for Witching* is a curious blend of ghost narrative and superstitious fantasy, underscored by a dark social realism, and a testament to the idea of the postfeminist horror aesthetic as a space of simultaneous genre and gender deconstruction. Carmen Maria Machado's work—as will be seen in detail in this chapter—is likewise defined by its rich melange of horror forms.

As with the thrillers that I detailed in my previous chapter—as a mode which has typically been aligned with commercial interests and popular rather than literary or auteur texts—the work of women in horror this century has also deliberately blended the genre's pulpiest and most aesthetically and ideologically rigorous dimensions in its search for new stylistic ground. Novels like Gina Wohlsdorf's *Security* (2016) fit this bill as a tale that lets serial killers loose in bloody fashion in a luxury resort named Manderley, an homage to the setting of du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Wohlsdorf balances a bold, pulpy narrative voice with

innovative security camera stream descriptions written in a literal narrative split-screen, and furnishes her novel with just as much realistic disgust through her attention to the details of excessive wealth and ego as to the details of her dead bodies. Japanese horror writer Asa Nonami in *Bødy* (2012) likewise reinvigorates body horror with her simultaneously thoughtful and grotesque depictions of the bodily realities of being—each chapter focuses on a different story framed through a body part—and through her crash-close endings that leave readers without closure or resolution. Likewise, Lauren Beukes’ richly layered *Broken Monsters* (2014) balances “profoundly terrifying” grisly murders with “unhindered, exuberant” prose, bitter social satire and intricate characterisation in a way that Schaub says makes it “very much a novel of the present” (2014: online). Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2007) and its poetic blend of horror and beauty, also seems to herald a new aesthetic possibility in female horror. It is one that reflects what Kristeva proposed, that “the ‘poetic’”—a mode of expression she has elsewhere associated with women—and its “unsettlement of analytic utterance”, testifies to its “closeness to, cohabitation with, and ‘knowledge’ of abjection” (1982: 30).

There has also been a flourishing of ultra-contemporary horror cinema by women in recent years that is both undeniably arthouse in character whilst also imbibing heavily on the grotesque images and motifs of low horror texts of the 20th and 21st century. In particular figures like French writer-director Julia Ducournau have crafted uniquely powerful pieces of female horror that both conform to and defy generic and auteurial expectations. The aptly named horror reviewer David Fear said of her debut feature film *Raw* (2016), that “in terms of the female-body politic, it’s an art-horror dirty bomb” (2017: online) and it’s true that the film’s intensely symbolic thrust, its simultaneously cold and erotic mood and its veritable rampage of gore prove an incredibly remarkable combination. Her 2021 Cannes winner *Titane*, in reviewer A. O. Scott’s words, “consolidates a filmmaking style based on visceral shock, grisly absurdism and high thematic ambition” (2021: online). The images of “stroboscopic

aggression” (online) that the film comprises emblemize a growing collective interest in how horror can be as sensorially as it is intellectually challenging, and Ducournau uses them to violently stage questions about bodily transgressions and transcendence; of nothing less than gender, love and humanity.

Perhaps slightly less likely to remain in the annals of cinematic achievement, but still interesting for this discussion, are also very recent works like Mimi Cave’s *Fresh* (2022), which casts *Normal People*’s Daisy Edgar Jones in a deadpan urban millennial dating filmic sigh-come-cannibal torturer remote house escape film. *Fresh* meets the ideological conventions of the growing social thriller or social horror mode with “B-movie absurdity” and harmonises it through an atmosphere of predominately “chilling normality” (Lee 2022: online). Despite its macabre premise, the film also uses actual visual gore sparingly and instead makes space for space for unsettling oddities like dreamy dance scenes set to breathy French electro pop. Likewise, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022) by Halina Reijn, based upon a spec script by horror writer Kristen Roupenian, renovates the slasher horror film by combining a frenetic pile up of—as the title suggests—bodies, with its attention to highly orchestrated Instagram-esque mise-en-scènes and the character development of its menagerie of flawed and privileged messy millennial woman Gen Z progenies.

There is good reason that female writers and filmmakers may want to consider how the gory imagery of the genre can collide with provocative high concepts, particularly considering the female body’s longstanding association with images of ‘gruesome’ physical pain, but also, in a counter reading, power. In this vein, Harrington has some particularly compelling insights about the subgenre or style of *gynaehorror*, which she describes as a “value-laden mode of aesthetic expression and cinematic representation that denigrates the female body and defines it foremost by its reproductive capacities in a manner that is negative and damaging” (2018: 9). This form can alternately employ standard horror ‘gross out’ visuals, which amplify

women's reproductive bodies in terms of their "sexed-ness, their reproductivity, their unruly fecundity and their maternal fleshiness" (10) or use more conceptual imagery which focuses on abstractions, elisions and fragmentations of the "body-image" of women (11). Whilst this may be read misogynistically, as Harrington explains, women's bodies, particularly their reproductive capacity, have tended to be sanitised if not outright censored.¹²² Thus, another dimension of the contemporary female horror aesthetic could certainly be defined as the reclamation of the visceral on female terms. Alice Lowe's black comedy slasher horror *Prevenge* (2016)—which plays with both a Creedesque monstrous feminine and the aforementioned genre fluidity—is an aesthetically unvarnished, dry and yet fearlessly grotesque portrayal of the autonomy stripped from women by society during pregnancy.

While Pinedo herself does not expressly consider female artists, her return to very Satrean and Mulveyesque language and her identification of this dialectic unique to horror, that between "seeing and not seeing" (1997: 51), particularly as it pertains to violent imagery, also illuminates much about the contemporary female aesthetic in horror. In particular, I find this tension she introduces fascinating, because I would suggest that most female composers of critical commendation play with what is shown and what is hidden in ways their male counterparts tend not to, perhaps stemming from a marked difference in the perception of what is actually horrifying or in a fundamental provocation of the ideas of pleasure and gazing themselves. I'm thinking here of Kristin Roupenian's *You Know You Want This* (2019). Including the world's first viral short story, "Cat Person", much of her collection exposes a kind of grimy horror which lurks just beneath the surface of every mundane female experience, in which where horror is not far-fetched, nor gory, but just the bleak reality of degradation, dismissal and cruelty waiting behind every tinder date. These are moments of painful intimacy,

¹²² I'm prone to think of advertisements for menstrual products here, which traditionally replaced women's menstrual blood with a sterilised and distinctly un-bodily blue goo.

of teeth gritting awkwardness that aesthetically utilise voyeurism as a guiding principle to simultaneously enhance the collection's dark cynicism and expose its cold, dehumanising quality. Away from the shock and fanfare, the typical thrill of horror, Roupenian's writings end with things as simple and yet chilling as a text message saying "whore" (2017: online), a more muted but much more relatable horror. Likewise, there are those works, such as Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (2018), the first featured text I will analyse in depth here, which also call pleasure into question through a similar brand of unflinching realism and its interest in the relationship between looking at and looking away.

POSTFEMINIST HORROR: A NEW CHALLENGE TO AND A TRANSFORMATION OF THE AESTHETIC PLEASURES OF HORROR

Like the paradoxical acid feminine aesthetic of many of the thrillers I introduced in the previous chapter, as critics like Whitney suggest, there is also an unsettled and often tumultuous aesthetic of brightness and terror and the very real and the surreal in female-authored horror texts of the 21st century. It is an aesthetic that both "critique(s) postfeminism's candy-coloured world and uneasily live within it" and that "unsettle(s) the glossy postfeminist surface" (Whitney 2016: 2, 167). Although Whitney recognizes, as I have, that there are texts in this growing canon of new horror that are academically rigorous, others, as she says best, "cleave to conventions of genre fiction" (3), at least in part. Yet, she stresses that they are "united in their bleakness", their denial of "straightforward aesthetic pleasures" and the affects of "anxiety, fear, anger" and "despair" that they produce (3). As Altman would attest, all texts contain a certain generic multivalency. As he observes, through metaphor, in the case of film:

Every screen moment is caught up in a multidimensional loom, in which several elements—foreground and background, shot scale and lighting, *mise en scène* and editing, dialogue and music—are woven together into a multidimensionally reversible fabric. With each new juxtaposition new connections are made, and concepts are reinforced or relegated to storage, potentially leading to that magic moment of conceptual reframing where the

spectator-weaver presses on the pedal, raising some threads while lowering others and thus initiating a new series of juxtapositions and reframings. (1999: 136, original italics)

In short, he argues that texts have inherently polygeneric strategies, which can only be evaluated when their status as “interlaced narratives characterised by multiple intersections and juxtapositions” is acknowledged (136). In the wake of postmodernism—which as this dissertation has similarly presupposed is now in our collective aesthetic rear-view mirror—Altman states that “generic destabilisation” is more common (142). He suggests however, through another evocative metaphor, that, when we see this generic multivalency, what we may be seeing is the “liquid lava of a new genre still in the creation process” (143). In the context of this dissertation—which has charted several such still molten new genres or modes—it seems plausible that contemporary horror by women, and the new forms of feminine sight they are manifesting, may in time lead to a new or distinct genre yet to be named, one that fuses beauty and ugliness, and rewrites the aesthetic of fear.

For now, it seems clear that in various, although broadly similar ways, today’s texts “drag women’s ongoing experiences of spectacular violence up from the basement, forcing our postfeminist culture to confront the monsters it denies” (Whitney 2016: 22). Yet interestingly—and arguably unlike their male colleagues—their texts don’t seem to quite fall under the new header of social or ‘elevated’ horror (another liquid lava genre or subgenre in the making perhaps). Critics seem to agree that Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) has ushered in a new era of horror storytelling, one which is particularly evident in film, but is also apparent in literature. *Get Out* has rightly been extolled for its Afro-pessimism aesthetic, and it is awash with a terrifying whiteness. It is a film that rewrites horror tropes and the horror geography of suburbia to make plain that “for African Americans, horror is not a genre, but a structuring paradigm” (Poll 2018: 70). However, despite the individual merits of *Get Out*, as an increasingly dominant form this type of social horror has been critiqued by female critics like Fraser who points out that, “by dressing this genre up, it actually does it a disservice” (2019:

online). Dowd made the same point in his review of Alex Garland's most recent thriller *Men* (2022). He calls the film "scarily obvious" and condemns the rise of horror films that masquerade as dissertations, and that "strive, loudly and unsubtly, to be about something scarier than a sharp knife or sharp fangs" (2022: online). As he describes of *Men*:

anyone who's watched a few horror movies this past decade will know what our poor heroine is up against. She's being hunted by (gasp!) a fearsome, oversized metaphor. Is there a more prolific monster in all of modern cinema? The ghastly metaphor prowls the multiplex and the art house alike, shapeshifting like the creature from *The Thing* to accommodate the allegorical needs of high-minded film-makers everywhere. (online)

Interestingly, amongst the films by male directors he eviscerates, he commends my featured director Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) as an example of a film that reflects how horror can be both meaningful, immediately sensory and tangibly new and surprising, without becoming didactic.

This seems to be another distinction between women and men operating in the mode in the 21st century. The years 2019 and 2020 alone witnessed big horror films directed by men go heavily didactic and, as Kuhn might say, inflexibly tendentious (1994).¹²³ This is a distinction epitomised by films like Peele's racially-charged follow-up *Us* (2019), Gaztelu-Urrutia's gruesome capitalism condemnation *The Platform* (2019), Bush and Renz's stirring slavery indictment horror *Antebellum* (2020), and Whannell's reimagined *The Invisible Man* (2020), which one male critic (not wrongly) described as "a bracingly modern #MeToo allegory that, despite its brutal craft, rings hollow" (Coyle 2020: online). Yet the women working in horror,

¹²³ As previously established, in Kuhn's writing she generally separates "tendentiousness and feminine cinematic writing", positing a certain incompatibility between them (1994: 170). Interestingly, in the context of this inquiry into 'social horror', Kuhn also establishes that even more ideologically feminist texts (principally the 20th century films that she studies) seem able to balance openness with their political rationale. As she explains, even these feminist texts—perhaps because of an innate feminine quality—seem to embed a deconstructive quality that allows "the spectator to negotiate his or her own position" (170). It is this openness and possibility of negotiating one's own ideological position that seems most clearly to me to be erased in these new male-authored works of one-note social horror. This is arguably what limits their interest as works of the horror genre, a genre which—as established—generally thrives when it destabilises normalcy in unpredictable and affective ways.

post-*Get Out*—several of whom I have mentioned in this chapter—have rarely been associated with the new label, and while their texts are formally and conceptually elevated, and socially attuned, they also tend to be far less singular and heavy-handed both aesthetically and thematically. While they do offer honest and brutal visions of women’s experiences—like their female thriller colleagues, and in comparable ways to the other female-contoured modes of this dissertation—they make a structural and fundamental inquiry into the style of story that is used to encase these experiences. In doing so, they arrive at a style that is evolving, but is perhaps best categorised for now as postfeminist horror.

JENNIFER KENT, *THE NIGHTINGALE* (2018): CHALLENGING PAIN-TO-PLEASURE PARADIGMS

When Jennifer Kent’s sophomore film *The Nightingale* debuted at the Sydney Film Festival in 2019, it was to significant controversy. During the film’s two premiere screenings “outraged cinemagoers (...) stormed out” of two of Sydney’s largest cinemas in protest of the film’s “graphic rape and murder scenes” (Thomas 2019: online). I was lucky—or depending on your penchant for the horror genre, unlucky—to be at one of those screenings, and the atmosphere in the cinema was palpable. One particularly disgruntled female patron shouted repeatedly “she’s already been raped twice” (in Thomas 2019: online) before joining a chorus of walkouts.

One need only to briefly consult film reviews of *The Nightingale* to see the same phrases appear time and again. A.O. Scott called the film “relentless”, “oppressive”, a depiction of “endless cruelty” (2019: online). Collins described it as “disquieting” and “deliberately violent”, a film that “can never feel good”, nor, as he stated, is supposed to (2019: online). According to Ide it was “harrowing”, “profoundly unsettling” and without “mercy” (2019:

online), O'Malley labelled the film “brutal”, “gruelling” and “violent” (2019: online) and Buder summarised it as a “bloody, brutal, and unforgiving” trifecta, an “unflinching” work of horror (2019: online). Many of these reviews also similarly mention walkouts, whether at Venice Film Festival, Sundance, or standard cinema screenings, which paints quite an indicting picture. While Hawkins’s study of art horror expresses the sentiment that we need “real artists”, “real goremeisters, offensive people whom we’re ‘prone to detest’” (2000: 215)—there is a certain kind of mettle in writing, directing and co-producing nothing less than “the most shocking film of the year” (Flood 2019: online).

Prefaced by only one short horror film, *Monster* in 2005, the Australian-born Jennifer Kent’s (b. 1969) cinematic debut as writer and director for *The Babadook* could also have been my principal text here. In it, the film’s protagonist Amelia is plagued by the violent death of her husband, who was killed in a car accident whilst driving her to the hospital to give birth to their son Samuel. The film charts Samuel’s fear of The Babadook, a monster he believes to be lurking in their house, and Amelia’s own slipping sanity in the face of the monster’s terrorization. Dark, desaturated, claustrophobic and disorientating, yet poetic in aesthetic and structure, Kern stated that the film was Sundance Film Festival’s “most frightening” work of horror the year it debuted, but also articulated that unlike most horror cinema, the film had a tremendous emotional weight (2014: 63). Its terror resides in the intersection of muted realism and the fantastically monstrous, and of the darkness which burbles in Amelia and her world beneath the fragile veneer of suburban mundanity. To let her speak in her own words, as she says to son Samuel, “Sometimes... I just wanna smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out” (*The Babadook*: 1:09:20-1:09:28).¹²⁴

¹²⁴ It is this combination of the film’s blunt emotional stakes with its deep strangeness that cemented its popularity within horror circles, and accorded it this rare level of academic interest. In this aesthetic study it must also be stated that the presentation of the film’s eponymous monster is a key dimension of the film and its affect, and displays many of the aesthetic tendencies that have been asserted above, like the fusion of the deeply real and uncanny. A stark contrast to the grim, dim faded texture of the

This same honest darkness is certainly on display in *The Nightingale*, which Kent also wrote and directed. The film follows Clare, an Irish convict, played by Irish actor Aisling Franciosi, as she stalks a British officer named Hawkins, played by British actor Sam Claflin, through the Tasmanian wilderness, determined to take revenge upon him for the agonising act of violence he and his underlings committed against her family, raping her and killing both her husband and baby. To make the journey, she enlists the help of an Aboriginal tracker, Billy, a displaced young man with his own traumatic past whose birth name is Mangana. As the two parties thread through the Tasmanian bush in search of the other, each commits almost unfathomable acts of violence until a final confrontation in the north of the state in Launceston leaves Mangana and Hawkins dead. Thematically, the film covers moving and horrific ground underscoring Clare's personal experiences of violence with the violence committed against Indigenous Australians. It is against this harrowing backdrop of malice and abject suffering that Clare's own unfathomable pain is brought to life. The film plunders the darkest depths of the human psyche, tapping into a well of almost unending human cruelty and apathy as it viscerally displays the frailty of civilisation and the anarchic rottenness that grows in its cracks.

Beyond these brutal themes, the film functions as a pure aesthetic experience, creating a suffocating cinematic atmosphere imbued fully with this cruelty. Visually dependent on the Tasmanian wilderness, the film presents a dark, labyrinthine, bewildering, primordial space. Perhaps owing to its 1835 setting, there is a certain 19th century styled sublimity evident in the

film as a whole, *The Babadook* is a cartoonish surreal monster, top hatted and spiky, a kind of distended and exaggerated picture of a child's imagination. Interestingly, in mid-2017, a couple of years after the film's release, *The Babadook* itself was appropriated to become a "frightening, fabulous new gay icon", as media commentators increasingly observed its inherent "camp sensibilities" (Orbey 2017: online). Amongst the internet the frenzy, one salient image was of a redressed Babadook wearing a cropped slogan tee that said 'GET READY TO BE BABASHOOK', and adorned with a royal purple feather boa, rainbow stripe suspenders and glittery pink flamingo glasses. This 'Babadiscourse' speaks again to the transgressive potential of the horror genre, especially in terms of gender, queerness, and sexuality. Likewise, it invites the sense that Kent's vision as a filmmaker is both aesthetically commanding and singular, but still with that "multi-layeredness" that Bainbridge spoke of as being characteristic of contemporary female cinema (2008: 195) that allows it to be so subjectively interpreted.

film, in which nature, in its boundlessness, is perceived as being suffused with “formlessness, suffering and dread” (Eco 2004: 281). This dread is amplified by the film’s grayscale grading, where lush greens exist only in flickers amongst a ceaseless, charcoal world, one in which much of nature seems gnarled and dead. Often the only colour is red, the red blood which spills freely, splattering and seeping across both man and land, and that of the soldiers’ uniform which likewise appear like a stain upon the earth. The film’s 1.37:1 Academy aspect ratio further establishes this opposing tension, creating a pervasive claustrophobia in which trees that stretch beyond the frame become like prison bars, and in which the wild landscapes, often truncated as they are, mesh into an indistinguishable oneiric monotony. Compounded by Clare’s central position in the frame, Kent utilises this, as Bazin terms it, painterly “centripetal” ratio, rather than the now-standard “centrifugal” openness of widescreen cinema (2005: 166) to both suffocatingly enclose the filmic space and draw us into Clare’s pain, while taunting us with the dangers that lie beyond the defined black bars that line the screen.

Much of this aligns fairly neatly with the expectation of a horror film. Kent often employs familiar iconography like a full moon shifting behind bare, claw-like silhouetted tree branches or macabre nightmare sequences, steeped in black and punctuated by disorientating arc shots. So too does she use cinematic night and the distortive flickering shadows of firelight as her prevailing lighting scheme. More notable however, is the film’s expungement of normative horror features. In fact, most of those same reviewers who affirmed the film’s cultivation of horror, dread and cruelty, also readily acknowledged its subversion of form. Specifically they recognised, the way it subverts the sentimentality that typically accompanies movies about vengeance that allow us to take comfort or reassurance in the narrative (Scott 2019: online), the way it resists the “Oscar-baiting” “Hollywood weepie” standard of trauma films (Flood 2019: online), and the way it eschews the redemptive or glorifying characteristics of period films to instead depict the “cold, honest, harrowing truth” of the “hell” that was that

time and place (Buder 2019: online). Reliant on natural lighting, handheld camera, supporting non-actors and on-location filming, *The Nightingale* disrupts the facile fantasy-realm in which much horror exists instead constructing a challengingly predominately neo-realist one.

Considering that the film falls dominantly into the category of rape revenge horror, its aesthetic pioneering can also be elucidated more clearly by considering the prevailing features of this subgenre. As Carol indicates, these films are encapsulated by their “brutal simplicity” (2015: 116) and by their focus on the portrayal of immediate violence over internalised character experiences. The notorious male-authored film *I Spit on Your Grave* in both Meir’s 1978, and 2010 through to 2019 serialized iterations, is called to mind, the 1978 original being a film Clover discusses at length. Of the original, in accordance with the above, its most characteristic feature is its “perverse simplicity” and its abrupt “aftermathless” ending (Clover 2015: 119). 1978’s *Spit* is not a film interested in psychology or substantiated explanations, it simply flutters from one scene of violent exploitation to the next. Sadly, in the course of 30-odd years little progression is evident, and as stalwart Roger Ebert says of the 2010 remake, while the opening half channels a realist, desaturated, handheld aesthetic that “implicitly assigns us the POV of the men as they taunt and terrorize Jennifer in plausible ways”, her later killing methods are reduced to “implausible, probably impossible” stylised acts that are “offered and received as entertainment” (2010: online). It is a problematic juxtaposition.

As a widely discussed film franchise, *Spit* is a benchmark case, and it illustrates that while rape revenge horror has in part come to encompass a realist aesthetic, akin to Kent’s, it appears that only the female’s suffering can be viewed on such sincere terms. Conversely, Kent’s Clare in fact attains close to no revenge, and her revenge is never simplistically cathartic. Hers is a trudging, tiring, tormenting path and her only moment of violent retribution becomes a viscerally slow and totally unvarnished scene in which both Clare’s now-victim and her own pain refuse to die. Occurring at the film’s mid-point and captured in a set of parallel

close up, shot-reverse-shots as blood increasingly splatters across Clare's sallow face and pools in the mouth of the young man, their shared torment and remorse only increases. Kent herself disavows the "stylized violence" of rape revenge films, saying they "play out in a very masculine way, and relentless and brutal violence is often the end game" (in Fuller 2019: 26).

Accordingly, although violence and death is omnipresent in the film and is frequently agonising to watch, it can also be unheralded and swift, and Kent's camera avoids voyeurism and fetishization. Rather, she favours close up shots that reveal the complex psyches of that violence's victims and perpetrators. Or alternately, she uses static wide shots that seem to channel famed auteur Michael Haneke's "cold formalism" (Peucker 2007: 148) and reject, as Carroll puts it, the "extreme gross fury visited upon the human body" that has become the hallmark of much contemporary horror (1990: 211).¹²⁵ Yet, I would suggest that Haneke's formalism tends to exclusively be cold, where Kent contrastingly makes space for heart-wrenching moments of tenderness and warmth, which she captures on those terms. While the film is defined by a powerful horror affect, Kent achieves this affective weight by alternately embodying and refraining from the heightened atmosphere common to the genre. Most evidently, *The Nightingale's* sparse and empty soundscape contrasts the way film scoring is used stridently in standard horror fare¹²⁶ to intensify a viewer's emotional response, often provoking them to close their eyes or look away (Tan 2016: 25). Instead, the unconventional pervasive silence of Kent's world adds to its unbearable weight and emphasises that as a director, she wants us to look.

¹²⁵ Interestingly, Reyes suggests that the "bodily turn" of 21st century horror may be overstated, and that the average level of visual horror gore may have in fact diminished since its peak in the late 90s (2014: 144). Likewise, he positively frames how body horror, the visceral and gothic bodies are spaces of alterity that can comment "successfully on the body, the self and society" (9), and therefore can be effectively claimed by women—as Harrington similarly espouses (2018)—which we see elsewhere in Kent's film, as with other texts in this chapter.

¹²⁶ Given the genre, this means standard male-authored fare, since only 5.9% of horror films are directed by women (Follows 2018: online).

Among others, Hanich discusses the paradoxical pleasure of fear on offer in horror texts. Using a phenomenological framework, not entirely dissimilar to my own, he suggests that the “objective aesthetic *strategies*” of a horror text work to produce “subjective aesthetic *emotions*”, whether “horror, shock, dread (or) terror” (2010: 23, original italics). For this fear to be sublimated into pleasure, he observes that firstly there must be a unity between the “*emotional dimension*”, or the spectator’s “*fear*” and the “*evocative dimension*”, the text’s “*danger*” (23, original italics). Although Hanich distinguishes the cinematic variant of ‘pleasurable fear’ from real-life fear as a unique phenomenological experience, as “precious moments of lived-body and temporal intensity” (254), despite the intense sensory, bodily and emotive experience *The Nightingale* provokes, unlike in most horror films the kind of pleasure in looking and seeing, and the potential feeling of power that stems from aligning with either the villain or final girl, or both, is primarily eroded in Kent’s vision. The film doesn’t recoil from violence, but it certainly doesn’t savour it, relish it, or offer it up as a pleasurable form of entertainment. This is a distinguishing feature of its aesthetic, and arguably in the case of horror, a very gendered one.

There is much in the film’s aesthetic fabric that feels gendered. As with *The Babadook*, *The Nightingale* is predicated on motherhood. Although officer Hawkins’ infanticide renders Clare a childless mother, Harrington’s declaration that “*The Babadook* locates terror and monstrosity deep within the heart of a mother” seems similarly applicable here (2018: 180). In her discussion of the longstanding overlap between horror and motherhood—one which goes far beyond *The Babadook* or *The Nightingale*—Harrington suggests that horror frequently exploits the “dissonance and interplay between idealised and transgressive motherhood”, oft constructing a figure she terms the “monstrous-maternal”, a translation of Creed’s ‘monstrous-feminine’ (183-4). Certainly, like Amelia, it is in a sense Clare’s motherhood, or robbed motherhood that makes her ‘monstrous’. Crucially, though, neither of these women are villains,

especially not in the sense of a male-authored horror antagonist like Norma Bates (from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, 1959), or Margaret White (from Stephen King's *Carrie*, 1974—and all of its various film adaptations), or a Mrs. Voorhees (from Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th*, 1980). Rather, in Clare's pivotal moment of violence, while there is terror and monstrosity deep in her heart, there is also the unfathomable love of a mother. The visceral imagery the film employs of Clare's ongoing lactation compounded by the haunting wail of a baby that bleeds into her waking reality from the film's dream spaces reflects that it is Clare's emptiness as a mother that drives the film, but it is also her power as a mother that also allows her to sympathetically become, the matriarchal survivor (Alban 2017: 181) at the film's conclusion. Kent's representation of Clare also strikes me as being particularly close to the paradoxical "desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (Kristeva 1982: 54), a series of unsettling discords that Kent's film, and contemporary female horror more broadly, embody both aesthetically and thematically.

Clare also thus adheres in part to the structural convention of the final girl, the girl who "is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again" who is "abject terror personified", who "alone looks death in the face" but who alone also finds the strength to survive (Clover 2015: 35). However, as footnoted earlier in this chapter, despite recognising her as horror's most memorable female figure, Clover still negates her agency, perceiving her as a figure which manifests masculinity to the extent that her own gender is masked. On the other hand, more pro-horror gender theorists like Pinedo (1997) and Paszkiewicz and Rusnak (2020) suggest that the final girl epitomises horror's ability to transgress boundaries, including gender boundaries, and provides a "powerful source of identification" for female viewers (Pinedo 1997: 173), thus positioning her as a feminist force. Certainly, Clare is the film's sole survivor. It is her understanding of true horror, her

vulnerability to it, her ability to withstand it, her ability to mete out violent revenge as well as her depth of compassion that define the film and its narrative resolution.

Analysing Clare, I recall a compelling passage from Siri Hustvedt in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (2016) as she meditates on the experience of being a woman looking at women constructed by men, in this case Picasso's *Weeping Woman* 1937. She describes her response to the painting in almost paradoxical terms. She is so emotionally drawn to the painting that it "upsets" her, but she is also "repelled" by the image, finding "the depiction cruel" (20). As she observes the woman's talon-like hands, the artwork's nightmarish abstractions and dark colour palette she notes that there is "a dangerous quality" to the woman's grief (22). I was struck particularly by this exploration because Clare is rendered in these same terms. While the final girl is normally that, a *girl*, naïve and new to the world, whose experiences serve as a surrogate coming of age, Clare has already come of age, and although she is young, she is also hardly naïve, but rather is knowing, proud, strong, guarded, and hard.¹²⁷ Despite the horror of Clare's experiences, the film's lack of sentimentality, depicted perhaps most clearly by its minimal dialogue, and the absence of didactic and expository 'suffering' monologues, means that she resists categorisation as either a patriarchal victim or a monstrous female and as such diverges from the patterns of this typically male structured genre.

Like the complex and full women who have populated the texts mentioned in this chapter and the previous ones of this dissertation, Clare is also richly characterised. There is a dangerous quality to her grief, a single-minded brashness and harshness which Kent and actress Aisling Franciosi—through a particularly committed performance—make manifest through her titled head and her hollow, directionless gaze which stares out from dark sunken eye pits.

¹²⁷ This feels very akin to other texts mentioned in this chapter, like Cave's *Fresh*, where Noa is certainly a 'girl' in the millennial conception, but likewise eclipses the more reductive versions of the final girl trope, by virtue of being as warm as she is "spiky" and by being overwhelming tired and jaded from the film's outset (Lee 2022: online). It is also akin to the eliding and complex protagonist-antagonist position occupied by female horror leads in female-directed films like Ducournau's *Titane*.

Ultimately, Hustvedt concludes that her relationship to Picasso's *Weeping Woman* is complex, "somewhere between subjective engagement and objectifying distance" (21), and this is also true of viewers relationship to Clare. She is at once completely open to us, her heavy grief is ours, but she can also be alienating, rash, cold and distant. It shouldn't be radical, but as Gilchrist wrote for *Variety* in 2018—referencing the work of other directors featured here including Coppola and Gerwig—"challenging" and "complex" female characters were finally, in the year of *The Nightingale*'s release, "having their moment on screen" (2018: online). To return to the very opening words of this dissertation, perhaps Kent's depiction is a Maggie Nelsonesque frank thing (2009), evoking a complex and rich inner life.

Moreover, despite the film's overriding neorealist affect and raw verisimilitude, like many of the other films in this chapter, Kent still samples from the genre's stranger poles to render Clare's mindscape and her bodily experience as she both commits and escapes from acts of horror, reflecting that surrealism or non-realism can be a way to depict the liminal and transgressive spaces of femaleness, especially in horror. As Chadwick distils, surrealism has had a more critically quiet but just as powerful life in women's hands, and it has supplied a visual vocabulary, imagery and models of female "political activism that encouraged activism that encouraged resistance, reached deep into individual psyches, and led to a new relationship between self-expression, political action and art" (2017: 187). Surrealism in *The Nightingale* comes in the form of moonlight-soaked, manically cut, whip pan dream sequences that intrude upon Clare's waking reality, emphasising her descent into madness, her love for her lost family, her fear, her anger, her desires and desperation. Like *The Babadook*, *The Nightingale* uses surrealism as a lens to plunder the depths of Clare's psyche to emphasise her selfhood in flux, a complexity of identity which—despite the film's historical setting—feels acutely postfeminist, and in harmony with many of the texts explored in this dissertation, beyond genre.

This centrality of Clare to the affect of the film, as this complex and compelling figure,

brings me neatly to its cinematic gaze. As many of the film's critics observed, "we can't look away from Clare, from what happens to her or what she sees" (Scott 2019: online), and throughout almost the entire film, Clare's face fills the centre of the screen space in close-up or we see the world through her eyes through point-of-view shots. Unlike the standard assaultive male gaze that Clover rightly presupposes to be standard in standard male-authored horror (2015: 173), Kent mediates horror's secondary gaze, what Clover terms as the "reactive" gaze, or in simple terms "the horrified gaze of the victim" (175). In particular, in the film's harrowing opening rape scenes the camera remains close to Clare's face, only deviating to point-of-view cutaways up to perpetrator Hawkins' own face or when she looks away, across to the fire that crackles dispassionately in the hearth beside her. As Kent herself remarks regarding these scenes, "I put it entirely from her experience" and "that's what's upsetting to people. It is real" (in Kohn 2019: online). For Clover however, this reactive gaze is still conventionally a scopophilic one, and a "resolutely gendered" one, because "to be on the receiving end of the camera is to be feminine by definition" (205). In this vein, Clover also links the feminine reactive gaze of the victim to the spectatorial gaze in an attempt to unpack, what she terms, the "symbiotic interplay of the sadistic work of the filmmaker and the masochistic stake of the spectator, an arrangement on which horror cinema insists" (179). For Clover, both of horror's gazes are weapons, and the cinematic engine at large is accountable for a kind of "masochistic exploitation of 'hurt'" (199), particularly the 'hurt' of women.

The question then becomes, how exactly does Kent's use of the reactive gaze differ from the genre's standard fare? It is difficult to answer. Sibley was convinced that, at least within a slightly narrowed pool of properly sensitive critics, a certain objectivity could be applied to aesthetic properties, that a consensus could be reached about the aesthetic quality of a text, because aesthetic terms *do* connote tangible properties (71-87). In this way therefore, it could be concretely known that "some works *are* graceful, others moving or balanced" (71,

original italics). As I began this course of investigation it would be true to say that while I denied his more intuitionist judgements I believed too in this objectivity, in the way of the Kantian supersensible. And yet, as I seek to convey here exactly what it is that distinguishes Kent's rape or murder scenes from a male-authored conventional slasher horror film—even here, in my last chapter—it still feels subjective, as if I am merely exercising my own purported sensitivities to the nuance of arthouse cinema. Despite this doubt, I nevertheless speak with a certain conviction afforded to me by existing critical discourses that affirm this—if at times—subtle distinction between works of male horror cinema and female directed films. More than just deviating from the normalised horror gaze, it appears as if Kent uses her camera, especially in these scenes of dark gravitas, to enact Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeality, where from an esthesiological or sensory perspective, the audiences' physiological bodies become annexed with Clare's so tightly that they become like “one single body” (1964: 168). As such, her terror and pain, as a real thing, becomes felt by audiences for their realness.

In this way, as Whitney proposes, the film belongs to a growing postfeminist realm of expression that “reify(es) and analys(es) gendered violence against women” in “the prism of a victim-skeptical, ‘empowerment’-focused age” by deconstructing and subverting the “pervasive *aestheticizing*” of women's experiences of violence and hurt (167, original italics). As evidenced, Kent's camera rejects the genre's tendency to salaciously savour female suffering. In this way, when Clare looks up at her assaulter she also looks dyadically at us as spectators, and when Kent's camera hangs back letting violence unfold in tableau as it might on a stage she encourages us to place ourselves within that scene and thus to look back at ourselves, as witness. Perhaps again similarly to Haneke—who, despite the violent reputation his oeuvre has accrued, doesn't feature acts of aggression on-screen and only reveals them through sound or their aftermath (Speck 2010: 74)—Kent uses violence not as cheap fodder but as food for genuine thought. In opposition to the standard horror gaze which, whether

assaultive or reactive, is predicated on the passive complicity of the spectator and on their desire to see this spectacle of suffering, Kent instead calls us to bear witness, through her horror affect, to the persistent “epidemic” of violence against women, because “turning away, like that’s somehow respectful, is not getting us anywhere” (Kent in Kohn 2019: online).

This acknowledgement of the spectator’s agency in gazing is cemented by the liminality of the film’s ending. In a moment of startling beauty, set on a wild and empty beach as the new sun of dawn just begins to crest above the horizon, luminous and gold, the closing scene’s aesthetic draws on the symbolic imagery of cleansing and redemption. Yet as blood-soaked Mangana’s life recedes with the tide, the iconography of the sea—tied perhaps to feminist predecessor Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899)—may, in its boundlessness, also represent the unbearable and endless aloneness that faces Clare beyond this final artistic curtain. This duality is encapsulated in the film’s final image, of Clare in close up, occupying the centre of frame, staring both at us and through us as she takes an inhale of breath before the film cuts to black—an ending which if thematically different is structurally identical to Gerwig’s in *Lady Bird*. It is difficult to read Clare, who is unmoored here, and the way Kent cuts the film, mid-breath, makes certain the audience feels the story’s continuation beyond this final frame, feels the aftermath of its violence in a very un-*I Spit On Your Grave* sense. Bainbridge offers this liminality and ambiguity as characteristic of contemporary female authored representations of the feminine. She suggests that a dualistic ending evokes a space of “ambivalence for the spectator who needs to rework and refashion her relationship to the narrative in order to work out any opportunity for potential closure” (2008: 163). This openness, also “interpellates the spectator, drawing her into the text and its structure to contemplate the pleasures”—such as they are in this case—“and unpleasures of the film itself” (163). In Kent’s case, she provokes

us perhaps to question, why we want to watch such a horrific thing at all, a mantle which Machado also picks up.¹²⁸

CARMEN MARIA MACHADO, *HER BODY AND OTHER PARTIES* (2017): CREATING OVERFLOWING, VISCERAL BODIES

Another artist who doesn't want us to look away is Carmen Maria Machado. Born in the United States in 1986 to a Cuban-Austrian migrant family, she has quickly become known for her work as an essayist, critic and fiction writer. As an openly queer woman of colour whose fiction is fixated on the world of the macabre in the vein of Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter and Helen Oyeyemi, Machado's work can be neatly framed by her own statement that "aesthetic and politics are not incompatible with each other" (in Faucheux 2016: online). Prior to the release of *Her Body and Other Parties* in 2017, she had released a retinue of short horror works which displayed her now characteristic genre play and knowing subversion of the way society has

¹²⁸For me, Kent mediates a space between the feminist destruction of visual pleasure that is foregrounded in Mulvey's model of counter cinema (1999) and the more stylised aesthetic of works of female horror like *Jennifer's Body* or *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, which "heighten spectatorial pleasures and disrupt the gender coding and power relations not by distracting us from, but rather by intensifying, our pleasure" (Paszkievicz 2018: 82). In similar ways, almost all female horror works, including Kent's, dismantle the "central ideological project of the popular horror film", the "purification of the abject" (Creed 2007: 14), and the pleasure that is associated with such restoration, while still giving women the aesthetic access to violence and anger that Paszkiewicz spoke of (2020). Kent does so, I contend, through a female lens that may elicit some pleasure for female viewers, although of a Kristevan violent and painful kind. Perhaps, in a world where horror is a reality for women, it is precisely Kent's realness, her commitment to a kind of vital ugliness and abjection—one which cannot be purified or resolved—that explains why Kent, as a female filmmaker, would want to make this film, and why a female spectator would want to view it. That being said, not *all women* want to subject themselves to a horror vision like Kent's (certainly the cited woman at the Sydney Film Festival screening did not). Likewise, not *all viewers*, men and women alike, will view her horror vision through the female lens she aesthetically provides (arguably, a misogynistic and masochistic male viewer may take a very opposite perverse kind of pleasure in Clare's suffering in the film than Kent intends).

dominantly told stories about women. Some of these works, for instance, darkly remix Giambattista Basile's Pentamerone fairy tales into gruesome stories of sex, vanity, aging and regret such as in "The Old Women Who Were Skinned" and pastiche penal code and the interminable horror of a mundane life that "forc(es) you to live for just a while longer" (2014: 15) in "California Statutes Concerning Defrauding an Innkeeper".

Since her first novel collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, Machado has also notably released *In the Dream House* (2019), a novel-length memoir-cross-criticism that recounts her experience in an abusive lesbian relationship. Widely lauded—like its predecessors—for its inventive form, the book is in part a dark and harrowing account of abuse and doubt told through that most iconic image of a haunted house: an obfuscating, shadowy place whose dislocating geography serves to mirror the spiralling psyche of its haunted protagonist. However, beyond the horrifying story of her real-life tragedy lies the book's perhaps truer purpose, the ficto-critical invention of an aesthetic or form capable of telling her story. As Waldman says without having "encountered narratives of queer domestic abuse; [Machado] lacked context and precedents; she could not make sense of her experience" (2019: online). Thus, she crafts this novel, with its "huge formal risks", in order to use the artistry of fiction to "dream a structure", a new form, "in which her story can live" (online). Beyond the genre of horror, this is a critical reaffirmation of this study, about how even in this well established and highly troped mode there are still so many stories that are completely untold—particularly the stories of women who occupy intersectional identities—and that a novel gaze and aesthetic must be constructed to tell them.

Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* is a collection of eight short carefully intertwined stories. Many are gothic parables that chart the tumultuous experiences of a string of female protagonists facing a surreal world of urban legends come to life or facing down completely novel monstrous creations, like the fleshy mouthless and eyeless "body-shaped.

Prepubescent, boneless” and “one hundred pounds, dripping wet” mass that becomes an immortal and distinct lifeform after being shed by a woman during her gastric bypass surgery (2017: 2127). In others, Machado’s women must face the equally, if not more horrific bracingly real world of domestic abuse and sexual violence. While her narratives in and of themselves are thematically and politically compelling, as many reviewers have remarked in relation to Machado’s genre play, its formal wildness makes the collection truly incendiary and such an apt text for this study. As Sehgal attests, the collection is a “wild”, “blazing” thing which borrows from “science fiction, queer theory and horror” and “remixes it to her own ends” (2017: online). Likewise, Jordan commends the collection’s very deliberate “manipulation of literary registers”, “formal experimentation” and “the gusto” with which Machado’s stories “reinvent horror” (2018: online). Although this dissertation is grounded in genre, a level of fluidity has become obvious across many of the works studied, but is displayed perhaps most intensely in *Her Body and Other Parties*. In addition to Altman’s thoughts on generic multivalency, I am reminded of McLuhan’s ideas about hybridity here. In his investigation of medium and form, he proposes that the meeting or convergence of media is a “moment of truth and revelation in which a new form is born”, “a moment of freedom and release”, and a moment that reawakens our sensory perceptions (1994: 55); and all of these are true of Machado’s text.

The book is almost overflowing with its aesthetic and at first glance Machado’s collection adheres to the typical predicates of the genre, with its haunted houses, urban legends, apocalypses, modern madwomen in the attic and supernatural visitations. Yet, like *The Nightingale*, *Her Body and Other Parties* takes horror’s surreal and exaggerated underpinnings and forces them to coexist in a world of painful realism and believable hurt. This is often an uneasy and even violent fusion, but it allows the mode to effloresce into something which is paradoxically both stranger and more normal. While the fundamental aesthetic underpinning the horror genre has typically been, as Carrol stated, and as I introduced earlier, massing and

magnifying (1990: 48-50), Machado, like Kent and their contemporaries, does more with less. Without needing to amass images of gore and fright in the conventional manner, *Her Body and Other Parties* horrifies us because that which is most ugly and disturbing is found both in unexpected corners and in plain sight. In a genre known for its singular plot progression, Machado's stories also offer character-focused vignettes that are "ambiguous by design" and leave the reader to try to "piece together" a conclusion (Corrigan 2018: online), one that often bleeds beyond its pages. In Machado's adoption of the horror mode she enacts what Bottici—whose work on feminine myths I foregrounded in my introduction—proposes, namely, to "cannibalize the myths around us and spit them back in an unrecognizable form" (2021: 13). I would suggest that Machado achieves this with the exact same force that Bottici describes in this line. By also being what Hawkins would describe as a 'real goremeister'—although the book runs deliberately low on actual, visceral gore—she, like Kent, succeeds in also further breaking the myth that unilaterally connects what is female with what is pretty, passive and cute, because in her world the feminine can be both a source of beauty and terror.

Unlike *The Nightingale*, this is not such a unilaterally brutal horror piece. In its formal play it does, in part, make space for greater pleasure sublimation, for glimpses of absurdity and black comedy, and for vignettes of visual beauty, in a way that is actually more akin to Kent's *The Babadook*. However, it makes apparent the same political issue at the heart of the genre, the representation of violence. While Machado's stories are suffused and often steeped in a grim, knowing darkness and horror, the violence that is inherent to horror tends to be dealt with frankly or, or alternately is only alluded to, so that it becomes part of the fabric and texture of the work, but not its aesthetic centrepiece. For instance, in the terse, taught "Inventory" Machado uses her pointed but bare, unvarnished prose to catalogue her bisexual female protagonist's varied sexual experiences: loving, hateful, vulnerable, distant, tender and violent. These complex and heady interactions, even the raw and violent moments, are glimpsed only

in swift, unelaborated snippets and typically short sentences as the story moves ceaselessly on. For instance, there is the man who “got angry and left, slamming the screen door so hard my spice rack jumped from its nail and crashed to the floor” (2017: 476-84); the woman who the protagonist “wanted to push (...) out the window. We had sex and I started crying” (493), or the man who she offered a “place to stay for the night, and he thanked me. I woke up with a knife to my throat and a hand on my breast” (527).

Beneath these fragmented violent interactions another story of horrific suffering breathes, one which propels the story forward, but which is told in even more understated terms. It is of a pandemic of apocalyptic proportions, but unlike the melodramatic tropes this kind of story would typically employ, Machado’s work keeps its distance, relying on vague symbols and just once, at the story’s end, an image of a woman—the protagonist’s final lover—with skin “the dark purple of compounded bruises, the whites of her eyes shot through with red, and blood leaking from the misty beds of her fingernails”, but whose death is otherwise announced by a “tipped” cup and a cold “puddle” of tea (562). As the narrator of “Inventory” nihilistically observes at the piece’s end, “I realize the world will continue to turn, even with no people on it. Maybe it will go a little faster” (571). This same interplay between the artistic exploitation of violence, and the thematic and aesthetic dislocation from it, is also evident in “Difficult at Parties”, which charts the aftermath of a sexual assault, an almost unspoken act of violence that precedes the work and permeates it, but is only made visible in this protagonist’s lingering “black-and-blue reflection” (2855). Instead of plundering the event itself, mining it for sensationalism, Machado crafts a world that is by nature violent, where much of what the protagonist sees is tainted and rendered on violent terms, from the bubbles that recede from her skin after a bath that remind her of “tide-scarred sand” (2881) or where the warmly lit house of the eponymous party “looks like it’s on fire” (2943). The closest Machado comes to the assault itself is through a surreal mirroring between a ‘delivery man porno’ the protagonist

watches; where in the face of an intruding stranger, “the delivery man, the no-delivery man”, her memory and pain transports her to “a screaming, rushing tunnel” (3083). This sinister episode ends when her protagonist hurls her laptop across the room and symbolically screams “so loudly the note splits in two” (3083).

Frequently then, what was made apparent in *The Nightingale* also announces itself here, that literary horror is fundamentally insufficient to depict the horror experiences by women around the world on a constant basis. In particular, the archly metamodern “Especially Heinous”—which consistently calls attention to the commodification of female suffering—features one vignette titled ‘VUNERABLE’ which depicts the ephemeral moment when:

For three days in a row, there is not a single victim in the entire precinct. No rapes. No murders. No rape-murders. No kidnappings. No child pornography made, bought, or sold. No molestations. No sexual assaults. No sexual harassments. No forced prostitution. No human trafficking. No subway gropings. No incest. No indecent exposures. No stalking. Not even an unwanted dirty phone call. Then, in the gloaming of a Wednesday, a man wolf-whistles at a woman on her way to an AA meeting. The whole city releases its long-held breath, and everything returns to normal. (2017: 1022-28)

In a world where six women are killed every hour by men, in most cases by their partners or men in their own family, in a “global pandemic of femicide” (Broom 2020: online), Machado’s pastiche of one of the most popular and enduring serialised crime programs *Law and Order: SVU*—a program that, as Bertram and Crowley state, packaged sexual violence into a “ubiquitous image” and “flood(ed) the television landscape” with it (2012: 64)—challenges our relationship to horror and violence against women as entertainment.

Aside from this brief, and sadly shockingly implausible moment of respite, “Especially Heinous” does mention crimes that are, quote-unquote especially heinous. Yet as with the prior examples, Machado deliberately undercuts both the false sentimentality and fear-to-pleasure paradigm that has typically underscored crime and horror texts respectively, and that Bertram and Crowley again suggest constructs a guise of empathy that “disguises the concomitant lack of change in the attitudes about and incidence of sexual violence” (64). Instead, Machado creates an at once surreal—the story includes female ghosts with bells for eyes—and bleakly

clinical aesthetic that forces readers to confront the unglamorous and unrelenting reality of female suffering. As Quinn writes, “Especially Heinous” creates an estrangement, not only from normative representations of violence and horror, but from our culture, in a way that:

Allows us to see that culture afresh, and be reminded of the kinds of questions that trip up the brain of any reasonable person: Why do we watch shows about women being raped and killed? Because women are raped and killed. Why are women raped and killed? That’s where the brain sticks. (2017: online)

By balancing an affecting portrayal of the genuine and irreversible consequences of violence and cruelty with these moments of deliberate intellectual and artistic distance, Machado—in a similar way to Kent—avows the excessively dramatized aesthetic tone that allows us to ‘write-off’ horror as a cheap or B-grade thrill and instead provokes us to consider the way in which we represent suffering, especially the suffering of women.

This paradoxical exploitation of and estrangement from violence, again takes a similar line to Haneke, who both understands that what has become common, in a world where art is a commodity, is that violence as “a good sell”, is something which is only available when “it is deprived of that which is the true measure of its existence in reality: deeply disconcerting fears of pain and suffering” (2010: 576). However, as he articulates in his influential essay *Violence and the Media*, he also understands that in a world of indiscriminate images, aesthetic reconsideration can “give the viewer the chance to recognize this loss of reality and his own implication in it” and “show the viewer his own position vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal” (579, original italics). This forced self-reflexivity is what both Kent and Machado do, as other contemporary female writers like Roupenian and Mariana Enriquez also do, especially in her collection of real-cross-surreal stories of bodily violence and self-immolation, *Things We Lost in the Fire* (2016). These female creators renounce the passive, uncritical spectatorship that has become conflated with the genre and instead use a believable, lingering, but distinctly un-hyperbolized aesthetic of violence to question our complicity with our fundamentally violent world. They are building upon the questions filmmakers like Haneke have previously raised

about the participatory nature of dramatized violence (2010: 576) and are using them to deconstruct, more specifically, the aesthetically intensified but emotionally disengaged portrayals of sexual violence against women which have become part and parcel of the horror genre, and that frequently appearing in works that are thematically and reflexively empty. Yet they do so avoiding didacticism or tonal singularity.

In this light, the text captures a female view of violence, but it does so through its aesthetic features and way of seeing. Most striking perhaps is the way Machado makes the body, specifically, the female body—as a space which has always been contested—the central image of so much of her writing. As it often is, it is hard to surpass Irigaray’s resplendent analytical prose at the beginning of her famed essay *When Our Lips Speak Together*:

If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will re-produce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again (...) If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again. (...) Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. Far. Above. (1980: 69)

Much feminist criticism has been preoccupied with the way we write the body, and it is an issue that similarly defines conflicting postfeminist discourses. As Still explains, “feminists have spilled much ink to show women’s association with the bodily, and how this has been presented in a negative light” (2007: 264). It is interesting to return to Irigaray’s conception of femaleness—and of others in the French school like Cixous and Kristeva, which with she is associated, and with whom this thesis began—that champions the notion of ‘sexuate’ difference, of gender as not as a purely social construct but as something equally biological.¹²⁹ As such, Irigaray’s theoretical writings—like Machado’s creative ones—are characterised by their dual recognition that the word may be used in abnegation or denigration of the female body but may also be issued in response as a triumphant “assertion of the body” (264).

¹²⁹ In this way Irigaray also interestingly pre-empts, to an extent, the focus of postfeminist mantras and ideologies on women’s bodies and the sensibility’s focus on female/feminine ways of being.

In a genre that is, in many ways, grounded in the debasement of women as flesh, Machado's women are also fleshy, visceral bodies, bodies with base animalistic needs and functions. They are bodies which may be vulnerable to subjugation or suffering but equally have agency and can experience ripe sexual pleasure. They are also bodies which experience the world and themselves on the distinctly sensory terms that governed the aesthetics of many of the still life writers I previously addressed. As Guynes observes, in *Her Body and Other Parties* "the horror stems not from the presence of the (female) body itself but from the body's contact with constructs like gender, sexuality, and propriety" (2017: 69). Machado's women and their bodies may be subject to the dark horrors that the genre demands, and may also be rendered in terms comparable to that of the monstrous female though these women, these bodies and their sensory experiences are always more complex than that. While Machado's bodies, as in the aptly titled "Real Women Have Bodies" for instance, might be so de-personified that they are reduced to see-through metaphorical "afterthoughts" that can merely "drift and mill and occasionally look down at their bodies" and then rather gruesomely be stitched into clothing, with "skin and fabric binding together as tightly as two sides of an incision" (2017: 1733), Machado's treatment of them never feels cheap or exploitative.

Throughout the novel, her use of the female body constantly reflects the lived bodily experience of a woman. "Real Women Have Bodies" itself forms a morbid allegory of the enduring politicisation and commodification of the female body, of the centrality of "be(ing) touched" to the value of women in a patriarchal society (1887), written from someone who has lived that value. Quinn asks of the text, "doesn't writing about women's preoccupation with their bodies somehow devalue them?" (2017: online), although she concludes—as I do—that Machado's preoccupation with the body and with protagonists who are equally preoccupied with theirs, embraces a kind of carnality whereby women gazing at their own body—as a site of danger, pain and oppression, but also pleasure, empowerment and strength—is not merely

the re-enactment of a patriarchal mirror but is the locus of a truer sight.¹³⁰ As Thomas-Corr writes, Machado “is at the forefront of a wave of writers (...) producing sensual, defiant, highly inward stories that centre on the female body” (2020: online).

In her investigation into the fashioned body, Nogués espouses that the woman’s body is the ultimate “radical Other” (2020: p. 232). Yet, in a material postfeminist world, it is more commonly fashion, or the clothed body, that defines “women’s sense of self and embodiment” (245). Therefore, as Nogués explains, female artists who are interested in exploring the darker parts of the female experience and psyche often play with the clothed body and shed these exterior and arguably patriarchal layers, to showcase a woman’s sex, or her bodily alterity. In doing so, they can make space for their own “killer look” that reacts to the “patriarchal violence” inherent in objectified and fashioned images of women (246). I particularly like the idea of a killer look, because although this dissertation serves as a testament to women’s ability to see themselves and the world in new ways, doing so is still difficult. Therefore, horror can be understood as an aesthetic form that can capture the frustration, the force and even sometimes the violence needed to conjure these new ways of seeing, both the concomitant pleasures and unpleasures. The sentiment that gazing, as a woman, upon one’s own body in the flesh may be as confronting as it is necessary is encapsulated in the novel’s closing image, from “Difficult at Parties”. Here, Machado observes a sexual assault survivor watching herself have sex with her boyfriend on videotape. She states, “Her body—my body, mine—is still striped with the yellowish stains of fading bruises. It is a body overflowing out of itself; it unwinds from too many layers” (2017: 3134). Machado’s characteristically paratactic prose aesthetic, particularly the hendiatis of the opening serves to underscore the shift within the

¹³⁰ This also recalls another Irigarayan notion I introduced in my still life chapter, that “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” (1985: 26), and evidently showcases a growing interest in sensory storytelling beyond the specificities of genre or mode.

protagonist as her gaze upon her own body allows her to become a being-looking-at for herself.

Yet, when the protagonist sees herself she also understands the complexity inherent in her body, in the female body. This complexity, which is at the heart of Machado's bodily imagery and aesthetic, is also key to understanding the novel through a postfeminist frame. Although his source material is contemporary teen horror cinema—and, like many critics mentioned in this chapter, he doesn't consider the gender of the composers of the works he examines—Fradley touches on this tension within female-focused horror in a postfeminist context. As he suggests, given that its “core affective register—fear, vulnerability, anguish, trauma—and thematic emphasis on suffering and victimhood are anathema to both the feminist political emphasis on female agency and postfeminism's confident preoccupation with feminine pleasure, personal strength and individual success” (2013: 205), horror outwardly appears to serve only masochistic ends. Yet, as has now been well established, akin to the thriller, it is this structural masculinity of the genre that also invites its subversive gender-play. Again, while his critical focus differs to mine, Fradley's conclusion that the genre's strange ambidextrousness, its paradoxes, allows its composers to illustrate both the “pleasures and pitfalls” of femaleness in a postfeminist paradigm and culture (219), seems especially pertinent to an interpretation of Machado's work. Fradley also notes that it is the genre's “affective semiotics” and “key visual tropes” which can most effectively be mined by artists to examine this dialectic and “hold a dark social mirror” to the contemporary female experience (205).

As Guynes identifies, in Machado's mirror she “observes in the everyday oppressions of heteropatriarchy and late capitalism what is truly horrifying” and yet equally she “find(s) release in the dark's nooks and crannies” (2017: 70). There is both a kind of condemnation and an affirmation in the text, a structural juxtaposition between what the current moment affords women and all that is deleterious about it—a paradox that female millennial and thriller authors of the 21st century have also particularly invested in. At the beginning of this dissertation, I

paid heed to the contradictions and the nebulosity of postfeminism, asserting, or perhaps rather hoping, that its inconsistencies as a framework and as movement in praxis—as a reckoning of the lived reality of gender in the 21st century—would have made fertile ground for female artists to arrive at new aesthetic forms. As an openly queer Latinx author, Machado expounds upon the horror genre’s possibly for transgressing boundaries, and her work is made rich and distinct for the ways it fuses genre with the complexities and paradoxes of the world postfeminist identity and sexual politics that she and her contemporaries occupy. In doing so, she finds in postfeminism, “gaps and necessary contradictions *a literary form necessary for the contemporary*” (Guynes 2017: 70, italics added), a literary form capable of encapsulating a state of female-hood in a state of flux and often violent oppositions.

Although Machado is not the first openly queer author I have presented in this dissertation,¹³¹ it must be addressed—as I similarly did in the last chapter regarding race—that another like but distinct study could have considered with more critical intensity and specificity the sexual orientation of the authors and filmmakers I selected. As I established earlier in this chapter, a more focused examination of the connection between the queer female gaze and aesthetic is highly deserved, both in horror (in which it has particularly multifaceted implications when considered on both authorial and spectatorial terms) and beyond. Yet this is not *this* dissertation, which is already expansive in its scope and inquiry, and in which I have upheld aesthetics as my primary analytical lens. However, Machado’s intersectional queer subjectivity should not be erased, and it is not my desire to do so. Rather, it can and should be considered as a part of the fabric of her text, the female experiences it constructs, the stories it tells and the style it uses to do so. Her work also connects to a broader legacy of queer horror,

¹³¹ Millennial filmmakers Desiree Akhavan and Emma Seligman are both openly bisexual, as is millennial novelist Megan Nolan, and millennial filmmaker Jen Tullock is openly lesbian. Metamodernist Ali Smith is openly lesbian as are still life filmmakers Céline Sciamma and Charlotte Wells. Maggie Nelson does not use labels, however she is married to a transgender male (female born) artist Harry Dodge, a subject she addresses richly in *The Argonauts*.

in which the biological sexed-ness of the queer body has frequently been used in startling and provocative ways. Gelder says it well when he describes how queerness:

dislodges gender from its normative 'essence' and (...) celebrates aberrations, relishing the spectral power of the sexually non-normative. Heterosexuality may well have made the homosexual into a monster defined by lack; but queer theory embraces this feature and returns it as a visitation of poltergeistian proportions. (2000: 187-188)

Although in Machado's book, the queer female body is typically encountered on the same terms as the straight female body, Machado's potential manifestation of these queer 'poltergeistian' powers invites a rereading of my preceding analysis.¹³²

Central to Machado's work and the novel literary form it builds is also its gaze. In a genre where gazing is so especially flagrant, it is undoubtedly and unapologetically women who are the object rather than the subject of looking in *Her Body and Other Parties*. Alban's framework of the Medusa Gaze is useful here because as a figure of myth and horror Medusa embodies a liberating range of double aspects within a horror paradigm: "victim as well as predator", destroyer as well as protector, powerful as well as helpless (2017: 2). Not only is Medusa indicative of the kind of flawed, sympathetic yet damaged female figures also abounding in Machado's work, but Medusa as a female icon represents "the dynamic power of the female gaze" (Bowers in Alban 2017: 2) because "her snaky, invincible gaze retains its power even after she undergoes destruction" (Alban 2017: 5). The protagonists that manifest Machado's sight might face trauma, abuse, horror and world ending cataclysms, yet despite the

¹³² As just one example, the disappearing women of "Real Women Have Bodies", including its queer protagonists (the female narrator and her girlfriend Petra), could be read as a very uncanny representation of Judith Butler's 'unseen lesbian'. As Butler influentially stated, lesbianism "has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable" (1991: 20). Although visibility for lesbianism has improved since Butler's analysis, it still is arguably much more 'unseen' than male homosexuality. In horror, lesbianism is still often absent or is, alternately, a source of male gaze titillation. Taking up Butler's notion, critics like Waldron have effectively traced the figure of the literal 'lesbian ghost' in horror texts throughout time. Although, as Waldron explains, she historically appears in "only subtly queer" or "villainized" ways (2022: 73), it would undoubtedly be deeply fruitful to consider Machado's thematic and aesthetic choices in "Real Women Have Bodies" in light of both earlier and newer horror texts that feature the figure of the lesbian ghost, and to consider more deeply the spectatorial and authorial nuances of queer female horror texts, and their interrelationship.

destruction they endure they look, and continue to look, and certainly don't 'cover their eyes or hide behind the eyes of their dates'. As Sartre decreed, the "petrification in in-itself by the Other's look is the profound meaning of the myth of Medusa" (1993: 430), and by reifying the Medusa myth in this way, he—perhaps inadvertently—opens a discourse in which women can—as Alban does—"claim" the Medusa gaze as "a female force" (2017: 5), and thus harness their power as an Other. To look back may be a dangerous, destabilising thing, but as the horror genre emblemizes, even at its darkest potentiality it is also a desirable and desirous thing. As one of Machado's protagonists asserts most lucidly, "I want to see" (2017: 3026).

Machado's collection is taken up with sight, and amongst the more disparate poles of her differently horrific worlds, is a unifying motif: that of the camera and voyeurism. Especially in "Difficult at Parties", her cumulative story, she—in a different but not entirely dissimilar way to Kent—reframes both horror's assaultive and reactive gazes, where her protagonist goes from having "the single eye of the camera (...) fixed on (her)" to "control(ing) it", and using it to film and watch "camera-me", until she is able to watch and reclaim her image of herself following her assault (2957-3054). Again, to return to my introduction, in part I justified this dual cinematic and literary study through a Merleau-Ponty framed interpretation of the gaze as a broader phenomenological phenomenon. That is, both as sight and something more sensorially inchoate than that, and this link between the gaze and immediate perception is rendered poetically by Machado in "Difficult at Parties", where gazing can mean "lean(ing) in so close to the screen" that one "cannot even see the picture anymore" and where it can also synaesthetically mean to "listen" to what people are thinking, which can also be "no words, just colours" (3054, 3065). In this story, as in others in Machado's text, gazing has a multisensory, haunting and preternatural quality, but for the woman who dares to look fearlessly it is also cathartic.

The gaze apparent within *Her Body and Other Parties*, as with *The Nightingale*, is also

unified by its self-reflexive quality. From the collection's outset with "The Husband Stitch",¹³³ in which there are so many stories of women's manifold sufferings and of women as prey or victims that they have a way of "running together like raindrops in a pond" (233), Machado makes an explicit reckoning of the female gaze with her story commands. Her dark and bizarre instructions, delivered in her tightly coiled prose, like: "If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them." (233) seem to reflect Machado's desire for her audience to not just read, but truly see and feel the world of daily horrors in which women exist. Machado, like Kent, effectively adopts the genre's tropes, but her complex and self-reflective creative horror aesthetic also allows her to question their limits and uses, making her work belong to a growing canon of horror texts that consciously engage with "the tyranny of the male gaze" (Fradley 2013: 216). What Machado also engages with, is the terms of form and genre themselves. As the protagonist of "The Resident" questions, "What's worse, writing a trope or being one? What about being more than one?" (Machado 2017: 2803), after having written about the figure of madwomen in the attic and succumbed to her own nightmarish fugue state. Quinn resolves, through her reading of the text, that "the world makes madwomen, and the least you can do is make sure the attic is your own" (2017: online). Machado, however, isn't content with leaving her women in the attic, nor of colouring them as (only) mad, and she makes the contours of horror pleasingly more capacious for doing so.

As has become evident in the preceding chapters, there is much that is novel about the use of form, aesthetics and genre by women in the 21st century, and much that is shared between the women working in film and literature in horror, as with the other modes, new and old, of

¹³³ A reference to the extra stitch the protagonist is given, following the birth of her daughter, in order to ostensibly tighten her vagina for her husband's future pleasure, and to the real world phenomenon of the same name.

this dissertation. The proposition that women are ‘nourished’ by horror that I introduced in this chapter—and that Lugosi seems to say so emphatically—remains a sticky one. Yet, it is unarguable that the mode continues to draw in women both as spectators and increasingly as creators, and that this interest is rewriting the terms with which we see and represent violence and hurt. In a way that continues to showcase the broad threads that link the aesthetic patterns established by women in the 21st century, these horror texts do what is now not entirely unfamiliar. They marry what is wickedly surreal or imagined with what is almost mundane in its normality and plain in its realness, they privilege mood, atmosphere and sensory experience over narrative expectations, and they showcase that what is female or feminine may be as ugly and monstrous as it is beautiful.

CONCLUSIONS



STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

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“The challenge for feminism is to rein back its compulsion to immediately translate aesthetic surfaces into political depths; or rather, to keep both surface and depth in the mind’s eye, teasing apart the multifarious socio-political meanings of texts while also crafting richer and thicker descriptions of aesthetic experience.”

Rita Felski, “Because it is Beautiful” (2006)

It feels fitting to begin the ending to my research with Rita Felski, whose assertion that the feminist aesthetic was a ‘chimera’ (1989) framed my own inquiry into postfeminist aesthetics. Although my final body chapter on female authored horror in the 21st century has resided in a more complex place where beauty and ugliness intersected and where aesthetic pleasures and unpleasures are inextricable, I contend that this thesis has broadly upheld what I postulated, that female authors and auteurs in the 21st century are crafting texts which reveal nascent and evolving yet evidently shared aesthetic patterns and tendencies. Moreover, these texts exhibit their creators’ interest in capturing and conveying the aesthetic experience, and in employing and expanding upon the formal features of a text to create works of richer stylistic, emotive, and affective depth.

In her essay “Because it is Beautiful: New Feminist Perspectives on Beauty” Felski describes early to mid-2000s feminist inquiries into beauty as “part of a wave that is still some way from cresting” and that suggest “a new willingness to engage the language of aesthetics in a spirit that is not just deflationary or demystifying” (2006: 279). As she continues, “even if the terms of debate are often defined in ways that feminists find problematic—it is remarkable how much new work on aesthetics still fails to acknowledge gender—it is becoming clear that

beauty is not about to disappear any time soon, that its potency is not so easily vanquished by negative critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion” (270-280). However, at the time of publication, Felski indicated that there was still a lacuna in both critical and celebratory discourses on beauty and aesthetics within feminism; a lacuna, she suggests, which may replicate a certain male misogyny that exists within the “irony, negativity and cool sensibility” of contemporary male-authored forms of art and in the male discourses that surround that art, which equate women and beauty “in order to reject them both” (280).

Without re-treading ground that I have already covered—most specifically in my still life chapter—Felski proposes that while beauty and aesthetic terms may be written onto the female body in problematic ways, women have also written “extraordinary expressions of beauty and creativity” across their own bodies, into works of art and into the world (280), and thus she advocates for a feminist address of beauty and aesthetics. In particular, it strikes me that when she addresses aesthetics and beauty, which she tacitly addresses almost as one in this essay, she describes it as something ‘irreducible’:

Even as images of beauty (...) broadcast a variety of socio-political meanings, there is an irreducible aspect of aesthetic experience that cannot be fully encapsulated in such terms. It is an element only inadequately captured in terms like wonder, or enchantment, or aesthetic delight; a pleasure in the expressive capacities of shape and form, texture and pattern that often arises in everyday encounters with texts and objects. (281)

Much as I predicted in my introduction, any aesthetic study is invariably defined by its nebulousness, by the way aesthetics resist being fully bound up with the more concrete world of socio-political realities. Although many of the theoretical giants I foregrounded in my introduction, like Kant, Bourdieu, and Sibley, have provided the groundwork, and a dense and deeply rich field of aesthetic study from which my own research has grown, Felski’s quote reminds me that it is the intangibility and elusiveness of aesthetics and aesthetic appreciation that make it so, to use her words, wondrous and enchanting.

In short, throughout this dissertation and in this conclusion I have sought to join Felski’s cresting wave as, I believe, it gains increasing momentum throughout the 21st century in a

postfeminist epoch. While postfeminism as both a sensibility and a movement in praxis is flawed, aesthetics inheres within postfeminism and postfeminism inheres within aesthetics, much more so than its politically motivated and focused predecessor. In my introduction, via Tasker and Negra (2007) and Postrel (2004), I suggested that postfeminism was compatible with the aesthetically focused world of the 21st century, but more can be said in this regard. Postfeminism is both a response to and a contributor to the prevalent ‘hyperaestheticism’ (Postrel 2004) of the last twenty years. As McRobbie distils, postfeminism is significantly geared towards the production of “commercial femininities” (2008: 59), that is of images of feminineness and femaleness that can be reproduced or replicated, but also, more positively, renegotiated or resignified. While postfeminism at its worst may be a series of empty “mostly pink-coloured commodities” (Genz and Brabon 2009: 79) it is still a site of aesthetic interest and inquiry. Where feminism has negatively been reduced to “*images* of the bra-burning, mannish and fanatic feminist”, a by-product of earlier feminist waves’ “rejection of femininity and beauty” (12, italics added), postfeminism thrives in images, in aesthetics and in beauty.

Postfeminism, even in its messiness and unboundedness, is contradictions and complexities is a movement attuned to the ‘surface’, although arguably for some, this may mean a loss of depth. However, though postfeminism is an inexorably slippery site—or as Genz and Brabon evocatively metaphorize it, an identity “tightrope” (120)—its pluralities and its copious forms of feminisms and femininities—even those which are at odds—have, in my opinion, contributed to the flourishing of works, both creative and of criticism, that keep both surface and depth in the mind’s eye and craft these ‘rich and thick’ descriptions of aesthetic experience that Felski spoke of. The deeply aesthetic focus of postfeminism’s commercial femininities, which in-praxis may be problematised, seem to gain depth and substance when handled by the female artists of this century.

When I began this thesis, I spoke to the broad ways in which women's art has been placed and valued throughout time, almost always as the lesser companion of men's. At the crux of this critically reified phenomenon has been—as my still life chapter explored most explicitly—a certain judgement that what is feminine or female *is* surface. As Hustvedt describes “the emphasis on *style* and *form* over *meaning*” has been perceived as “precisely the force that feminize(s) and emasculate(s) art” as “a fey reliance on surfaces” and “as female frippery” (2016: 25, original italics). At the other side of the spectrum, as my inquiry into post-postmodernism attested, men's deliberate stylistic innovations, especially into the avant-garde, are acclaimed as style and form beyond or above meaning, where women's are typically neglected (Steiner 1999). At the start of my research, I suggested that this debate of substance over style was invariably gendered, even in its changing standpoints, and as such I wanted to uphold a New Criticism inherited and partially formalist framework to consider how style could be substance, and especially how new female-led styles could be critically affirmed in this light. It is a notion I have returned to several times throughout my research, and though I do believe that style can certainly be substance, perhaps the phrase style *and* substance is ultimately a nicer fit, one which represents what the texts I have addressed in this thesis have achieved. Or, as per Hustvedt, style and form *with* meaning.

While this has been an aesthetic study, invariably I have considered the stories that enrich my chosen texts, even those that challenge our notion of story, much as I have studied their themes and their characters. I have also considered, in many cases, their gender (and other) politics, and the gendered and political discourses that surround them. As such, through my analysis, I have arrived at shared thematic preoccupations amongst texts—particularly in the case of the tightly connected and quickly proliferating millennial fiction—as much as I have arrived at shared aesthetic encasings. As I perhaps then heralded in my chapter on metamodernism, while the works of this dissertation uphold their own aesthetic unity, this

aesthetic unity gains greater integrity and affect for the way it works both in harmony (and at other times) in deliberate disharmony with its subject matter. Moreover, while the works that I have discussed in this thesis reflect a self-evident interest in form and style, they do not use style as a kind of armour against story or feeling. Nor do they seem to reflect the anxiety of influence that has historically worked to shackle female creativity (Felski: 1989). While much formal innovation has been on display in this thesis, it has generally been of a more subtle character, and both the new modes and reimagined modes I have considered seem to reflect that a female artist in the 21st century can be aesthetically attuned and demiurgic without having to be avant-garde or deconstructive. That is, she can find new—or perhaps, more colloquially, *newish*—avenues for the expression of both style and substance; in doing so, she can also begin to rewrite the terms of aesthetic appreciation and judgement through a female demotic.

THE CURRENT FRONTIERS OF THE FEMALE GAZE

Alongside my inquiry into what I first termed the ‘possibilities’ of postfeminist aesthetics has also been my ‘search’ for and study of the female gaze. As I established in my introduction, I have deliberately used these open and probing terms to acknowledge that while the formal features of a text can be analysed and evaluated, the connection between these features and concepts like aesthetic unity and gender are not unequivocal. At the outset of my study, I established three broad research questions to guide my research. Firstly, I stated that I wanted to understand the unique aesthetic qualities of landmark texts by female artists, and how these could further an understanding of the rich complexity of the female voice and gaze; I subsequently linked the female voice and gaze, and have overarchingly treated them as intertwined phenomena throughout this thesis. Secondly, I wanted to uncover the unifying

aesthetic qualities of landmark texts by female artists, and how these could further an understanding of the female voice and gaze, as possibly distinct from their male counterparts. Finally, I hoped to evaluate the aesthetic parallels between contemporary literature and cinema, and, by extension, use these parallels to further my understanding of the importance of aesthetics as a gendered tool of meaning making.

In attempting to address these questions, I developed a research framework that sat at the intersection of formalism and identity politics¹³⁴ in order to negotiate these distinct ontological concepts—gender, gazing and aesthetics—and study them in an interrelated and meaningful manner. Although the gaze may be an imperfect phenomenon by which to make sense of the ways in which gendered experiences of being may make themselves manifest in the aesthetic fabric of texts, I have found it to be, largely, a fitting prism for my analysis. As I established in my introduction, I made the voice and the gaze two confluent phenomenon, and as my research has grown under phenomenological lines, the ‘gaze’ of my analysis has also come to be a more sensory phenomenon, and has come to be a stand-in, as it is fair to say Sartre proposes, for being. As Sartre postulates, looking is central to having an “inner finality” and “realis(ing) a presence” in the world (1993: 266). As he states, “I constitute an organised whole which is the look” (266). In these terms, this is perhaps where my analysis has situated itself, considering the gaze, or the look, as part of the organised experiential whole which is the artist.

Sartre’s statement that “a look cannot be looked at” (379-380), which he issues in his evaluation of the incontrovertible being-for-others that the Other’s look evinces, seems almost like a challenge for critics like myself to try and look at the look and understand its terms and implications. In this way, I have mirrored what many texts by women in the 21st century also

¹³⁴ Much of my introduction functioned as a kind of justification or prolepsis for this approach, and while on an inter-chapter basis (and even an intra-chapter one) my approach may have wavered between being more formalist or more socio-political, I hope that the reader has been left with the sense that it has been a broadly fitting approach to delve into this complex yet compelling subject matter.

seem to do, to look at looking. From the first chapter of this dissertation on the millennial mode of expression, my investigation has, in many ways, furthered Maggie Nelson's conception of the female gaze—that which began my thesis—as a “version of female intelligence” (2009: 21-22). Also, as a sensory, desirous, observing, inquiring, floating and even forceful thing, a ‘scorching’ thing very much attached to the phenomenological reality of being female, which, as my still life chapter further elaborated, is bound up in a more complicated state of immanence and transcendence. What this means more precisely in terms of the texts that I have studied, is that they reveal a willingness and even an eagerness for female creators to look back at themselves and question themselves as a purveyor of the look. In my introduction I suggested that, vis-à-vis Nelson, the female gaze recognises the importance of seeing all, candidly and with clear eyes, and though each mode in this thesis is unique, there is connective tissue between them, particularly in their self-reflexivity, their authorial interpolation, their narrative openness, their attentiveness to aesthetics, their formal and generic hybridities, and their haptic descriptions of the female experience. They also share a willingness to look under Gass and Nelson's ‘metaphorical skirt’ (1991, 2009) and find both the grand and the deeply prosaic there.

Although they do not do so to the exclusion of men or male characters, the principal texts of this dissertation have fixed their gaze both on and through at least one central female character and have tried to develop an aesthetic that suffuses with that character and her own way of seeing. Interestingly, while they use ‘the look’ to see these characters clearly and deeply, they seem to free it from the power relations that inhere Sartre's writings. The look may affirm and make manifest the experience of being, but it does not rely on forging a strict subject-object position, nor in categorising people as a being-looked-at versus a being-looking-at (Sartre 1993). Instead, their texts make space for multiple angles of view. Additionally, as they have developed their various aesthetics, I have frequently contended that the female artists of this thesis have also sought to find new formal outposts that capture and represent their own

ways of looking and seeing as a female creator, and that make their own sight an immutable part of the fabric of the text. Their texts often draw attention to their madeness and their personal resonance, and their creators let their personal gaze bleed into the world of the text in a way that I have suggested enhances their authenticity and emotive and affective weight.

Perhaps they also do so to pick up on the longstanding association of women as autobiographical artists. As Battersby explains, it is “males who are associated with cultural creation, and the construction of an alternative, fictional reality. Females are necessarily linked to the body; to the ‘real’ world; to feeling, emotion and ‘subjectivity’” (45). While this has typically been a critique, one that has reinforced the male genius myth—and that has led to counter movements like that of *écriture féminine* which chose to deliberately write the female body in response—I propose that many 21st century texts by women find new ways to be personal and to highlight the authors’ gaze and closeness to a text by finding new ways of seeing through, to and beyond the female body and self. However, though these texts may write the female body, and these worlds of feeling emotion and subjectivity, they do so without being strictly narratively autobiographical and their gaze also sees through the personal into rich alternative, fictional realities. Moreover, without needing to find an oppositional aesthetic to house their gaze, contemporary female writers and directors seem to trust that the closeness of their gaze is not a sign of artistic weakness, and that their audiences will share this sentiment.

This brings me to the fact that my interpretation of gaze theory has also intermingled the spectatorial and authorial functions of the gaze. Although Nelson’s personal exploration of the female gaze oscillates around the colour blue, it is hard to surpass the sagacity of her observations. As she states, “it is the business of the eye to make coloured forms out of what is essentially shimmering” (20), and the female directors and authors of this thesis have, in both unique and unified ways, used their gaze to make something of concrete form from what is shimmering, elusive, ephemeral—the female experience in all of its various outposts and

materialities. Yet, each chapter of this thesis has stressed that the female creators of the 21st century operating in these modes resist confining their vision and leave it open, leaving it to continue shimmering in nuanced ways for its spectators, particularly the female spectators to which they more self-evidently address. However, while these works typically align the gaze of the spectator with their female characters, their gaze does not turn the men of their texts into empty signs, and they often offer their spectators equal alignment, such as in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* or Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. As each chapter of this dissertation has reflected, when the female writers and directors analysed in this thesis gaze, they read the surface for depth and search for new subjectivities. Without deconstructing their own narrative and emotive terms, they also often perforate the textual 'illusion' to encourage spectators to actively orient their own gaze in relation to that of the text.¹³⁵

I also established my research under the rationale of studying the female gaze in contemporary film and cinema as being distinct from the male gaze, but not as being strictly reactionary or oppositional, as texts belonging to earlier waves of feminist counter-cinema and counter-literature often were. As my introduction established, in the 20th century the need for women to forge their own (and often radically different) language and gaze in artistic production—as opposed to what was male/masculine—was stressed, with influential theorists

¹³⁵ Something this thesis has not ventured into particularly is how male spectators respond to these texts, and how they identify, or not, with these texts' gazes. This would be a fruitful course for future investigation. Although these texts hardly match the "scopophilia, voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism" that are the modalities of the "controlling, punishing, self-regarding look" of the male gaze at its worst (Butler 2002: 4), how much of an address does their more evidently female gaze make for male audiences? Throughout this thesis I have associated openness and multi-layeredness with the female/feminine aesthetic (as per Irigaray (1985), Kuhn (1994), Bainbridge (2008) etc.), however this openness may only stretch so far. As I questioned in my still life chapter, does the contemporary female gaze allow for authorisation or identification with more female/feminine aesthetic and narrative positions amongst male spectators? Or—as I proposed in my chapter on the horror mode when reflecting on how Jennifer Kent in *The Nightingale* mediates horror's standard assaultive and reactive gazes—does the subtlety or nuance that often marks the female gaze in contemporary texts, that which is inherent to their openness, mean their meaning can be stripped by an overriding male gaze? Or, for male readers and viewers—who have historically held the dominant gaze—is any obvious textual reversal or change simply alienating to the extent that they do not engage with the text at all?

like Mulvey asserting that “the new grows only out of the work of confrontation” (1979: 4). Accordingly, Mulvey proposed a female/feminist aesthetic governed by, what Butler calls, “defamiliarisation, rupture and reflexivity”, as well as by alienation and strict formalism (Butler 2002: 6). However, this is a position that Mulvey has later softened on in the wake of postfeminist renegotiations (2019). In attempting to navigate and understand the current frontiers of the female gaze, this thesis has not attempted to resolve essentialist, biological or cultural models of gender, nor set them in opposition, but similarly take them as concomitant features of gender theory and production in the 21st century. In short, I have attempted to understand “the distinctiveness” of women’s artmaking and the gaze embodied in that artmaking, in a way that acknowledges both an “understanding of gendered subjectivity” and “the position—or positions—of women in contemporary culture” (Butler 2002: 22).

However, despite these intentions, inevitably, my analysis has still embodied some oppositional and essentialist male versus female tensions and tendencies, particularly in my treatment of the female gaze in the thriller and horror modes, with their more longstanding masculine attachments.¹³⁶ In doing so—and perhaps inevitably given my framework of the female gaze—I make gender an overarching or defining feature of the texts I have studied, in many cases, both of their construction and reception. While I do not renege on the fundamental premise of my inquiry, any type of women’s cinematic and literary studies do what has, until recently, rarely been done in reverse: study women’s artistic production as a manifestation or

¹³⁶ I also grant that while I have addressed the works of men in counterpoint to my central texts, my analysis of the aesthetics and gazes of contemporary male authored film and fiction is not comparable to the depth with which I have investigated women’s work. In particular, as I footnoted in my horror chapter, I have not substantially addressed the nuances of the male gaze/s, particularly with regards to sexuality, or from an intersectional perspective. I have therefore tacitly posited a sort of homogenous male gaze or aesthetic, at least to the extent that it pertains to the modes that have been the subject of this thesis. The value of a more deliberately comparative study—one that considers the intricacies and distinctions of male ways of seeing and manifesting that sight in the 21st century—is self-evident.

mark of gender.¹³⁷ Yet, this approach still feels necessary in order to counter the critical silences that Tillie Olsen first spoke of (2003). As Wanzo likewise attests, “although the concept of ‘the male gaze’” as first conceived of by Mulvey—and therefore its antithesis the female gaze—is now “problematic”, because it involves a certain “generalisation about the identity and desires of the one who looks, attention to and analysis of the circulation of the gaze is warranted” because ‘the look’ persists in its power (2016: 660).

This conundrum has been commented upon many theorists who have embarked upon comparable studies, such as McCollum and Clarke in their edited collection on female directors working in horror, a text I referenced in my preceding chapter. McCollum and Clarke caution that any understanding or definition of a female cinema or school of literature makes their gender an “explicit” part of their artmaking when it remains “implicit” for their male counterparts (11). As they elaborate in reference to film, (although the point can be made in literature, where women’s writing is also marketed, read, and understood on gendered terms): the concept of ‘the female filmmaker’ means that “what they do is different or is made different by the matter of their femaleness” (12). However, McCollum and Clarke go on to assert that:

When identity labels are used meaningfully, they can stir a powerful sense of understanding about the world in which (...) [women] operate and about how their identity exists within various patriarchal structures (...) [and] the integral role that this identity can play in the way that filmmakers see and produce their work. (15)

Again, though their work is limited to an analysis of contemporary horror cinema by women, I choose their text to cite from in particular—although they are not the only ones to comment on this challenge—because their edited collection was released just last year. This then, to-

¹³⁷ There are some notable exceptions, including Bruzzi (2013), which I have referenced substantially, as well as texts like Bloom’s *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture* (2017) from Palgrave Macmillan’s ‘Global Masculinities’ book series, and Martin’s *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film* (2020). These texts herald a newer—and very valuable—field of masculinity studies, which seem to me to be a necessity given the as-posed anxieties associated with contemporary manhood. However, these influential critical works typically consider men’s aesthetics and masculinity as both attached to and separate from the gender of the author, differently to my author-centric analysis.

date, is perhaps an unresolvable tension. It speaks to the fact that a gendered study may impoverish the individual nuance of the text, and, in the case of women, force their work into an oppositional position against the dominant male gaze and male aesthetic. Equally, it also speaks to the fact that—in a world in which gender is still invariably a part of the media and socio-political landscape, notwithstanding extant biological conceptions of gender, which I have also acknowledged in this dissertation—it is necessary to draw these dividing lines in order to understand, as McCollum and Clarke say, the way female artists ‘see and produce their work’, which is something I believe this dissertation has achieved.

UNIFIED THROUGH UNIQUENESS: UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL YET INTERCONNECTED GAZES AND AESTHETICS OF THIS THESIS

At the outset of this thesis, I picked up on Butler’s suggestion that the work of female creators is ‘unified in diversity’ (2002), given that women’s creative production is an inflected mode that must, to some extent, negotiate its position in response to the dominant standards of taste, given that the dominant standards of taste have historically been male/masculine. Butler also describes women’s cinema and women’s literature as inflected modes because they reflect that, although women do not possess “a cohesive collective identity” they are “not absolutely differentiated from each other” (2002: 22). In this capacity, my work reaches a similar conclusion. Although each mode of this thesis exhibited unique aesthetic and thematic tendencies, my analysis has showcased that even across those modes that may initially seem the most incompatible tangible similarities can be ascertained.

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, I studied the interlinked relative flourishing of the predominately female-penned realm of millennial fiction and of an aesthetically and thematically similar body of films created by female millennial-aged writer-directors in the 21st century. A product of the complex identity politics of a postfeminist, late-capitalist and neo-

liberal world, the millennial speak texts I highlighted in this chapter explore the process of self-definition that is embarked upon by young women in a paradoxically liberating and limiting age. Focusing closely on *Lady Bird* by Greta Gerwig and the new millennial fiction urtext *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, my analysis considered the formal and narrative strategies employed by these creators to construct the ‘unmoored’ postfeminist subject (Genz and Brabon 2009). My inquiry revealed that these texts pastiche the generic conventions of neo-realism, romantic comedy, and the Bildungsroman to arrive at an acutely 21st century mode of representation that aesthetically reflects the ‘close up’ media culture of the 21st century, the broader trends of millennial design and the processes of self-editorializing and self-curating that have come to define the millennial female experience. In accordance with the ‘girling’ of postfeminism, the millennial female writers and directors operating in this mode tend to populate their films with young women or ‘girls’ who hover in a state of prolonged adolescence; these protagonists are often myopic and messy, and even mean, and their experiences are quotidian, and, beyond their own journey of selfhood, arguably unimportant. Yet, in this chapter I proposed that the increasing presence on screens and in books of these full and flawed young women simply “liv(ing) through something” (*Lady Bird* 1:45-1:47) is important, highlighting what a certain strand of young female filmmakers and authors think is worth saying and the postfeminist cultural moment that is allowing them to say it. In capturing these messy millennial women, millennial speak creators are also establishing a defining feature of the postfeminist female gaze in art—one that is reflected in various ways across and between modes—that it has an interest in gazing at women in this close up frame, and really seeing them, in ways that are candid and unvarnished but not cruel.

Moving onward from this millennial frame, which reflects a very specific and generational experience of the 21st century milieu, I shifted to the realm of the post-postmodern or metamodern, a new sensibility which is similarly attached and attuned to the conditions of

21st century life. While the contours of post-postmodernism are still in the process of definition, in this chapter I postulated that the aesthetic textures of recent 21st century literature and cinema by women hold value as a distinct mode of metamodern art. While avoiding heuristic labels, I posited that key novels like Ali Smith's *How to be Both* and Miranda July's *Kajillionaire* exemplify a growing body of textual work uniquely attuned to the metamodern sensibility, as understood by recent commentators like Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) and Josephson Storm (2021). My research revealed that works by female authors and auteurs, like Smith and July, are crafting a new kind of pointillist realism with surrealist punctuations, and are creating works that reimagine postmodern aesthetic devices and develop a new approach to thematic sincerity. They also distinguish themselves from their more critically discussed male contemporaries in nuanced but clear ways—and their work has not and arguably cannot be attached to newly canonically male metamodern modes like New Sincerity and Smart Cinema. Most acutely, the defining feature of metamodern texts by women is that they seek to find meaning amongst the fractured legacy of postmodernism and the complexities of the current cultural moment. Developing a mode of expression that is simultaneously hermetic and direct, these works acknowledge both the banality and absurdity of existence whilst reflecting an overwhelming desire for human connection and for life itself. Like their millennial sisters, the women working in this mode often achieve this through their sincere portrayals of complex, idiosyncratic and deeply human women who they characteristically gaze at and through with a precise and close lens and, often, a buoyant kind of candour. It is through this gaze, which they couple with bold and ebullient artmaking and self-reflexivity, that female metamodern creators find a harmonious way of both advancing aesthetic form and emotional affect.

Further developing these interstices between form and meaning, in my subsequent chapter I took the painterly term of still life and applied it to a new realm of contemporary novels and films by women. In doing so, I sought to define the contours of a nascent anti-

narrative mode of literature that, like millennial speak, has principally been crafted by women. Taking up the gendered associations of still life painting and the division of sensual pleasure versus intellectual rigour it has long evoked, my third body chapter proposed that, in an epoch in which women are becoming increasingly dominant in literary fiction and independent filmmaking, they are also eschewing the predicate of plot in favour of works that cherish stasis and stillness. In doing so, I resolved that they are renovating the novel and the film, creating texts that are deeply attuned to beauty, aesthetics, haptics, and the sensorial and phenomenological experience of the female self and body, both in immanence and transcendence. Through a synthesis of comparable literary and filmic modes, including Chambers' 'Loiterature' (1999), Galt's 'The Pretty' (2011), and Skye's 'Quiet Literature' (2017), I evaluated the formal textures of landmark texts by women in this 21st century field of stillness, most specifically Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* and Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, and explored how they communicate through the organic unity of aesthetic expression. Although these texts place a plot-driven model of narrative in abeyance, and cultivate ephemerality and liminality, my analysis reflected that they abound in meaning, not in spite of but because of their still, pretty, and sensory aesthetic. Therefore, I concluded that the still life novel and film offer new possibilities for affective and emotional depth in literature. My analysis of the still life mode also revealed a 'cosmically passive' (Glieberman 2017), observational and tangibly *feminine* female gaze, inviting a reconsideration of what it means to look and how women may observe their world and themselves.

Shifting from a discussion of these more nascent modes—which although they inevitably derive and borrow from preceding modal forms of literary fiction and arthouse or auteur cinema lacked a clear precedent—I moved to the realm of the female-led thriller. With ultimately a surprising affinity to the still life mode, in this chapter, I uncovered an expansive field underscored by a compelling aesthetic and thematic fusion of the masculine

and feminine. Working in a genre and mode that has deep masculine roots, the female creators who are crafting thrillers in the 21st century have developed a paradoxically acid feminine mode, one that transposes the girly candy culture that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility often espouses and upholds, and weaponizes it. In my detailed exploration of Emerald Fennel's *Promising Young Woman* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, my research illuminated a new form of thriller that tells stories grounded in the here-and-now and that privileges realism, yet that destabilises its formal and narrative grammar through a heightened aesthetic that embodies both glossy and dark extremes. In doing so, I proposed that the female-led thriller rewrites the terms of violence and action, finding a new female language for its expression. The female-led thriller also develops its dramatic and affective core through its portrayal of and alignment with complex women who blur the mode's historical boundaries of perpetrator, investigator and victim and who transposes and transform the trope of the femme fatale. In a manner not dissimilar to the 'close up' frame of the millennial mode—which was likewise used to tell the stories of antiheroic women—the female writers and filmmakers of the thriller mode inscribe us within their women, even at their hardest, coldest or cruellest. In doing so, the gaze of these texts views and re-presents the genre's often iconic images from an Othered female lens, provoking a reconsideration of what it means to be 'feminine' and how the feminine looks.

Traversing further into a dark yet often paradoxically beautiful aesthetic world, my final chapter centred upon a study of the horror aesthetic as evident in a significant arena of 21st century female authors and auteurs. In an often critically maligned mode predicted on masochism and misogyny, my analysis has reflected that a new body of female-authored horror is growing, one that pastiches the high and low aesthetic and thematic possibilities of the genre, and plays with the borders and boundaries of taste. Following Kristeva's theories of abjection (1980), women working in horror today reclaim women's visceral bodies, and bodily and phenomenological experiences, reimagining the terms of horror's voyeuristic gaze and its pain-

to-pleasure paradigms. Female writers and directors, like Carmen Maria Machado (author of *Her Body and Other Parties*) and Jennifer Kent (director of *The Nightingale*), move horror's standard images and formal devices to new outposts, creating hybridised texts that are both sensorially and intellectually challenging, and that fuse horror's possibility for strangeness and surrealism with a new kind of chilling and understated realism. Avoiding the narrow tendentiousness and didacticism that is defining a new wave of male-authored social horror, women working in the mode today are instead creating texts that speak boldly and truthfully whilst making horror's aesthetic contours more capacious and compelling. In doing so, without confining the horror genre's possibilities, they seem to be rewriting the aesthetics of fear, as well as of beauty and ugliness. Like the other modes of this thesis, 21st century works of horror by women are defined by their gaze, which in a genre which has long upheld an assaultive male gaze—especially in cinema—is significant. Tapping into the longstanding complexities of women's spectatorial relationship to a genre predicated on female suffering, the contemporary horror gaze is a self-reflexive one. It is one that allows its creators to both employ, critique, and transform horror's tropes and conventional way of seeing, and through alignment with a female protagonist who is more than a reductive final girl (Clover 2015), give authentic depth to the form.

From this distinct aesthetic terrain, certain recurring stylistic choices can be observed. Many of these have already been signposted and explored in depth throughout my chapters, but they bear repeating. In broad terms, the female and feminine aesthetic of the 21st century is characterised by its eminent female gaze, its interest in the poetic following Kristeva and the school of *écriture féminine*, its interest in the material textures and sensory experience of being—including of being a woman, and, more specifically, the phenomenological and bodily experiences of being a woman—and its aesthetic of detail and close attention. In particular, almost all of the texts of this thesis reflect an aesthetic interest in how the subjective can overlay

or be rendered by the surface. The aesthetic of these texts is likewise defined by a preoccupation with aesthetic beauty, prettiness, and sensuousness beyond “meaning and content” (Zeglin Brand 2013: 8), and with women’s aesthetic pleasures. Zeglin Brand suggests female artists today “utilise beauty to a more intense degree” (14), and I agree that the contemporary feminine aesthetic is often a visually and descriptively orchestrated one. In extension, part of the contemporary female aesthetic is its evocation and reclamation of femininity, the ‘girly’ and the ‘chic’. Many novels and films analysed in this thesis embody a tangible incandescence or radiance, a sort of pastel hued glow, an attention to soft light, alongside the candid aesthetics of darkness and ugliness that are used to construct an artful antithesis. More broadly, they often also use their characteristic layering to make artful harmonies from both minor and more major discords. Realism governs as an overarching aesthetic principle, at least in the modes I have explored, but it is often tinged with an oneiric quality, or with a sense surrealism or hyperrealism, and in this way many of the texts also reflect soft generic boundaries. As this conclusion has already established, the contemporary female aesthetic is also an open and multi-layered one, one in which aesthetic interest accrues in layers and in which stylistic features do not need to operate as fixed signs or narrative symbols but rather contribute to an enveloping sense of atmosphere and feeling. More specifically, these texts—though often in understated or subtle ways—reframe and reimagine common images, visuals, symbols, words and narrative moments from a female perspective that allows us to see them in a different way.

Narratively speaking—although there tends to be a deep correlation between formal and narrative features in the texts I have studied—these works illuminate a personal and intimate approach to story, and a muted or modified approach to teleology, with diffuse narratives that are interested in liminality and plurality common. As Bottici may champion, many 21st century female authored texts also reflect a conviction to telling stories about and for women (2021). Through both their narratives and aesthetics, which are often also self-

reflexive, these texts often enact what prior feminist critics have proposed, that female authored texts open up reader-subject relations and encourage new ways of feeling about, responding to and being moved by texts (Kristeva 1984, Kuhn 1994). This list of features is not exhaustive, nor does it do complete justice to the rich aesthetic—and thematic—trends that I have studied. It is not intended, either, to presuppose that all women favour these aesthetic devices on the basis of an essentialist, fundamental or fixed gendered unity. It is challenging to summarise the aesthetic depths that I have traversed without stifling them, nevertheless, it is necessary, and I contend that within each mode of this thesis—the millennial, the metamodern, the still life, the thriller and horror—there is a growing array of texts that take up these stylistic features.

RECENTRING AESTHETIC TASTE: CONSIDERING THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THESE INTERCONNECTED GAZES AND AESTHETICS

Beyond the specific qualities of these five modes and even beyond their shared aesthetics, sensibilities and gazes, it is important to ask what this analysis of female authored texts in the 21st century says on broader terms. Perhaps most significantly the cumulative worth of my study is that it reflects a slow but sure decentring and recentring of the parameters of aesthetic taste and worth. The 21st century time period of this thesis—with, I suggest an increasing hastening—has reflected an ongoing shift towards a female realm of art which, without excluding men, is produced by and for women, and is discussed and judged by women (both in popular and academic circles) on those terms. In my introduction I cited Ecker’s commentary in her discussion of the feminine aesthetic that we should analyse as women (1986), and, increasingly, this seems to be a reality. In her study of aesthetics and gender, Korsemeier makes plain that despite the Kantian notion of the supersensible, which acts as a kind of balance for the invariable subjectivity of judgements of taste, the supersensible has long upheld the alignment of women with the ‘shallow’ or “narrow scope” of beauty and men with the sublime

(2004: 47). As Korsemeier argues, “the model of the ideal aesthetic judge, the arbiter of taste, was implicitly male”, leading her to ask pointedly on the matter of aesthetic judgements, “whose taste?” (46). In 2004, while the answer was certainly men, today, the female gaze and female aesthetics are continually occupying a more central position.

Although they hail from the more conversational realm of in-praxis discourses, several cultural commentators have spoken to this phenomenon. In Thomas-Corr’s article, “How Women Conquered the World of Fiction”, she speaks of the shift that has occurred from the 1980s and 1990s (and, as she adds tartly, from “the previous 6,000 or so years of male cultural hegemony”), where the “writers we considered our leading novelists were men”, to now (2021: online). As Thomas-Corr explains, women are now championed by industry-shaping literary publishing houses like Vintage and Faber & Faber, and often dominate awards shortlists. Thomas-Corr cites several buzzy authors of this thesis, like Rachel Cusk, Ottessa Moshfegh and Megan Nolan, and compares their cultural presence to male authors—she names Max Porter (who I referenced in my still life chapter), describing him as one of a very small “handful” of known names—ultimately decreeing that none of them have “anything like the cultural buzz of a Sally Rooney” (online). The growth of the female author in the 21st century seems to be supported by several trends this thesis has also uncovered, like the gender reading gap, and as Thomas-Corr cites, women now make up 78% of editorial staff at publishing houses. She also speaks to other factors, like the growth of female-led book podcasts and online book clubs.¹³⁸ Thomas-Corr also theorises that today’s male literary fiction writers “aren’t

¹³⁸ Although these do not exclusively endorse literary texts or books by women, female authors tend to dominate on these forums, and many texts of this thesis have enjoyed an upswing in popularity and acclaim through these mediums. Beginning with perhaps the originary *Oprah’s Book Club*, which was started in 1996 by Oprah Winfrey, today Emma Robert’s *Belletrist* is a hugely popular independent female author supporting platform and *Reese’s Book Club* by Reese Witherspoon is also an increasingly dominant arbiter of taste for both books and their cinematic adaptations. Also popular is millennial author Dolly Alderton’s *The High Low*, Emma Watson’s *Our Shared Shelf*, Florence Welsh’s *Between Two Books* (which has included personal recommendations from both Sally Rooney and Greta Gerwig in the past) and Kaia Gerber’s book club, all of which have vast social media presences.

writing from the dominant point of view or with the self-assurance” that male writers had in the past (online), and that this may impact both their writing and its reception.

While neither Thomas-Corr nor the host of writers and publishers she speaks to are in support of erasing men from the novel, or diminishing their achievements (nor am I myself), one comment from male author Sam Byers (most notably of *Come Join Our Disease*, 2021), is particularly striking. Byers opines that now is a particularly fertile time for the novel for both genders due to the aesthetic innovations of women—he cites Rachel Cusk and Eimear McBride—who are “breaking down traditional forms” (in Thomas-Corr 2021: online). What Thomas-Corr’s conversations with a cross-section of the literary community evince, is that the literary space into which women and men are emerging has changed significantly, because men’s status “no longer feels dominant” (online). An analogous article by Smith on screen cultures captures a similar sentiment. She pinpoints the works of female filmmakers and television showrunners, who have likewise been addressed in this thesis—like Céline Sciamma and Phoebe Waller-Bridge—and who are increasingly dominant on screens and in cultural commentary. Smith states that there has been a steady rise in the number of films and television shows by women who are making texts from a “female vantage point” and “sensibility” (2020: online). She argues that, while not reactionary, this growing body of work counters the standard visual male portrayal of women and balances the power dynamics of the male gaze, which tends to separate the person seeing and the person being seen (2020: online), proposing a transformation of how film looks and how women are depicted on-screen.

What all of this means is that—at least with regards to newer texts produced in the 21st century, given that undoing canonisation is difficult and, in my opinion, generally unlikely—there may now, and in future, no longer be a de-facto male dominant aesthetic or way of seeing art, in both the realm of literature and cinema (and, as Smith (2020) argues, in television). So too, the space of cultural criticism in which those texts are evaluated and valued may also no

longer be a de-facto male space. As such, given that men's status may no longer be dominant, especially in the novel—in film although maleness still stands as structurally hegemonic, I would suggest its dominance is no longer unchallengeable—this means that many gendered assumptions about female and feminine aesthetics may be positively reframed. Much as Smith (2020) portrays the female gaze in contemporary texts as a balancing or mediating force for the male gaze, perhaps the ultimate result of this proliferation of new and reimagined styles by women is that there will no longer be a dominant space, but rather a more open and balanced one. In my thriller chapter I spoke of contemporary female creators' confidence in fusing traditionally feminine and masculine forms of expression but suggested that the opposite was rarely seen. Author Rob Doyle (most notably of *Threshold*, 2020) told Thomas-Corr, men's loss of dominance and this aesthetic recentring may benefit men artistically, given that "great literature" often comes from a position of "opposition" (in Thomas-Corr 2021: online).¹³⁹ I would add that, if associations in art of 'female frippery' are finally vanquished, perhaps men and women alike can embody feminine and masculine aesthetic properties without 'opposition', and continue moving them towards new, less gendered outposts.

On the other hand, while this shifting landscape is broadly positive, especially for women in literary fiction—and also in genre fiction, where Thomas-Corr's article advocates that they are similarly making gains—Thomas-Corr cautions that although women are now statistically ahead of men in participation and editorship, female novelists are not necessarily afforded the same level of cultural respect. Moreover, in future, she questions whether the dominance of women may lead to the novel being "dismissed as a feminised form" (2021:

¹³⁹ The notion that male creators today may consciously be writing from a non-central or oppositional standpoint, and also from one of greater gender consciousness in which they may not take their maleness or masculinity as implicit, both supports my proposal that a sort of decentring has taken place—where male aesthetics cannot assume to be the central position—and further affirms that a dedicated study of male aesthetics and the male gaze in the 21st century is warranted.

online).¹⁴⁰ This concern is a valid one, which could similarly reinforce gender divisions in cinema as women's authorial impact in the medium broadens. When Korsmeyer asked the question in 2004, "amid all these changes, have the concepts of artist and art also utterly changed, such that their implicit masculine gender has all but faded away?", she answered that this was not the case (2004: 128). While she referred to female and particularly feminist artists as "pathbreaking innovators" she conceded that "breakaway movements in art remain to that extent bound to rejected legacies, which therefore retain much of their power in these acts of confrontation" (128-129). However today, upholding the postfeminist and post-confrontational framework that I have established, the pendulum has certainly swung a little. Today, masculinity is often interrogated both in and around texts, meaning the gendering of taste is certainly less 'implicit'. Moreover, the aesthetics of this thesis—which as I have attested above, generally represent an evolving or evolution of what has come before rather than a confrontational dismantling—showcase a more effective recentring, one that does not have to be bound to rejected legacies but rather turns its face openly and receptively towards the new.

UNADDRESSED OUTPOSTS OF THE FEMALE GAZE: CONSIDERING FEMALE AESTHETICS AT A BROADER SCOPE

Although my work has tried to find a productive balance between a close focus on landmark texts—which if used exclusively may risk missing out on the true contours of these broad modes, movements, and genres—with a more encyclopaedic study—which if employed

¹⁴⁰ This, sadly, seems plausible given the fact that male readers "consciously or unconsciously, do not accord female authors as much authority as male ones" and assume that "women's books aren't for them" (Sieghart 2022: 218-219). In my still life chapter, I addressed the reading gap, however I did not unpack that this gap reveals that men are not only reading less than women but that they almost only read books authored by men. Recent figures show that "for the top ten bestselling female authors" only "19% of their readers are men and 81% women" (Sieghart 2022: 217).

primarily may miss the specificities and nuances of these modes, and therefore become superficial, it is a process of selection and omission. Similarly, as it pertains to the modes of this dissertation there are other genres that have eclipsed my remark. In established modes, science fiction, for instance, is a genre alike thrillers and horror in its often-entrenched masculine perspective, and thus could have made for compelling study. Naomi Alderman's Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction winning, distinctly matriarchal manuscript-within-a-novel *The Power* (2016) and Agnieszka Smoczyńska Polish language debut *The Lure* (2015), a simultaneously glittering and sinister, neon and oneiric *The Little Mermaid* subversion would both prove fascinating source material. Likewise, in my chapter on metamodernism, I stated that non-fiction filmmaking is the realm of cinema in which women's works have flourished most, which suggests the worth of a study of non-fiction aesthetics. As Winston *et al.* attest, in the 21st century "most vividly for women, the legitimation of subjectivity" in documentary has opened "the door to previously suppressed modes of expression" (2017: 127), and I believe touchstone works like Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) would showcase a particularly rich and layered aesthetic, one that could be used to draw interesting lines between the fiction genres I have explored.

There are also other nascent modes that verge beyond conventional modal and generic umbrellas that have also eclipsed the lines of my inquiry here. Most notably among them may be Cli-Fi, which draws from the legacy of dystopian and science fiction, but in an acutely 21st century manner. While its popularity has led to recent works of criticism—including Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019), Johns-Putra and Sultzbach (2022), Mundler (2022)—as a primarily ideological movement, less attention has been given to its aesthetic textures, and to gendered patterns. In this context, books like Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020), could be illuminating; the novel taps into several of the core aesthetic tendencies I have tracked in this thesis. Beyond the text as a climate change parable, Cook favours a primarily muted and distant

aesthetic that “destabilis(es) our sense of time, pull(s) the perspective back, and blur(s) details”, except for when she turns her gaze to the landscape, which she frequently does, where she evokes a “harsh, dazzling setting” with vivid precision (Obreht 2020: online). Murray and Heumann (2016) were some of the first to parallel this realm of fiction to what they termed the new cli-fi cinema, a to-date very nebulously defined field, associated with big blockbusters on one end and unsettling and unnerving arthouse films like Clare Denis’ characteristically darkly and hauntingly beautiful *High Life* (2018) on the other; suggesting that the aesthetic grammar of the movement would benefit from being excavated in a similar manner to which I have approached the new modes of this dissertation.

Thinking beyond the aesthetic and generic plane, as previous chapters have illuminated, a more intersectional approach to the concept of the female gaze is also deeply warranted. As such, this study could be replicated through the study of texts that have been authored by women of colour and/or women with intersectional identities.¹⁴¹ The recent Man Booker winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo is written in a polyphonic manner with a blend of poetry and prose that could suggest a particular kind of mixed-media novel is developing in the hands of women of colour in the 21st century. This is an idea supported by works like *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine, which artfully weaves together essays, poetry, and images, and through a fusion of pithy vignettes and longer meditations on race creates something which expands beyond traditional dictates of form. Equally, in akin yet distinct ways to the new modes examined in this dissertation, women of colour are reimagining the aesthetic terms of realism in film. Ava DuVernay’s muted and

¹⁴¹ Beyond this, a much more internationally aware analysis also beckons. Despite my suggestion of an increasingly global and shared literary and filmic culture—which I uphold—my analysis, by nature of my study in English Studies, has resulted in a diverse world of global female expression being minimised. For example, texts like Maren Ade’s *Toni Erdmann* undoubtedly deserve study at the level of July’s *Kajillionaire*, and there are entire film and literary cultures that are developing in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East whose aesthetic and thematic terms are directed by women.

tender ‘still life’ portrayal of both suburban sadness and beauty in *Middle of Nowhere* (2012)—one underscored by the political realities of being black and a woman—comes to mind. Her intimate filmic gaze saw DuVernay become the first woman of colour to win the Best Director Award at Sundance Film Festival. Mati Diop’s moving fusion of neo-realist social commentary on life in Dakar, Senegal, with a supernatural love story in *Atlantics* (2019), showcases another new outpost for realism, one which also aesthetically transforms the tenets of magical realism and its relationship to postcolonial expression. Like DuVernay, Diop’s subtly new style saw her become the first black female director in competition for the Palme d’Or at Cannes. A more concrete aesthetically focused study of these texts would be of value in and of itself, and it could also be used in a kind of retroactive conversation with the texts of this thesis.

In my introduction I caveated that my analysis would study the works of cisgender women, an issue I wanted to approach with due sensitivity. Again, without diverging too far, nor re-treading too much, transgender artmaking as an emerging mode offers exceptionally compelling possibilities. So too might the future of non-binary film and literature prompt a rethinking of the ways in which we analyse and categorize the works of both genders. More specifically, on the aesthetic terms that underpin this thesis, a new mode of literary fiction written by openly transgender authors is making itself apparent. Torrey Peters’ debut novel, *Detransition, Baby* (2021)—which saw her nominated as the first openly transgender woman for the Women’s Prize for Fiction—is a formative text. Much as Rooney has been appointed ‘the first great millennial novelist’ for her interpolation of 21st century communication trends and her unmistakably millennial voice, Peters has drawn the same accord as ‘the first great trans realist novelist’ (Lavery 2021: online). As Lavery suggests, Peters “breezily plays with the structural conventions of literary realism” by highlighting “typifying vignettes that will be familiar to readers of contemporary trans writing, especially as its protocols were thrashed out on Tumblr and WordPress in the 2000s” (online). Though these examples are necessarily

limited in scope, these unaddressed outposts of the female gaze reflect that there is still much left to be investigated in female aesthetics, in complement to what has been undertaken here.

THE FUTURE OF FEMALE AESTHETICS

I titled this dissertation the ‘evolving possibilities’ of postfeminist aesthetics, and accordingly I have tried to place the texts of this thesis on a kind of ongoing continuum, understanding that my study of 21st century styles arrives only after two decades of evolution; and, thus, that much more is to unfold. Though the significance of some of the texts of this thesis may be eroded in time, even in as little as another twenty years, the female writers and filmmakers of today are shaping the aesthetic conditions of now, and therefore also—considering aesthetics as a ceaseless process of evolution—to some extent, those of the future. While it is challenging for any creator or critic to question what the texts of the present and their formal qualities will augur for the future, it is also vital. Thus, I want to conclude by very concisely considering what the texts and modes of this dissertation, of this ‘now’—as well as the aesthetic de-centring and recentring that I have proposed—may reflect for the future of female aesthetics.

Within my overarching framework of gender, the gaze and aesthetics, this thesis has ultimately been structured through my consideration of the expression of gender through genre and mode. However, as I established at the outset, and as my dissertation has evinced, these are not closed concepts, but rather exist in a state of constant renegotiation, and perhaps more so now than ever before in history. As the preceding part of this conclusion reinforced, there is always a tension between celebrating the possibility of gendered and expression and confining it. In order to celebrate without confining, I have tended to lightly skirt around more pressing

questions of gender in the 21st century and, likewise, I have softly mediated ideas about gender as biology verse gender as cultural determinism.

Therefore, although this dissertation has been this rather positive and celebratory thing, which perhaps stems from my own relationship to the postfeminist sensibility, gender is currently at a paradoxical place. Although one generation, Gen Z, appears to be currently moving away from gender as we know it—on biological, cultural, and essential terms—at least in certain circles, ‘gender’ is for many generations a more loaded term and concept than ever. Judith Butler, who advocates for a cultural rather than essential model of gender, has emphatically stated that “we need gender studies more than ever” because we are occupying a moment in which “‘gender’ attracts, condenses, and electrifies a diverse set of social and economic anxieties” across cultures and across politics (2021: online). Although I cannot resolve these fluctuations and contestations here, they feel pressing and timely. Given the absent or light gender politics of many of the female-authored texts of this thesis, and likewise—at many points—my own analysis, which is also characteristic of postfeminism, it will be interesting to chart how postfeminism as a theory, movement and sensibility negotiates these near-antithetical interpretations of gender in the near future. Taking the aesthetic evolutions of this century as by-products of postfeminism—including its interest in femininity, its individualisation, its sexualisation, its pro and anti-feminist strains, its aestheticism (Gill 2007)—it is likely that, in whatever manner gender, gender theories and gender sensibilities evolve in the coming years, they will contribute to the development and production of new styles and forms of expression, as well as their reception.

Considering the generic hybridity and reflexivity that this thesis has also revealed—and how it has likewise showcased the various ways in which women in the 21st century are confidently working in-between and beyond categories that were often established in an aesthetic period in which men were the accepted tastemakers—the ongoing value of generic

labels as a determining assessment of texts can also be questioned. Particularly in my analysis of the swiftly evolving millennial mode, and as I likewise broached in my horror chapter, I have presupposed a certain speed to generic formation in the 21st century, which may similarly invite a reconsideration of its worth as a definitional system. Although, Moretti may disagree with the certain newness I have attached to this ephemerality, given that he states that “temporary structures” is a “good definition” for genres (2005: 14). However, there still seems to be a significant reduction from the 25–30-year genre life cycle Moretti defined to the landscape of today, which—if my work is to be considered—may come into being, evolve and unravel in as little as five years. For Moretti, genre formation is “the same comet that keeps crossing and recrossing the sky” where gender and genre are generally “in synchrony” (27). Yet, in the 21st century, it is harder to picture this metronymic, predictable comet.

There are significant trends that are very rapidly and very profoundly shifting the genre landscape, and they are driven in huge part by young women. I am thinking here most specifically of BookTok, and what De Leon calls its “trope-ification” of books (2022: online). As De Leon explains, BookTok creators use tropes like the very millennial “morally grey main characters” as “search engine optimization terms to package their content and convey the ‘vibe’ of a book” (online) and make videos that are “inspired by the mood or the ‘aesthetic’” of books (Flood 2021: online). The scale of this phenomenon makes it unignorable for any theorist studying the literature of now—in early 2023, #booktok has accrued 115 billion views on TikTok¹⁴²—and both Flood and De Leon pinpoint BookTok’s influence upon the bestseller lists of books for the last two years. Although slower to start, #filmtok is a growing and comparable form of responding to films, and the hashtag now has over 18.4 billion views.¹⁴³ In

¹⁴² As a point of comparison, when Flood’s article was published in June 2021, she states that #booktok had attracted 9.6 billion views, reflecting a massive upswell in just one year and a half.

¹⁴³ Likewise, #movietok has over 12.8 billion views, #cinematok has another 1.7 billion, and so on.

this way BookTok and FilmTok perhaps herald even greater hybridisation between genres, and new ways of considering what a genre is defined by. Considering this as a phenomenon driven by the tastes of young women also says something interesting about the established and entrenched means of classifying and approaching texts, and how they may or may not serve female creators and audiences; as I foregrounded in my chapter on millennial fiction, women’s work is often left uncategorised or is pushed into deeply niche genres (Raymond 2015, Badley *et al.* 2016, Perkins 2016). In their aesthetic focus the BookTok/FilmTok phenomenon reflects an increasingly aesthetic response to texts, which may in turn encourage greater aesthetic attention in their production. The head of marketing for publishing house Simon & Schuster says BookTok is about “making books cinematic” and “showing what you get from a book beyond words” (Horrox in Flood 2021: online), speaking to the collective visual and haptic orientation I have charted in the female authored novels of this dissertation. De Leon more conclusively states that editors and writers are now planning “books around tropes trending on TikTok”, but she—reinforcing the quicksand environ of genre today—cautions this may ultimately serve to make these “trend(s)” more “fleeting” (2022: online).

AN ONGOING SEARCH FOR THE FEMALE GAZE: THE ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES OF POSTFEMINIST AESTHETICS

With the final words of this thesis, I do not intend to dismantle gender and genre, nor their interrelationship. However, it feels clear that their current positions are not fixed. In consideration of the bi-directional meaning making of aesthetics that I began this thesis with (Lasky 2014), if our understandings of gender and genre—and likewise aesthetics and the female gaze—further evolves in the future, it will be in part due to the aesthetically captivating, affective and layered work of the artists *of today*, and likewise the many female scholars and critics who I have cited in this dissertation. These women have, in individual and shared ways,

worked towards a recentring of taste, not only in art itself, but in criticism, both academic and popular, changes that will continue to resonate and evolve in the coming years. Likewise, these women have worked to construct new ways of seeing the female experience in the 21st century, and new ways of representing that sight. Most simply, they have worked to create new ways to tell women's stories, including the telling of *new* women's stories. In this way, the female creators and critics of this thesis are therefore—as I first proposed in my millennial chapter—shaping the contours of women's experiences today and into the future.

As I reach the end of my search for the female gaze, I cannot help but feel that there is still so much to be seen, uncovered and understood, and so much yet to come. My search, therefore, is best labelled as an ongoing one. I used the word celebration in my preceding section and although it may be an unconventional term for a critical inquiry it may well be the best one. Witnessing and charting the aesthetic landscape of female authored and directed texts—which has expanded and evolved even as I wrote this analysis—has been, in many senses, a celebratory act. It has been an act that has affirmed the incredibly textured and alive nuances of the texts of some of this century's most influential and talented artists. It has likewise been an act that has spoken to the collective power of women to forge new voices and gazes, new aesthetic outposts to represent those voices and gazes, and new ways of valuing and perceiving those aesthetic outposts. With many of the female authors and auteurs of this thesis only at the beginning or mid-point of their personal creative journeys, they alone will continue to fuel an aesthetic landscape of endless possibilities; and, if the shifts—both gentle and more profound—that this thesis have traced grow in the future, their voices and gazes will continue to join with an increasingly diverse and prominent chorus.

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