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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

That film means a lot to us is obvious. But what does film mean to you? The answer to that is as varied and infinite as film itself. Our identifications with a particular film or television show are ones which we hardly ever forget, and the associations are ones we carry throughout our lives; whether it be something as simple as a hilariously executed Amy Poehler joke or as complex as the nostalgia felt when visiting the 1960s alongside Don Draper. No matter what, those identifications are our own. The implications, however, are not. They are a product of a larger ideological landscape, one that we all share and have hoped to bring to the forefront in this issue.

EyeCandy is the canvas on which we tease out those implications and cull out of those passions an insight into the actual state of our community. And this is a transformation we prize above all else. In the construction of this journal we were presented with a challenge that mirrors the very objective of the journal itself: building up our creation from nothing. This journal was an infant in the care of a collective, a group of people who came together to experience week-by-week the real struggle to have a functional, communicative, and caring community which unifies to create something meaningful. And we did it.

This volume stands not only as a testament to the growth of both that group and that journal, but of what it means to build the awareness of a real, thriving community here in our town of Santa Cruz - and by extension the world at large. What we hope you gain isn't just a greater appreciation of film. Whether you love the art form with a passion, or just like a good popcorn-filled evening, our goal is the same. What we hope you realize is that the values we've imparted to our “newborn” of an issue are those we hope to impart to you as well: creativity, agency, awareness, and change.

We needn't sit in the cinema in awe at what intricate commentary has been laid out before our eyes. Makers and writers of film alike can see that the cinema doesn't just “say” something about society. It actively does something to it. It's a two-way street, and one you live on; regardless of whether your career has anything to do with film. This is what we hope you'll realize when reading these articles. We've not just sat back and listened to these films say something to us, but have taken it upon ourselves to do something with our love for those images by giving back to our peers. And you can too. We suggest you start by having a good read.

KELSEY CARTER & LEO ROBERTSON
CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF
Don Draper (Jon Hamm) in *Mad Men* (2007, Matthew Weiner)
When I started out writing this piece, I knew I wanted to look at nostalgia, as it seems to have dominated visual culture in recent years. Looking at Hollywood, this was obvious; the two major Oscar contenders this year were *Hugo* and *The Artist*, films dedicated to remembering and reconstructing the age of silent cinema. Then there were films like *Midnight in Paris*, *My Week with Marilyn*, *War Horse*, and the seemingly endless stream of reboots, remakes, and superhero films. Even films perceived as forward-looking — think *Drive* and *The Tree of Life* — were imbued with that nostalgic impulse. I felt its presence locally as well, most strikingly in the Del Mar Theatre’s reheashing of its midnight movie programming to include films like *Space Jam* and *Good Burger*, films whose sole value is nostalgia for the 1990s. I wanted to write about nostalgia because it felt dominant and at the same time unexplained. I wanted to know why we are so fixated on the past.

Settling into the subject, I knew the one thing I didn’t want to write about was *Mad Men* (2007–). It felt too bluntly obvious, utterly uninteresting. Then I realized that to write about contemporary nostalgia without including *Mad Men* would be ludicrous and deliberately myopic. *Mad Men* is one of those cultural landmarks that people feel connected to beyond its entertainment value. Like *The Sopranos* (1997–2007) before it, it’s one of those shows that people bond over and debate about. A quick Google search will yield dozens of fan sites and blogs dedicated to episode recaps and overly impassioned discussion. This is another reason I wanted to avoid writing about the show: I’m too big a fan. Simply put, I like *Mad Men* too much, and I was afraid of ruining it for myself by looking at it critically. Fortunately, the opposite turned out to be true. It’s a show riddled with problems and complexities, and there is a lot about it that’s uncomfortable, but this is what ultimately makes it vital and interesting.

The eminent Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson formulates the nostalgia film as one that “does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality,” but instead “reinvents the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an
older period.” The effect of this, for Jameson, is that the nostalgia film abstracts from “real” history to create a representation based on “stylistic allusion.” The nostalgia film is thus not a true engagement with the past; it’s too busy mythologizing it to provide any kind of critical reading. While there are elements of Jameson’s sense of nostalgia in the show, *Mad Men*’s brand of nostalgia feels like it’s doing something different. The nostalgia in *Mad Men* is labyrinthine and contradictory; it refuses any kind of simplistic reading. I want to highlight what I see as *Mad Men*’s deeply conflicted relationship to the past it depicts, and ultimately argue that its particular form of remembering reflects the nostalgia of its audience.

**The Times They Are a-Changin’**

*Mad Men* positions itself in a time period rarely depicted in mainstream visual culture: the beginning portion of the 1960s. While the 1950s and the “turbulent” late ‘60s are often portrayed, the first half of that decade is often neglected. This period is a kind of hybrid era; it retains some of the perceived innocence of the ‘50s while the seeds of the tumult that marked the late ‘60s were just starting to sprout. It was pre-Watergate, pre–civil rights, and America’s last war was seen as a just one. The Beatles were just emerging and Bob Dylan still went by Robert Zimmerman. It was the tail end of the sort of youthful, innocent period that nostalgia films like to invoke.

Of course, the ‘50s and early ‘60s were never really the idyllic Caucasian nuclear fantasy that nostalgia films portray, but *Mad Men* deliberately narrows its scope. It makes itself a show about white people with money, and thus is able to shut out some of the more troubling aspects of its era. In other words, the world of *Mad Men* reflects the world of its characters. In this way it aligns itself with its target audience: the affluent over-30 crowd.

All of these observations are an attempt at finding an answer to the question of what exactly *Mad Men* is nostalgic about. It seems to me that they want to recreate the moment before the storm, when identity and boundaries were rigid and a clear power structure was in place. The plot’s focus on an advertising firm — a new, powerful, and cynical entity in the early ‘60s — is significant. *Mad Men*’s characters haven’t completely subscribed to the dream of their era — they are the ones constructing it. Their job is to understand American consciousness and desire and simultaneously to shape it. Furthermore, they are manufacturing this dream at the precise moment it begins to unravel. The question, then, is what *Mad Men* has to say about this dream.

**A Nostalgia of Seduction**

The visual grammar of the show is largely borrowed from the era it depicts, and rejects modern cinema’s tendency toward what film historian David Bordwell calls “intensified continuity.” This term refers to a formal strategy in modern filmmaking marked by rapid editing, close framing, a wide variety of focal lengths, and a highly mobile camera. *Mad Men* rejects these strategies in favor of more classical formal tactics. For instance, the show eschews Steadicam and handheld camerawork in favor of a static frame and elaborate, fluid dolly shots. It favors wide, inclusive shots in deep focus that include both the characters and the interior spaces they inhabit within the frame. Additionally, the show has a predilection for employing old-fashioned effects like fades and dissolves, rare in modern film and virtually absent from television. The color scheme of the show, marked by solid colors that are sharply delineated, hearkens back to the days of Technicolor. The effect of all these classicist formal tendencies is a beautiful, cinematic image. The show looks too good for television, and seems a better fit for one of the lavish old movie houses of cinema’s golden age. The reactions to the show reflect this, as it’s hard to find a review that doesn’t pay lip service to its meticulous visual style.

Perhaps the most seductive elements of *Mad Men*’s aesthetic are those that populate the frame itself — the fashions and period sets pieces. The appeal of the *Mad Men* style is evident in the way its influence has manifested itself in
certain cultural zones. For instance, Oprah, arguably the most influential woman in American culture, produced a *Mad Men*-inspired episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* called “Oprah Goes Back in Time: The ’60s” back in 2009. On the show, she interviewed the cast of *Mad Men* and shared some of her “favorite things” from the era, including a Jackie Kennedy Barbie and hair rollers. Banana Republic, the Gap-owned retail store, has developed a popular *Mad Men* clothing line. Pencil skirts are popular again and suit sales have apparently gone up since the series began, according to a piece in *The Guardian*. I can’t help but wonder if Lucky Strike’s stock has risen recently as well. The appropriation of ’60s fashion and paraphernalia by fans of the show is hardly surprising, as the show takes pains to construct a world both period-accurate and sumptuous. Even for a critical viewer like me, the show’s style is one of its central pleasures. This is not solely because the fashions featured on the show are draped over extremely attractive people. In the logic of *Mad Men*’s universe, style is an essential part of character and is a source of meaning for the audience. For instance, Peggy begins the series in rather frumpy attire and becomes increasingly chic as she gains power, while Joan maintains a certain kind of power and agency largely through her sexually charged wardrobe. Betty and Don both take a great deal of care in their appearance, but neglect it in their lowest moments. My point here is that style is not incidental — it’s one of the show’s most important signifiers.

The popularity of the fashion in *Mad Men* becomes troubling when you consider much of what’s being signified. A central function of fashion in the show, quite explicitly sometimes, is to indicate gender roles and identities specific to that era, many of which are problematic in a contemporary context. Don Draper’s tailored suits, his combed hair and clean-shaven jaw, his cocktail and his perpetual cigarette all represent an archaic myth of American manhood. They point to a powerful, dominant will, rugged individualism, and a solitary, masculine intelligence. Don is well groomed without being overly so, and we sometimes see him disheveled in the morning or channeling Brando in tucked in white t-shirt and khakis. These digressions from his typical dark suit and tie only bolster the sense of a powerfully masculine character. Less virile forms of masculinity find their expression in style as well. Sal, one of the only significant gay characters, is more likely to incorporate patterns, colors, and accessories into his wardrobe. These stylistic flair, his pinstripes and occasional scarf, codify his queerness. Pete Campbell, whom we are made to sympathize with but not admire, represents a slight stylistic departure from the Don Draper ideal. For some reason, be it because his hair is too perfectly combed or his suit is slightly off-color or ill-fitting, his appearance always falls slightly short of that masculine ideal. In the logic of the show, this is in line with his character, which is spoiled, self-pitying, and occasionally cowardly. The women, particularly the wives, express the myth of the domestic feminine in their appearance. Betty Draper takes pains to always look pristine, and indeed she always does. She always wears a modest amount of makeup and knows how to dress appropriately in different contexts. At home, in a sundress or form-fitting sweater, she exudes a quiet, domestic sexuality. In public, she performs the role of Don’s wife with special finesse. She is cosmopolitan but slightly coy, she looks wealthy but never gaudy, her dress is somewhat sexualized but she is far from a tramp. Betty’s narrative is that of a woman constantly performing, and her style is an extension of this. In moments when that performance begins to break down, her appearance follows suit, as in season one, when she momentarily decides to stop her masquerade and lounges around the house without makeup.

“The women, particularly the wives, express the myth of the domestic feminine in their appearance”
in a bathrobe for a week.

As with the men and masculinity, other styles of femininity are signified through the women’s fashion. There are the secretaries, in pencil skirts and form-fitting blouses — which are often removed in office sexual liaisons. They seem to always come to work in lingerie. Joan is the ideal of this archetype, in heels and clothes that advertise her body while remaining appropriate for the workplace. The ad-men, as well as the camera, are endlessly interested in her appearance. Her body, constantly alluded to by the males and lingered over by the camera, references Marilyn Monroe. Her bombastic sexuality is a source of power for her, as it allows her a mobility and agency beyond that of the other girls, but she is ultimately punished for it when she is raped by her fiancée.

While the show invites some of these descriptions to be read as critique — Betty is miserable in her endless performance and Don is utterly lost in his masculine identity — that kind of reading ultimately fails. The critique is there on some level, but is submerged, overshadowed by the way the show glamorizes and eroticizes its own world. The style of the era is foregrounded and offered up as a source of pleasure in itself. The show’s impulse to criticize Don Draper, occasionally showing itself, is counteracted by the impulse to idealize him. He is a failure of a family man and terribly unhappy, but he is also undeniably, astoundingly cool. His place is in a long tradition of iconic American males — Jack Nicholson, Marlon Brando, Charles Bukowski—that demand both our pity and admiration. His masculinity is strong, solitary, hard but understanding; traditional but not rigidly so; sexy; normal but not overly conformist; and damaged in a romantic way. He is John Wayne meets Jack Nicholson, with a touch of Cary Grant’s class. Draper may be an awful role model, but his appeal is strong. For this reason, I’m not convinced that Mad Men critiques, but it’s not accurate to say it fully endorses, either. It’s hard to tell whether the show wants to condemn or commemorate its own world. It’s clear, though, that it aims to seduce. While sometimes it feels that Mad Men wants to be an indictment of a repressive era, it just as often feels like a eulogy for a time when men were men and women were women and the meaning of that was clear. When you could see all the boundaries and life had a stable texture.
Nostalgia and Knowingness

The show’s aesthetics — the classicist cinematography, the color palette, the meticulous attention to period detail — all contribute to a sense of “hyperreality” that pervades the world of the show. In other words, *Mad Men* is so painstakingly constructed, its world so full and autonomous, that it moves beyond realism and becomes something completely its own; it feels otherworldly. One of the effects of this hyperreality is that *Mad Men* feels completely self-contained. Everything that occurs in its world feels like a product of that world alone. The early 60s as constructed in the show, despite us knowing it is supposed to represent our past, feels broken off from our own time. The show establishes a disconnect between its world and our own, resulting in a kind of emotional cleavage between the past and the present.

Insofar as it fosters a sense of disassociation, *Mad Men* encourages its audience to adopt an attitude of “knowingness,” by which I mean the sentiment that “we thankfully know better now.” This isn’t solely a result of the show’s visual style; it is also a matter of focus, of what the show chooses to highlight. Especially in the early seasons, the show turns its critical eye toward practices and attitudes that are largely outdated. For instance, the show takes special pleasure in its pregnant characters, and emphasizes the ignorant practices of mid-twentieth century motherhood. The image of the mother-to-be happily downing cocktails and chain-smoking is a recurrent one and epitomizes the knowing attitude: Images like these are meant to shock us, but they are palatable because we feel we are above them. The fact that these practices are outdated renders them non-threatening. They are utterly foreign to us, and thus obscure our connection to the actual history. These images effectively localize the problems of the past onto outmoded practices, encouraging the attitude that we are beyond the issues of that past. The virtues of our present day are thus emphasized and exaggerated. The knowing attitude fosters the idea of progress; it is history patting itself on the back.

In contrast, many of the deep socio-political problems of the era, those that we still struggle with today, are often glossed over. The emerging civil rights movement is acknowledged but backgrounded. There are a handful of black characters, mostly in service positions around the office, but we don’t really have any access to them. Race is always peripheral in the *Mad Men* universe. Similarly, the Cold War is acknowledged — one episode has the Cuban Missile Crisis as its backdrop — but it is never a focus. The deeper problems of the era are each paid lip service but have no narrative force. Instead, they simply add to the atmosphere. Because these problems go unexplored, they remain impenetrable, and ultimately contribute to the disassociation we feel from *Mad Men*’s world.

The virtues of our present day are thus emphasized and exaggerated. The knowing attitude fosters the idea of progress; it is history patting itself on the back.

What I am trying to show here is that *Mad Men*’s vision of the past is easy to reckon with because it is only vaguely our own. This world is simultaneously seductive and alienating. It’s sumptuous and invites us in, but we find it largely inaccessible. We are encouraged to pass judgment on it but also replicate it. *Mad Men* creates a world that is both ours and not ours. Looking into that world, you don’t know whether to denounce it or mourn its passing.

Don Draper as Mirror

The finale of season two has Don Draper pitching a new campaign to the people at Kodak. “Nostalgia,” he says, “takes us to a place where we ache to go again, a place where we know that we are loved.” He speaks these lines slowly over slides of him playing with his wife and children, showing a seemingly happy Don Draper, an unfamiliar sight. For those absorbed in Draper’s story, this is a crushing moment, a hallmark example of the feeling of deep and irreparable loss that permeates the show. The speech is deeply felt; one teary ad-man even...
feels the need to leave the room. At the same time, it exemplifies Mad Men’s profound cynicism. While the speech is eloquent, even poetic, at the bottom of it all we are aware that it is an ad pitch, and a particularly exploitative one at that. Don’s position here is ambiguous. We don’t know whether he is sincere or cynical, and we suspect he’s both. His nostalgia in this scene, conflicted and near unreadable, epitomizes the nostalgia of the series.

It makes sense that Don Draper is our primary access point into Mad Men because his relationship to his world mirrors the audience’s. He has rejected his own past, his nefarious parentage and poverty inflected youth, and remade himself from scratch. He’s an apparent success; confident and strong willed, he is the envy of his peers. While he is outwardly stable, the foundations of this identity are extremely fragile. He is the eternal drifter, always vacillating between nostalgia and flight. Like Odysseus, that other great nostalgic hero, his journey is toward home. Unfortunately for Don, that home is unclear. It’s not a place as much as a void that demands to be filled. His relationship to the past is ambiguous; it is both a source of comfort and a source of terror. When he flees it he finds himself lost, but when he moves toward it he finds it lacking, always out of reach.

Don’s nostalgia, with paradox at its core, is profoundly of this moment. The myth of America, the land of freedom and innovation in all its youth and vitality, no longer holds the weight it used to. The old historical narratives, once stable and consoling, are contested. Despite the political right’s attempts to prove otherwise, American identity is an unstable concept, in a constant state of negotiation. New technologies have multiplied the voices in this conversation exponentially. While this potentially means democracy, it also means disorientation, a massive rootless shrieking that drowns out the sense of who you are. The nostalgia film (think American Graffiti or Dazed and Confused) has always addressed the conflict of identity by attempting to restore the past and represent it in idealized form, but this model is no longer effective. When our conception of home is contested, Mad Men is what our homesickness looks like. The show returns to the last moment in which America still saw itself as innocent and dwells there. It finds warmth as well as cynicism, beauty, and terror. The show longs for an older, more solid world while it exposes its shortcomings. It is ashamed of — and tries to cover up — its own longing.

After his nostalgia speech, Don Draper returns home with the intention of blowing off work and joining his family on a Thanksgiving trip. He walks in the door and informs Betty of his change of heart. Her smile exudes authentic warmth, the children are overjoyed, and we are treated with a rare moment of domestic bliss. Don is finally home and the dream is realized; the viewer experiences a catharsis like an encounter with the sacred. But then the scene begins again, Don walks in the door and calls out for his family. But they’ve already left. The resolution, the triumphant return home, is out of reach, and he’s going to spend the weekend alone. This is the space that Mad Men lives in; it revels in the pleasures of a mythical era but undercuts it with a persistent coldness. It creates the warmth of nostalgia but saturates it with a sense of inevitable loss. Right now, this speaks to us.

Resident Evil
Films and video games have had a very rough and one-sided relationship over the past couple of decades, especially in recent years. The film industry has become overbearing and abusive toward video games while games have remained soft-spoken and underappreciated. Like most unhealthy relationships, the abuse stems from an acute lack of understanding intertwined with a distinct sense of self-righteousness — resulting in the film industry continually dispensing films whose only goal is to cash in on the market that the video games have established on their own.

Video games have become one of the most profitable media, grossing a larger annual income than both the film and music industries combined, so it comes as no surprise that the powers that be would have interest in dipping their hand into the virtual pot. This is not dissimilar to the superhero movie phenomenon that has become so profitable in Hollywood, but for many reasons, video game movies tend to be of a far lesser quality. In fact, I would venture to bet that if one were to survey fifty different video game advocates on why the movies based on their hobby of choice tend to be so horrible, one would receive fifty different answers that focus on different aspects of the relationship. However if one were to break those fifty responses down, there would be three basic problems from which all the others flow: low budget, misunderstanding the appeal of games, and severe lack of fan service.

The budgets for video game movies are pitifully low on average; a majority of the films lie anywhere within the $10-50 million range of production budgets — a significantly lesser value than that of almost all Hollywood films. However, one must realize that most of the films based on video games don’t come out of Hollywood; they are produced by smaller production companies or individuals who are attempting to profit from the booming video game market. Interestingly, this used to be the reverse — video games had attempted to take advantage of the pervasiveness of film in order to expand their consumer base. An example of this is more than apparent in the 1989 film The Wizard, which was produced by Universal Pictures and heavily funded by Nintendo. The film
follows the exploits of a group of ragtag gamers but is more akin to an extended advertisement for Nintendo — which becomes evident as the young gamers encounter the wielder of the Nintendo Power Glove, a product that Nintendo had released earlier that year. Furthermore, the film culminates in the revealing of then-unseen footage of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, which would be released in the following months. Yet, by representing Nintendo products so faithfully in the film, it manages to capture the essence of gaming culture in ways that many films have since failed to do.

It is this failure to capture the essence of the gaming community, those mentalities and sensibilities that gamers share, that most clearly defines the failure of video game movies. The complete disregard for gaming culture, history, and growth causes video game movies to become shallow and disconnected from both their origins and their audience. Yet for the most part, superhero and comic book movies manage to adhere to the deep mythologies from which their characters are born, so it should not be assumed impossible to appease the scrutinizing eyes of nerds of other persuasions. Unfortunately, those of us who are persuaded toward virtual realms have been forced to suffer an utter decline in the quality of films ever since Steven Lisberger’s 1982 film, *Tron*.

*Tron* was released during the declining years of what has become known as “arcade culture,” a time during which the video arcade was the place to be — so much so that it was even common for a young man to take his date to the arcade after a romantic dinner. This cultural phenomenon, the golden era of arcades and the proliferation of virtual gaming across age and gender, paved the way for a movie like *Tron*, which focused not only on pop-culturally relevant circumstances but the escapism that any form of media provides as well. It did so in a way that pushed the boundaries of film while exploring and broadening the appeal of video games through Lisberger’s implementation of computer-generated graphics. The visual effects that have become the defining characteristic of *Tron* were met with hesitation from Disney studios, despite the fact that they were looking to attempt daring productions. Luckily, Lisberger managed to convince the studio of his abilities and *Tron* was made and met with praise and success, an occurrence that an extraordinarily few video game movies can truly boast.

If *Tron* was able to do so many things correctly, then where did video game movies
make their first mistake? That question is certainly open for debate, but the most prominent film that comes to mind is Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel's 1993 atrocity, *Super Mario Bros.* This film was so far removed from the actual game that it was nearly unrecognizable. Almost everyone in this day and age knows the basics of the *Super Mario Bros.* video game: a little man in overalls travels through the Mushroom Kingdom in pursuit of the kidnapped Princess Peach. Where Morton and Jankel got the idea for power crystals and jet boots is unknown, but they certainly did not come from the “Mario universe. In fact, the character names may be the only signifier that the movie is actually based on the game.

While Morton and Jankel may have soiled the most renowned video game in history, at least they knew when to throw in the towel — unlike Uwe Boll, who continues to desecrate video games and enrage fans by ceaselessly churning out horrible straight-to-video films based on numerous video game franchises. One might expect that the studios backing Boll would have eventually pulled the plug after every one of his films resulted in failure at the box office, and this has largely been the case. Unfortunately, the absence of studio funding has not stopped Boll from creating his films. Instead of working with and through studios, Uwe Boll finances his films largely through exploitation of the German government, which gives grants and tax exemption for German-made films. The law surrounding the tax-based funding of German films changed in 2005, but by that time, Boll had saved what he calls a “tax shelter fund,” and in spite of the law change, investors in German films receive a fifty percent refund from the government. This, in conjunction with the poorly made films, has created quite the stigma against Boll from gamers, film critics, and the German public alike.

One must realize, though, that making a film that adheres to the world of a video game is more difficult than simply recreating that world for the silver screen. Logistics and marketing often get in the way and force a redirection of films toward a broader demographic of viewers. Not to mention the difficulty of capturing a video game's narrative (which can span anywhere from ten to eighty hours) within the two hours of a feature film. Because of these hindrances associated with film, the possibility of video games being depicted on television warrants investigation. The episodic structure of television content allows video game-based shows to span across multiple hours, thus remaining faithful to the lengthy narratives that games often employ, and the lower budget of production allows for the creators to limit the influence of funding studios.

Sadly, video games within the realm of television are almost nonexistent. Most of the video game-based shows that do exist are animated, such as *The Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog* and *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show*, which benefits both the show and its faithfulness to the game-world in multiple ways. Firstly, animation allows for the manipulation of physics in ways that would be difficult to reproduce in a live-action situation, allowing for the notable mechanics and aesthetics of a game to be recreated in the show with relative ease. Secondly, animation is cheaper to produce than live-action projects, which allows for an allocation of finances that focuses on the narrative quality with respect to the franchise over visual effects — the reverse of what is typically...
seen within the film industry. Lastly, because the shows are animated, there is little dispute over who the target demographic should be; it is commonly accepted that cartoons are widely aimed at children. Thus, the narrative and production of the series is not subject to manipulation by marketing executives who are trying to reach a larger viewer base.

This is not to say that animation is universally better for creating game-based media but that it is easier. However, in the age of the Internet, we are beginning to see the potential of live-action productions based on video games, the likes of which we would never have seen in theaters. Many web-based videos focus on games and gaming culture, and due to the absence of a production studio and money-driven executives, the creators of the videos are able to form their projects as they see fit, often resulting in a more pure and unadulterated product. For example, the two-part short film *Escape from City 17*, directly based on the *Half-Life* franchise, takes place in a parallel storyline to that of the second game in the series. The short was produced by two fans of the game, the Purchase Brothers, on a budget of $500 and using equipment from previous projects. The final product was met with praise from critics, fans, and even Valve, the game studio responsible for *Half-Life*. Its success is largely attributed to its uncompromising loyalty to the game’s universe and its narrative, accomplished through the props, settings and overarching tone of the entire short.

Clearly, a large contributor to the success of the short is the fact that the Purchase Brothers are fans of the game that their film is based on. This is the factor that separates their project from commercial video game movies that boast large production values; the content captures the experience of the game as seen through the eyes of the player and does not feel the need to adhere to the profit-concerned Hollywood mode of production. Instead, it allows the project to remain a labor of love, which comes through in the final product in the best way possible. This new outlet for fans to reach a broad audience has created a space in which projects like *Escape from City 17* can prosper.

One person who has taken full advantage of the proliferation of the Internet to express her love of video games through film is actress Felicia Day. Perhaps best known for her role in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, the actress has found most of her work in Internet videos. Aside from her work on *Dr. Horrible*, Day has created and starred in two web series that are based on video games. Her first series, *The Guild*, focuses primarily on material surrounding MMOs, such as Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft*. In fact, Day has stated that the series is a product of her previous addiction to Blizzard’s game. Riddled with references to the fantasy MMO, the show takes a comedic stance by commenting on the bonds that players make with each other within the game and how those bonds carry over into the real world. What is notable about the series is the fact that it successfully and accurately captures the culture surrounding MMOs, particularly *World of Warcraft*.

*The Guild* has won multiple awards across its five-season run, earning Felicia Day the chance to create her second web series, *Dragon Age: Redemption*. *Redemption* is in many ways a step forward for video game cinema as a whole because the game developer, Bioware, requested and paid for the videos as a direct tie-in to its video game series. The show takes a comedic stance by commenting on the bonds that players make with each other within the game and how those bonds carry over into the real world. What is notable about the series is the fact that it successfully and accurately captures the culture surrounding MMOs, particularly *World of Warcraft*.

With two successful web series, Day has yet to slow down. In fact, she has increased her output six-fold. In April 2012, Day started a YouTube channel called *Geek and Sundry*, which focuses primarily on gaming and different modes of nerd culture. Day, along with Wil
Wheaton and others, created six shows that are featured on the channel, each targeting a different area of nerdy interests. The show topics include video games, tabletop games, comics, and even a science fiction and fantasy book club. Although the channel is young at the time of this writing, it is already receiving hundreds of thousands of views every week, a number that is sure to grow as knowledge of the channel spreads. Like The Guild, Dragon Age: Redemption, and Escape from City 17, we can attribute the success of the channel to two facts: First and foremost, it is a labor of love, a “dream come true” for Felicia Day. Secondly, the channel’s content is made by and for nerds and does not feel the need to compromise its content for the sake of profit.

We have established that film and television have tapped into the video game market by attempting to recreate that which makes the games so popular, but what about the inverse of that relationship? What have games taken from the film industry? Certainly, we must take into account the most literal inversion of the relationship: the adaptation of existing movies into video games. While these games exist in droves, they tend to suffer from a dilemma similar to that of movies based on games. Specifically, it is the problem of translating a two-hour film into a twenty-hour experience. That is not to say all games based on films are bad; there are some exceptions, though not many. Those particular instances of success usually function as side-stories to the film. For example, the universe of Riddick originally established itself and its characters through the films Pitch Black and The Chronicles of Riddick, but has since expanded through the games Escape from Butcher Bay and Assault on Dark Athena, which function as prequels to the films. The games were well received by both critics and fans of the universe; they even served as the entry point for many new fans who were not aware of the depth of the universe. It is these instances in which the game deviates from the rigid narrative of the film to expand the universe that we find movie-based video games to be successful or worth playing.

However, video games have taken much more from film than direct translations of a product from film to game, subtly taking film tropes and techniques regarding camera and narrative and reapplying them appropriately. The most prominent example of film within video games is realized in the controversial narrative technique of cutscenes. A cutscene is an occurrence that is common within narrative-based games during which control is taken from the player to present a scene that would otherwise be cut out of a movie. Prince of Persia: Sands of Time (2010, dir. Mike Newell)
the player to allow the screening of a cinematic sequence that is used for narrative progression. Cutscenes adhere to a purely cinematic mode, using camera movement and stylistic techniques that one would commonly find in the narrative-focused structure of film or television rather than the ludic structure of games. This is the source of much of the controversy surrounding cutscenes; they remove the agency from the player, shifting from active playing to passive watching. Yet, cutscenes have been — and continue to be — a staple in the structure of commercial video games.

Regardless of the controversy, it is undeniable that cutscenes are an attempt to capture the narrative techniques of film and reapply them to the narratives of games. Square Enix, the development team behind the Final Fantasy franchise, has employed cutscenes as a staple in their game design for a large majority of their games. The cutscenes have steadily gotten better aesthetically and continue to be a large source of praise for the series. The positive response, coupled with improving technology, enticed Square Enix to explore the possibilities of extended cutscenes to deepen the narrative of the universe. This prospect reached a high point in 2005 with the release of Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children, a feature-length film composed of computer-generated graphics that acts as a sequel to the game Final Fantasy VII. What is particularly interesting about Advent Children is that the film was made by the developers of the Final Fantasy franchise, many of which had no experience creating films. Simply by using the techniques they had learned from video games and previous experience creating cutscenes, the developers at Square Enix were able to create a well-crafted film that adhered firmly to the Final Fantasy universe.

The idea of implementing games as filmmaking tools has also manifested itself in machinima, which is the creation of films using the tools, environments, and characters within a video game’s engine. Most commonly, machinima is created through the manipulation of in-game cameras to imitate camera movements common to film and replacing or creating dialogue in the game to create narrative. Usually, these productions are created by fans and focus on expanding the existing narrative of a game, or creating narratives outside of the games. The latter is often slated toward a humorous glimpse into the lives of the game characters that players don’t see. One of the most popular instances of machinima is Red vs. Blue, a comedy based in the universe of Bungie’s celebrated first-person shooter, Halo. Using the first person perspective as a manipulable camera and subtle movements of onscreen characters to simulate talking, the world of Halo ceases to be an alien-infested warzone and becomes a set for the comedic antics of the RvB cast. The simply made and well-written machinima series quickly became a wild success and has paved the way for hundreds of others to explore this inexpensive yet potential-filled fusion of film and video games.

Another way in which the cinematic approach of cutscenes has affected the world of gaming is through the development of a new style of games and gameplay. In these games, such as Quantic Dream’s Heavy Rain, the focus is centered primarily on the narrative within the game and less concerned with the actual challenge of playing it. By prioritizing the narrative over the ludic nature that is assumed in games, much of the player’s agency is removed.

Unsurprisingly, this has been the source of much debate over the definition of a game, as well as the role of cutscenes within games. Many ludologists (those who advocate for gameplay over narrative) do not consider Heavy Rain to be a true game due to the excessive removal of player agency; they view it more in the vein of a movie or an extended cutscene. Meanwhile, narratologists (those who place narrative’s importance above gameplay) consider the Intellectual Property (IP) to be well within the definition of a game by arguing that any interaction with the software, no matter how insignificant, implies gameplay. However, the correct approach may be to view these works as neither game nor movie but as a new method of experiencing a narrative altogether, a way to bring the audience closer and to give them control over the outcome of the narrative, almost
like a digital Choose Your Own Adventure book – an interactive drama, if you will.

Perhaps somewhere down the line interactive dramas will become the standard in entertainment and the ludology vs. narratology arguments surrounding them will become null. I would certainly be open to the option of interacting with my favorite movies and television shows. Imagine if Lost had been an interactive drama, allowing the audience to choose the paths the characters take or participate in solving the puzzles of the island. But, as they say, wishful thinking gets you nowhere.

The future of video game films is overflowing with potential; movies such as the Resident Evil series show that video game movies are beginning to be taken more seriously, and they are being allowed larger budgets that are comparable to those of other Hollywood productions. Now, all that is missing is the right director with the right vision, someone who is well versed in video games as a whole — enough to recognize all the subtle cues, aesthetics, and gameplay mechanics that create a game’s unique appeal.

Luckily, Ubisoft Studios, the developer/publisher responsible for Assassin’s Creed and Splinter Cell, has recently opened a new film branch in Paris, which has already begun production of films based on the previously mentioned titles. However, the creation of this studio was a result of the financial success of Prince of Persia, another IP of Ubisoft that was adapted to film by Disney in 2010, so the influence of Hollywood juggernauts may be closer than one would like.

Still, I cannot look toward the future of video game films and not feel hopeful. From 1982’s Tron to present-day Resident Evil, video game movies have improved in production quality — now the quality of the content just needs to catch up. With fans producing films and distributing them via the Internet, the standard for that quality continues to rise and expectations continue to grow. Video games explore film’s structure with interactive dramas and the line that separates film from games has become blurred. Those who once focused only on games are beginning to take a chance in films, and vice-versa. Video games have begun to stand up for themselves, and their relationship with film has finally started finding some equilibrium.


Television, especially in today’s ratings-driven world, relies on what film professor Amelie Hastie calls the promise of “imminent revelation.” The thrill of anticipation, that suspense created by knowing what’s coming but not knowing when, is what enables television programs to retain viewers through multiple episodes and seasons. “Television itself — its very structure constituted by breaks, by a schedule that produces ellipses and interstices no matter what channel you are watching or even how you are watching — is always on the cusp of something. This structure moves us towards a continuous state of imminent revelation.”

This state of being “always on the cusp” is what makes television great as well as a difficult medium to work with. Pacing in television shows is always a delicate art, and especially on shows in which romantic relationships are a significant focus, there’s a fine line between jerking the audience along on a five-season game of will-they-won’t-they and boring them with relationships that never progress.

In shows such as ABC’s Castle (2009–), which gains viewers with the incredible chemistry between Kate Beckett and Richard Castle and subsequently loses them with the frustrating lack of developments, the financial need to extend a show’s run for as long as possible is even more at odds with the artistic vision than in more plot-driven television. In response to Castle star Nathan Fillion’s statement that “the lack of resolution is what keeps people coming back,” media scholar Henry Jenkins wrote, “I know what Fillion’s worried about — he’s worried about seeing something like what has happened to House this season. But the problem with House is not that House and Cuddy are...
in a relationship. The problem is that the writers do not have a clue how to depict a relationship between House and Cuddy in a way which shows any kind of emotional maturity, any kind of psychological depth, any kind of personal growth.” But in spite of Jenkins’ belief that meaningful, committed long-term romances on television are possible, such relationships are still extremely rare. Generally, writers confine character relationship to the safer route of time-tested on-again-off-again couplings, because serialized broadcast narratives and romantic closure are an unlikely friendship.

Romances in the form of dime-store novels and cheesy Hollywood blockbusters are popular because consumers know what to expect: 150 pages or two hours of romantic tension, a few surmountable obstacles, and eventually the deeply satisfying closure that comes with a Disney-style happy ending. Television, of course, tries to cash in on the emotional investment (and subsequent crowds of viewers) that Hollywood has mastered ever since Harold Lloyd stuttered his way to love in Girl Shy (1924), but the truth of the matter is that television is not cut out for romance in the way that movies and books are.

Romance is an appealing genre largely because of its promised closure, and the television format functions primarily by denying closure between episodes. In some romance-fueled shows (such as Gossip Girl [2007–], in which Serena van der Woodsen has an endless string of scandalous lovers) the desire for closure combined with the need for sufficiently tantalizing plot developments leads to a steady stream of new romantic partners. In other shows (such as Felicity [1998–2002], in which Felicity Porter essentially waffled between Ben and Noel for four seasons), the conundrum is solved by rotating repeatedly through one or two major couplings that constantly have borderline ridiculous obstacles thrown in the way of “true love.” Both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks. In a show like Gossip Girl, it is difficult to get too invested in (and get that all-important sense of closure from) a relationship that will be dust in the wind by the mid-season premiere, but in a show like Felicity, running laps around the love triangle can be exhausting. However, Felicity, Gossip Girl, and even Castle are commercially successful and generally well-liked. At times, the repetition and lack of substantial developments can be frustrating, but the ratings don’t lie: As much as I hate to admit it, something about these tactics does work.

But once in a while, a show manages to maintain some kind of narrative anticipation while avoiding the clichés and repetition of most romantic TV shows. Two shows aired in recent years have navigated the treacherous waters of television romance with surprising freshness and admirable skill. Pushing Daisies (2007–2009), Bryan Fuller’s hyper-saturated detective fantasy, and Misfits (2009–), Howard Overman’s gritty sci-fi teen soap, both exhibit their narrative ingenuity through very unusual relationship arcs.

Although the shows are extremely different, with Pushing Daisies portraying a saccharin world of near-excessive whimsy and Misfits taking a much darker and grittier route with an equally off-the-wall concept, both use the strangeness of their respective premises to sidestep the tired old plotlines of romantic sitcoms and soap operas by avoiding the consummation (and subsequent loss of emotional investment) of romantic relationships altogether. By using their (somewhat convoluted) mythology to create a reason for characters not to touch, both shows manage to create a relationship dynamic that is never quite satisfying. And because this lack of satisfaction is based on canonical foundations, these shows avoid making their audiences feel teased and taunted. The obstacles to the relationship are presented as part of the

“Writers confine character relationships to the safer route of time-tested on-again-off-again couplings.”
broader mythology of the show, not obstacles purely for obstacles’ sake.

In *Pushing Daisies*, Ned can bring the dead back to life with a brush of his finger. However, as you might expect, there is a caveat: If he touches the formerly-dead a second time, they die again — for good. Ned’s formerly dead childhood sweetheart, Chuck, lives in his house, works at his restaurant, and helps him solve mysteries. However, although their relationship is apparently exclusive, they can never touch each other in the ways a normal couple would. Over the course of the show’s two seasons, there are a few instances of pseudo-physical intimacy, when the couple kisses through a barrier of saran wrap or, more commonly, finds a way to simulate hand-holding.

It is worth noting that the show addresses sexual interactions between the two, or lack thereof, euphemistically at best; Chuck and Ned long for casual affectionate touches rather than sexual gratification. In “The Television World of *Pushing Daisies*,” Alissa Burger writes that “the sweet talk in *The Pie Hole* celebrates an alternative form of intimacy, one focused on language rather than physical touch.” The show uses what creator Bryan Fuller called “more written” dialogue to create a lighthearted world of whimsy, where hand-holding and alliterative sweet nothings are enough for a modern couple.

Some very successful shows (like *Gossip Girl*) focus much more on physical intimacy, treating sex not just as a voyeuristic spectacle, but also as well-established shorthand for relationships. A single act of intercourse conveys a certain kind of relationship between two characters, and requires less screen time (not to mention writing or acting finesse) than a less sexual approach. *Pushing Daisies*, however, attempts to build a relationship between Chuck and Ned through banter and significant looks alone, and, for the most part, succeeds. Granted, *Pushing Daisies* isn’t aiming for the same goals as more explicit shows like *Gossip Girl*. In fact, *Pushing Daisies* has more in common with *Castle*; just as *Castle’s* “imminent revelation” is the always-just-out-of-reach kiss between Castle and Beckett, *Pushing Daisies* fans always hope for a solution to Chuck and Ned’s problem. There is a constant focus on one central relationship, what fan studies refers to as the “one true pairing,” between two characters who are clearly meant to be together. Shows like *Pushing Daisies* and *Castle*, which have an obvious “one true pairing,” sacrifice the opportunity for gratuitous sex scenes with multiple partners in order to more fully develop fans’ emotional investment in the couple.
But for the most part, the chemistry is enough in *Pushing Daisies*, and the flirting between Chuck and Ned has sustained an audience for two seasons and beyond. (After the show’s cancellation, Bryan Fuller began working on a much-anticipated comic book to bring the series to a close, but the deal fell through when the WildStorm publishing company shut down.) Fans of *Pushing Daisies* watched for many reasons; some came for the dialogue, some for the characters, and some for the stories. But the relationship between Chuck and Ned, whether it was a major draw or simply icing on the television cake, kept *Pushing Daisies* fans interested without making them angry. The relationship doesn’t feel forced, because the reasoning behind the couple’s no-contact policy is firmly rooted in the show’s mythology. It is excitingly frustrating in a way that makes viewers tune in next week, not the kind of frustrating that drives audiences away out of dissatisfaction.

The British series *Misfits* is heading into its fourth season on E4, and an American remake headed by *Gossip Girl* creator Josh Schwartz is currently in development. It’s a show with a much darker tone, and its premise is even more complex than *Pushing Daisies*. In a world where a magical storm has given many people superpowers, one character in the ensemble cast, Alisha, has the less-than-desirable advantage of creating uncontrollable and mindless lust in anyone who touches her. When she begins dating another character, Curtis, their desire for a more conscious and “real” connection forces them to keep their relationship strictly hands-off. Although on the surface *Misfits* has little in common with *Pushing Daisies*, considering its much grittier take on reality and its hyper-sexual perspective on the no-contact romance, it uses the same method of postponing romantic gratification in the name of its supernatural premise. Whereas *Pushing Daisies* expresses the strangeness of an emotionally serious relationship through simulated casual touches and overwritten dialogue, the relationship on *Misfits* seems to be held together mostly through sexual attraction. Alisha and Curtis have a committed, exclusive relationship, but their relationship relies much more heavily on physical intimacy (or something like it) than on emotional intimacy. Their most serious conversations are on the subject of sex, and almost all of their interactions as a couple consist of nothing more than scenes of mutual masturbation. Unlike Chuck and Ned, who are caught in a perpetual state of wanting to hold hands, Alisha and Curtis reach climax many times over
the course of their relationship, but never as a couple, sexually or in a narrative sense. Their sexual gratification always occurs separately, on opposite sides of the screen, meaning that the audience never sees a true physical connection between them.

Unlike on *Pushing Daisies*, the relationship between Alisha and Curtis is not the “one true pairing.” Their relationship lasts for a little over a season and then ends, not because of the strain of their lack of physical intimacy, but simply because they grow apart and become interested in other people. Both characters move on to more normal relationships, with sex, cuddling, and actual conversations. *Misfits* denies us the satisfaction of a complete emotional and physical relationship, but after a season of TV relationship purgatory, the closure of a concrete end to the relationship is almost as welcome. The writers cleverly played with television romance traditions, taunting the audience with a not-quite-relationship in an incredibly innovative way. But in the end, they did something braver (and possibly even rarer): They let a tired, old TV relationship die.

The television medium has depicted many tropes that spring from financial motivations: commercial break cliffhangers, off-again-on-again couples, repetitive procedurals, and big melodramatic mysteries that the “tune in next week” voice always implies will be solved soon. *Pushing Daisies* and *Misfits* both found a place for honest, straightforward storytelling within those TV tropes. *Pushing Daisies* and *Misfits* prioritize their bizarre premises, working the limitations of the format into the core concept instead of the other way around. Writing characters who candidly express their feelings for one another, and still somehow maintaining a sense of “imminent revelation,” is impressive — even if that sense of imminent revelation is slightly artificial. There is no will-they-won’t-they, and there is no logical possibility that their relationship’s supernatural obstacles will evaporate. And yet, in the heart of each audience member is a tiny spark of hope that one day, Chuck and Ned can ditch the saran wrap, and Alisha and Curtis will be able to just hold hands. Intellectually, we know it will never happen. But we feel the need to tune in next week, just in case.

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In light of modern filmmaking, media, and digital technology, silent film could be viewed as a breed of lost art. With the coming of sound and the decline of silent film in the 1920s, cinema may have seen the death of an art form that allows viewers to escape into pure dreamscape. The enchantment of going to the movies once provided an escape from reality. With the onslaught of “the talkies,” those who made and appreciated silent films had to endure the industry’s change to sound and the loss of silence. This shift was accompanied by a loss of the unique beauty that had been born with silent film’s creation. Early- to mid-twentieth century filmmaker René Clair testified to this loss by explaining how the end of silent cinema ushered in “the gilded age” of capitalist commercial production. Film that used words to keep audiences entertained created a vastly different atmosphere and effect on audiences. The poetic majesty of movies that seemed like surreal dreams was suddenly lost amid the noise of films that strove to create an illusion of reality based on verisimilitude. This artistry seems to have been erased nearly completely, yet its traces remind audiences to appreciate simplicity.

Nevertheless, the introduction of sound brought with it innovative technology that opened doors to new possibilities and capacities to tell stories. In their essay, “Statement on Sound,” filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexander suggest several doors that sound could open but with which silent cinema had previously struggled. By examining what has been lost and taking into account film’s many gains, obtained over generations of leaps and bounds of change, it becomes possible to see how the birth of cinema and the work of film’s early silent period can be held up to the gilded age of films made ever since. By studying the era of silent film, it can be seen how silence is in fact golden. Film’s first and oldest generation should be prized next to its many offspring — not only for its originality and antiquity, but for the effect it was able to achieve using silence and simple means of technology.

For René Clair, the loss of silence was initially thought to mean the complete dis-
Clair indicates this sense of uncertainty in the statement: “We who have seen an art being born may also have seen it die” (Fischer 34). Clair believed that silent film was a form of poetry, an artistry crafted to express a purity that came through the singular union of music and imagery. He suggested the recipe for this surreal quality was “born with the blessings of prestidigitators and magicians.” Clair explains that it was “because the cinema of the early years ‘believed in every enchantment’ that it found its poetic vein right from the start and awakened in our hearts that love of the miraculous which heightens our childhood years” (Fischer 36). The dreamlike atmosphere that silent films allow viewers to enter can be compared to a state of reverie. With the dawn of the talkies, Clair and his fellow comrades of silent cinema voiced sensible concerns that the poetic voice of film would be muted by the birth of prosaic sound. He voiced the cost of sound by likening film to literature and using poetry as a metaphor:

“Yesterday poetry which seemed to be losing its power over literature and exhausted words, was being reborn with its still hesitant rhythms and its pristine purity, on the great white canvas toward which the whole world were leaning. Now this canvas is emitting a voice, sentences, and words so often heard before . . . Can the talking picture be poetic? There is reason to fear that the precision of the verbal expression will drive poetry off the screen just as it drives off the atmosphere of daydream.” (Fischer 37)

Clair felt that the merging of sound and cinema made movies inseparable from reality and subject to a loss in their affective value. After witnessing the rise of the talkies, Clair predicted that cinema was headed for a “gilded end.” He believed that money would kill the industry and challenge creative intelligence and art making. He feared that the roles and rules of finances would come at the cost of independence (Fischer 35).

Today, film has indeed entered its “golden age.” Hollywood has become the hometown of America, with movies as one of our biggest past times and at the forefront of entertainment; cinema has become a creation of expensive spectacle. The industry’s financial capital has skyrocketed while many narratives’ meaningful qualities have, in modern times, begun to dwindle and diminish. What’s left of the style of filmmaking Clair upheld as magical and artistic now lies mostly in the past, preserved in silence and cherished only by the select cinephile. Can modern audiences reclaim silent film? Or will the era be forgotten? With the making of films like The Artist (2011), it seems silent film may be capable of a resurgence.
When Rene Clair realized that the art of cinema was facing a conversion to sound, he refused to be defeated by the industry’s insensitivity to his art form. Clair found ways to adapt to the changes of the talkies and to preserve the nature of film’s beauty by attempting to recreate the quality of “unreality” that he was able to achieve in silent movies. Clair used innovative techniques of abstracting sound to preserve the artistry inherent in his silent movies, despite the introduction of dialogue. Clair explained his new approach to the changing industry by saying, “I conceived that it would be possible to recapture the unreality of the light comedy by replacing words with music and songs. From that moment on my work began to interest me” (Fischer 40). Clair reinvested himself in his work with a new gusto for recapturing what might otherwise have been lost. Clair described the resulting product as a “hybrid” film moving between silence, song, and speech. Clair commented that he understood how “in theory” this combination might sound as “indefensible” a method as that of “opera comique” but nevertheless it worked (Fischer 42). By allowing his films to be governed by music, Clair created a quality of abstraction that turned his pictures into musical montages. Characters moved in time to the music, creating a sensory experience that was fluid and highly imagistic.

The perfection of “silence” is ironically, not derived from film’s silence but from the dance between sound and images that forms a perfect symbiosis. Clair describes it saying: “The imaginary words we used to put into the mouths of those silent beings in those dialogues of images will always be more beautiful than any actual sentences. The heroes of the screen spoke to the imagination with the complicity of silence. Tomorrow they will talk nonsense into our ears and we will be unable to shut it out” (Fischer 38).

Symbol and narrative carry viewers into their imaginations and accomplish feelings comparable to those rendered by dreams and visions. Clair once defined his dreams in film with the statement: “There will perhaps come a day when a simple series of images with no definable link but united by a secret harmony will arouse an emotion analogous to that aroused by music” (Fischer 38). Perhaps it was a similar harmony that Clair achieved between sound and images that was capable of recapturing the feeling of magic in the age of sound. Music took the movies out of the realms of reality and rearticulated them in the space between reality and fantasy, illustrating life’s synchronicities — its ordinary moments of successive beauty and convocation of life’s surreal qualities, as well as the subtle intricacies and inexplicable patterns that often go unnoticed.

Clair referred to the musing of Marcel Proust to relate the abilities inherent in music reappropriated through the cinema. He related that, “Marcel Proust wondered ‘whether music were not the unique form of what the communication of souls would have been if language had not been invented, words formed, and ideas analyzed.’” He corrected himself, however, saying, “No, not unique. Marcel Proust would not have written that if he had known the possibilities of a visual art, the cinema” (Fischer 39). Nevertheless, Clair’s use of music in his films proves that it is neither visual art nor music alone, but the pairing of the two that accomplishes a communication that conveys life’s fluid progression in a wordless fashion. Words are not needed with the use of music, for the combination of music and images speak in ways that surpass language. Rather, they speak to the language of emotions and capture the magical synergistic moments that defy explanation.

It is no wonder, upon realizing the majesty of the silent artistry, that artisans like Clair would find the induction of sound jarring. Silent films were original in their powerful ability to tell stories, composing comedies and tragedies, from heartwarming and charming to wrenching and breathtaking, and at times potentially life-altering. Sound that possessed grit
and voices robbed silent cinema of its musical backdrop. Clair described this, saying:

“If almost everyone is in agreement on the value of mechanically reproduced music . . . the same is not true for the noises that are added to the action. The usefulness of these noises is too often questionable . . . when you have heard a certain number of sound films and the time of wonderment has passed, you discover not without surprise, that the world of noises seems much more limited than you would have believed earlier.” (Fischer 45)

The introduction of “noises” seemed to Clair to be a disruption of what film should be. Nevertheless, Clair believed strongly in the pursuit of capturing “unreality.” He refused to let the changing industry rob his films of their potential beauty. The mastery of “unreality” evolved from the synchronous harmony of sound and imagery. In her commentary on Federico Fellini’s La Strada (1954), Claudia Gorman describes how music can undermine a film’s sense of reality. She states that:

“There is a degree of stylization achieved by manipulating the characters’ action so that they submit to musical division of time rather than dramatic or realistic time. The characters in the narrative film whom we conventionally accept as subjects, unquestionably become objects when their movements and speech coincide strictly with the music; for we can consider musical rhythm — an abstract, mathematical, highly organized disposition of time — to be the opposite of spontaneous “real” time. We sense that the characters have been created and they do not inspire us to identify with them” (Fischer 43).

The characters of silent films move between frames like figures come to life out of frozen artworks. In the essay “Statement on Sound,” “montage” is referred to as the “principal method which has led cinema to a position of such great influence” and the “indisputable axiom upon which world cinema culture rests” (Statement on Sound 1). Silent films often relied on the use of montage to a highly effective degree. In some sequences, perfectly orchestrated to appear as a montage of well-composed images, every instant becomes photographic. The character’s movements and gestures, facial expressions and actions, are bold, dramatic, and carry an air of theatricality; conveying magical undercurrents by turning down the volume on the constant chatter of everyday life and turning up the volume on life’s quietly memorable qualities. Silent films capture life’s vivid passion and intensity without the barrage of thoughts that so often accompany our modern waking lives. They draw threads to the hearts, minds, and souls of those watching through their ability to touch us silently. When dialogue is not a film’s primary mode of communication, we are compelled to deepen our engagement and draw from our experience of what composes life’s most basic human elements. It calls upon our ability to be empathetic by taking an active stance in understanding the actors’ thoughts, feelings, and expressions. Silent films take viewers away from the pace and noise of the everyday to enter into a trancelike state, to engage with life in a more profound way which conveys its most potent qualities by silently entering worlds of the surreal.

The writers of “Statement on Sound” address their fears for the film industry by commenting, “Sound is a double edged invention and its most probable application will be along the line of least resistance, i.e. the field of satisfaction of simple curiosity.” The immediacy of speech as a form of communication makes dialogue appealing in movies. Yet, despite the clarity of communication through language, many movies do not seem to speak to deeper levels of meaning in the way that enables moving pictures to be truly moving. “Statement on Sound” asserts that an “incorrect understanding of the potential of the new technical invention might not only hinder the development and improvement of cinema as an art form but might also threaten to destroy all its formal achievements.
to date” (Statement on Sound). This fear is accompanied by the writers’ prediction for the future of cinema: They state that there will be commercial exploitation “of the most saleable goods, i.e. of ‘talking pictures.’” This prediction, one could easily argue, seems to have come true. Surrounded by constant streams of communication, commodity culture, and technological innovations, the pace and mindset of modernity is reflected in the movies. Too often, they seem designed as mere eye candy, fed to American audiences through advertising and commercial industries but lacking intricacy to their narratives. The most expensive films too often seem to feel the cheapest within the context of originality and creativity. What the writers see as more harmful, however, is their second prediction. They see this as “the loss of innocence and purity of the initial concept of cinema,” stating that “cinema’s new textural possibilities can only intensify its unimaginative use for ‘dramas of high culture’ and other photographed presentations of a theatrical order.” It is this loss of innocence that has overtaken us and continues to be in effect.

The writers of the “Statement on Sound” do not give up hope. Just as Clair refused to be defeated, they argue that the use of “contrapun-
Many of the methods and techniques that early filmmakers relied on remain lying in the graves of the silent films they were born with. Nevertheless, just as these films can be stirred from the depths of dusty archives, perhaps from observing cinema’s early skeletons, those techniques filmmakers first created may be resurrected. “Statement on Sound” suggests that:

“The contrapuntal method of structuring film not only does not weaken the international nature of cinema but gives to its meaning unparalleled strength and cultural heights. With this method of construction the sound film will not be imprisoned within national markets, as has happened with the theatrical play and will happen with the ‘filmed’ play, but will provide an even greater opportunity than before of speeding the idea contained in a film throughout the whole globe, preserving its worldwide viability.” (Statement on Sound 2)

Film has enormous potential to create social impact simply by its widened accessibility. It nevertheless remains necessary for film to retain quality of both purpose and form, artistic merit and considerate social intentions. In order for modern cinema to rise up and meet the challenge of creating meaning, we may need to seek new means within the industry. This means exploring uncharted territories, seeking untold stories from the throngs of society, culture, and history. Film must seek higher means of expression, whether by investing in the powers of technology or investigating the beauty of antiquity, where a treasure chest of resources already lays waiting.


George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) in *The Artist* (2011, dir. Michel Hazanavicius)
A prominent theme in cinema this past year was the romanticization of film history. On the surface, films like *The Artist* and *Hugo* emphasize and explore our childlike rediscovery of early cinema. *The Artist* strategically employs silent era aesthetics and film language to properly contextualize and stylize its story, while *Hugo* advances its plot by immersing its audience in the magic of silent movie making. Together, these films breathe life into an otherwise stagnant public perception of silent cinema. While *Hugo* acts a heartfelt reminder of this lost genre, *The Artist* is more of a revelation. Through its form, it flagrantly forces us to look back and question the premature death of silent cinematic language.

Traditionally, a film like *The Artist* would have been conservatively conjured up as an era-appropriate, period piece. Instead, it challenges these conventional cinematic strategies, choosing not to rely on tributary pastiche to punctuate its points. *The Artist* is unique because it actively infuses prominent formal elements of silent filmmaking into the structure and makeup of a story about silent filmmaking. Long before the film’s conception, Hollywood had thoroughly exhausted the story behind *The Artist*. The same basic narrative structure can be found in a myriad of 20th century classics like *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Sunset Boulevard*, among others. *The Artist* separates itself from these past films by exploring the shift to sound through an overwhelmingly self-reflexive form.

In the film, George Valentin embodies almost every quintessential, redeemable aspect about silent cinema. When talkies take over, his character rightfully spirals out of control and out of the spotlight. However, unlike the act of silent filmmaking, George’s character doesn’t die out. Instead, he’s saved by another actor, Peppy Miller. Much like *Hugo* and his quest to rebuild a broken-down George Melies, Peppy rushes to revive Valentin, because she wholeheartedly believes in everything he represents. In a way, the rebirth of George Valentin lays the metaphorical groundwork for the reawakening of silent cinema in the 21st century.

*The Artist’s* ambitiously optimistic final sequence argues, through the form, that silent filmmaking and some of its core characteristics,
should never be forgotten. Film critic Daniel Mumby sums up the significance of these last few frames: “the film’s resolution, with a silent actor and talkie actor working together, is a demonstration that... different stories can and should be told in different ways within a given medium.” The Artist is a film that flaunts this message, that our ongoing negligence against outdated or unusual cinematic genres, like silent film, is both ignorant and wasteful. As a film, The Artist acknowledges and respects the talkies, but it also pushes film makers and viewers to question our strict over-reliance on standard storytelling techniques in modern movie making. The quality of the film as an entertaining, engaging piece of work is proof enough that silent filmic language can and should still be used to weave worthwhile cinematic stories.

It’s official - The Artist, and even Hugo to a certain extent, have briefly lifted silent cinema out of the margins and into the mainstream. The charm and warmth of The Artist helps it disprove a common stigma held against the genre. Watching a well-made silent film is not as physically demanding or difficult as we’ve been led to believe. The truth is, The Artist successfully mixes melodrama and comedy in ways that outshine an awful lot of contemporary films with sound. Although many would argue against it, I firmly believe that a well received, successful, contemporary silent film like The Artist has the potential to revive this sleeping giant of a genre.

There are three ways in which this spike in public appreciation could conceivably aid in a resurrection of silent film. The first and most reasonable outcome involves an increase of interest in preserving and screening old silent films. Another plausible aftereffect is that some of the more obvious and effective silent cinematic conventions will be openly integrated into contemporary sound-based films. The third and final result would be far less likely, but possible nonetheless: the critical and financial success of The Artist could potentially result in the production of new, contemporary silent films in or around the industry.

That’s not to say there haven’t been some openly negative reactions to revisiting silent cinema. In the UK, a group of viewers angrily demanded a refund to The Artist, feeling as if they’d been tricked into seeing a silent movie. To a certain extent, the “uninformed audience member” is almost impossible to avoid at nearly any event. Art house films like The Artist are especially frustrating to viewers who stubbornly stick to movies that predominantly employ
modern, conventional storytelling techniques. Earlier in the year, *Drive* drew similarly shocked reactions. Many were disappointed and some even sued, stating it didn’t live up to the trailers because they made it look like *Fast and the Furious*.

Beyond these petty scuffles, there have been two major arguments against *The Artist*. Online journalist Jeffrey Overstreet declares that the film was unfairly predestined to succeed, due to its self-affirming praise of the industry. “The Academy Awards are the biggest annual party that Hollywood throws for itself, and *The Artist* is a movie that worships Hollywood — its vanity, its values, its people-pleasing, its superficiality. Looks like a done deal.” It is true; together, the film and ceremony actively service their individual legacies. That could explain it winning Best Picture, but not much more than that. The second argument is twice as legitimate and thrice as thought provoking. Jaime N. Christley, film critic for *Slant Magazine*, strongly states that *The Artist* is a shallow, incomplete sketching of silent cinematic form. Jaime states that the film “ignores everything that’s fascinating and memorable about the silent-film era, focusing instead on a patchwork of general knowledge.”

I actually agree with Christley. *The Artist* is a basic, fundamental take on silent film, but that’s exactly why it works so well. For many modern moviegoers, *The Artist* could end up functioning as something of a gateway drug to silent cinema. Christley ends up dismissing the film because it refuses to be a summation of the most critically lauded or memorable silent-filmic moments. She fails to see that *The Artist* was purposefully made to be more than a mere history lesson. By utilizing some of the most redeemable, core conventions of the genre, *The Artist* effectively shatters the myth that silent movies cannot be accessible to the average, modern viewer. Looking to the future, our ability to revitalize this lost genre relies on the same mainstream market that so easily turned its back on silence before.

It took more than thirty years to perfect the form of silent film. Today, most of this old filmic language has either been absorbed into or abandoned by cinema with sound. In more ways than one, *The Artist* proves that silent filmmaking was a prematurely deserted art form, and that many of its classical conventions can still entertain a majority of moviegoers. The truth is, a large amount of these silent cinematic traits have continued to be covertly deployed in a number of successful contemporary films. This only adds to my point, that the public is ready and willing to undergo a resurgence in silent cinema.

Let’s return to the final sequence of *The Artist*. The film’s conclusion reveals that the saving grace of silent cinema lies in finding and utilizing an endlessly translatable, universal film language. At the end of *The Artist*, this universal language turns out to be dancing, an activity that doesn’t rely on dialogue or diegetic sound to get its point across. Another unrestricted, all-inclusive aspect of the genre is physical comedy. Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd were among the many slapstick masters of silent cinema. This universally appealing comedic style lives on today in characters like Mr. Bean.

The international popularity of Rowan Atkinson’s television and film personality Mr. Bean, is an overlooked, yet entirely valid indicator of the potential allure of a silent film revival. His character is mostly mute, relying on speechless, physical comedy to make his audience laugh. At the same time, producers purposefully steer away from using a black and white film stock, even adding a comforting laugh track to eliminate any potential fear of colorless silence on screen. International language organization Pimsleur Approach recently ran an article about

“*The Artist* could end up functioning as ... a gateway drug to silent cinema.”
Rowan Atkinson’s blundering clown doesn’t necessarily carry off the balletic wit of Chaplin, Lloyd or Keaton, but there’s a reason why this character is welcomed with open arms in ninety-four different countries and has earned Atkinson an estimated seventeen million dollars. The universal language of silence can be lucrative, and Atkinson is no fool.” This internationally appealing aspect of silent cinema can be found in even more recent and popular examples. Take a look at Pixar, one of the industry’s least threatening, undeniably mainstream production houses. 

WALL-E and Up both begin with silent cinema inspired sequences. For WALL-E, the crew spent an extended period of time studying the films and comedic styles of the same slapstick artists I mentioned earlier. Its first act is almost entirely silent, except for the occasional robot noise. Especially for a children’s film, this was an enormous risk, but it paid off in the end. Pixar returned to the silent introduction with 2009’s Up. Without any dialogue, the now infamous montage of a man and woman’s love and life together is a comedic, sentimental, and melodramatic feast of visuals. For most moviegoers, this silent film within a film was the highlight of Up, helping it become only the third animated feature ever to be nominated for Best Picture. Although these two examples alone could have convinced the industry to reinvest in silent film, most cinema makers and viewers missed the connection I just described. The more realistic route that silent film will take after The Artist involves looking back rather than forward.

If there is going to be a movement to revive silent cinema, it will most likely take place in film preservation. Ideally, at least a portion of the audience members who thoroughly enjoyed The Artist or Hugo will seek out ways to satisfy their new-found interest in silent cinema. The ongoing restoration of silent film is essential to keeping the movement alive. Due to a lack of commercial interest, coupled with a dangerously flammable film stock, more than 90% of silent films have been lost since the transition to talkies. These vital preservation efforts can pique the interest of new fans in two varying ways: home and theatrical screenings.

There is new evidence of a upward shift in the enthusiasm and sale of silent cinema. LOVEFILM, the European equivalent of Netflix, recently released some telling statistics on the subject. In the week leading up to the Academy Awards, the streaming and rental rates of silent film increased by forty percent, delivering a direct correlation between the success of The Artist and a new public interest in silent cinema. With evidence like this, preservation houses will undoubtedly step up their efforts to restore more of these films. In fact, the British Film Institute is currently working on the restoration of all nine remaining silent Hitchcock films. BFI also plans to include a comprehensive reworking of canned scores with brand new, accompanying music for each of the films. This brings up one of the most pressing problems facing silent film today. Traditionally, silent cinema was almost always screened alongside a live musical accompaniment. To avoid this contemporary dilemma, and see silent film as it was meant to be seen, a new crop of theatres and festivals are sprouting up all over the world.

The largest of these silent film festivals, at least in the United States, takes place in San Francisco. For more than fifteen years, the San Francisco Silent Film Festival has screened a diverse selection of silent movies, as well as showcasing a variety of preservation efforts. Each showing includes its own individual musical accompaniment, from solo pianists to full orchestras. Although this breed of specialized film festival has traditionally been left to serious cinephiles, the success of films like The Artist and Hugo may seriously change that.

Tying it all together, Vanity Fair’s annual Hollywood issue featured an article about the Silent Film Festival in San Francisco, written by none other than Martin Scorsese. In it, he praises the festival for its monumental restoration and screening of Abel Gance’s 1927 epic Napoleon. “Don’t wait for it to come to a theater near you - getting Gance’s magnum opus up on
a screen is a herculean task. This is a major event.” Coming from Martin Scorsese, in a magazine as widely read as Vanity Fair, proves once and for all, that this is a transformative time for silent cinema. Silent era aesthetics have even worked their way into the actual design and layout of this year’s issue. For a magazine that touts its ability to find and foster cultural trends, this is just another example of how the idea and imagery of silent film remains intriguing after all these years.

*The Artist* transcends its lazy labelling as a novelty film by crafting a charmingly self-referential form that reaffirms the timeless value of silent cinema. To quote Daniel Mumby once more: “[*The Artist* and *Hugo*] demonstrate the value of what was once written off, showing that it is possible to create a genuinely great audience experience whether in black-and-white or colour, sound or silence, 3D or 2D.” Although the practice of silent filmmaking is often attached to a specific period of time around the start of the 20th century, *The Artist* confirms that silent cinema is much more than just an era of movie making. People tend to think that silent films are just talkies without sound, when in fact, they should be understood as an uniquely different way of making and watching movies.
Cultural analyst Mark Jancovich recently argued that “public spaces of interaction have become increasingly redundant” and activities that once required us to venture outside the house are now brought to us through the wonders of modern technology. We no longer feel the need to actually meet up with a friend, now that texting will save us so much time and energy. No one wants to go through the laborious process of preparation for going out to dinner anymore — not when they can just leave their sweatpants on and order in. One of the greatest thrills used to be packing up and traipsing all the way to the movie theater to get some entertainment, but who can afford the ten bucks it now takes when illegal online streaming is so much quicker and cheaper? Essentially, the way we interact with each other has evolved tremendously because of technological advancements — to a point where our relationships with these public spaces, as well as with technology itself, have been changed irreversibly.

Movies were once an occasion for a grand night out and an excuse to look your best, meet up with friends, and share an experience together. Now it is more common to view a film at home on your own, and you may re-watch your favorites dozens of times, giving you an entirely different viewing experience than if you had just seen a film once in the theater. The arrival of television signaled a real change in the way people viewed and consumed all forms of media. Audiences were thrilled that they could now gather the family on their very own couch and enjoy the nightly news or half-hour comedy shows on a daily basis. However, in the 1950s, having a relatively small pool of programming to choose from and only one TV in the house
preserved the group aspect of the experience. Since everyone was still watching the same shows, it remained a larger cultural phenomenon. Today, with an endless variety of programming on television and increasingly so on the internet, chances are you are not watching the same shows as your next-door neighbor or your co-worker the next cubicle over.

One of the greatest changes to the consumption of film occurred when film studios realized they could use television and home viewing to their advantage. First with VHS and then with DVD and Blu-ray, film studios have turned home consumption into a huge market. In fact, the executive vice president of Buena Vista International, Daniel Battsek, said in 2004 that if the VCR was the savior of cinema, then the DVD was perhaps the “savior of the entire film industry.” This is further proved by the fact that “for approximately two decades, more U.S. viewers have been watching Hollywood films at home than at the theater, and the revenues generated from the distribution of feature films in the nation’s households have surpassed big-screen box office takes.” Film Professor Barbara Klinger explains this when she says, “Stocked with an array of devices for audiovisual entertainment, the home is a place where individuals can withdraw to engage in private shows and reveries via the playback of cinematic and other images.” By the end of the 1980s, many of the features of the cinema were beginning to find their way into the domestic sphere. The traditional television screen format of 4:3 ratio began to be supplemented by the 16:9 widescreen format, which was able to show many feature films without the need for cropping. Indeed, the viewer no longer needs to leave the house to go to the cinema, because the cinema has now all but come to the viewer.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the explosion of illegal downloading and streaming taking place on the web over the last decade. Programs like BitTorrent and the now defunct Megavideo have played a distinct role in promoting the already popular home viewing experience. It is undeniable that “there has been a rapid and dramatic expansion of what it now means to even be an audience.” What was once a public activity has become increasingly private. All of these changes have affected the way viewers think about themselves in relation to film as well as in relation to the outside world. Improvements in technology have pushed us further and further into our own private worlds, and today we are even able to construct our own technologies and viewing environments.

This ability to bring films into the home has also allowed us to experience them differently through the practice of repeat viewings. This habitual watching did not really take off until the introduction of the VHS player and since then has evolved through DVDs, Blu-ray and Internet viewing. Indeed, any of us who have come of age in the last thirty years most likely has fond memories of screening a favorite film over and over again on the family television, perhaps even multiple times in the same day. Now that films have become objects in the home, “they can attain an intimate, quasi-familial status that affects their meaning and influences individuals’ perceptions of themselves and the world.”

This practice of repeat viewings has changed the way we feel about technology in general. It is now more of a “friend,” something familiar and reliable, and has made public spaces increasingly redundant and undesirable as a result. Most of us have films that we fell in love with as children or teenagers and watched so many times that the VHS copy wore out and had to be replaced. We know every line, every scene, and even every preview that will come on before the feature presentation. While VHS
tapes may now be obsolete, the children of this decade will grow up with memories of streaming films on Netflix and have those same comfortable feelings of nostalgia upon seeing those same films for the fiftieth time years later.

Our identities are now not only formed and constructed by the people we surround ourselves with, but now also by the movies we watch and the values we cull from them. A favorite film can shape the ways we think about ourselves and our place in the world just as much as an actual person can; our relationships with consumed media instantly changed when we began to create our own personalized versions of the movie palace right in our bedrooms. No longer forced out of the home to view films and use them as a tool to socialize, we have begun to socialize with the films themselves through repeat viewings. These newly formed emotional relationships have had a lasting effect on the way we relate to film and media, to each other, and even with ourselves.


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The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl (or ABG) is a web series that premiered in February 2011, with the pilot garnering 995,044 views to date. Issa Rae created the series and stars in a lead role. Co-producer, Tracy Oliver initially planned to package the series as a half-hour comedy for network syndication. But after the viral success of ABG’s first season, finding a network home may be unnecessary. In summer 2011, when it looked as though ABG wouldn’t be able to finance new episodes, Rae sought viewer support on the fundraising website Kickstarter. The show’s backers contributed nearly $60,000 (the goal was $30,000), enough to complete five remaining season one episodes. ABG’s first season, which concluded on January 12, 2012, was celebrated for its original biting humor, funding methods, guerilla approach to production and utilization of social media. Even in its infancy, ABG is a groundbreaking example of independent production and distribution. EyeCandy was thrilled to speak with Ms. Rae.

Rae: Definitely both. Stanford didn’t start a legitimate film program until my senior year, so it was too little too late. I [took a leave of absence] my sophomore year to go to New York Film Academy. [Stanford] had a film society, but that just wasn’t enough for me. I needed to immerse myself in filmmaking and N.Y.F.A. definitely provided that. And yes, Palo Alto sucks, by the way!

Tell me about the fellowship at Public Theater in New York City and how that immersion experience inspired you to create ABG.

Rae: I got the fellowship and returned to New York City after graduation. I didn’t really know anybody. The only people I knew, and ended up being roommates with, were a friend from school and Kiki Harris, who plays Germy Patty [on ABG]. Making friends was really hard for me — I was very shy — but the fact that I didn’t really have a social life definitely contributed to my creativity. I was always finding things to create and to do. While I was there, I watched a Public Theater workshop between these amazing actors of color and I thought it would be really cool to start a short film collective where actors, writers, and producers could help each other produce. So I
had that going on in NYC, and I got equipment for it, all this stuff. Then I ended up getting robbed. Our apartment got broken into and like twenty Gs’ worth of equipment was stolen. I stayed in NYC for another year and was like, “OK, forget this. I’m going back to L.A., where I know people and have more resources.”

You are signed with UTA and 3 Arts Entertainment. Do you plan on turning ABG from a web series into a half-hour comedy for cable? Rae: For season two, we’re definitely looking to keep it on the web. We’ve received offers from different networks, but honestly, the creative control wouldn’t exist and my vision and network television’s vision do not align, yet. I would like to see it on cable in the future, but it’s not likely for season two.

Since you first imagined ABG as a cartoon, have you considered producing it as an animated series for cable? Rae: I don’t think so. Just because of how it is and how it’s playing out right now, I really like how it’s going so far. I love the cast and I think maybe we could do an animated spin-off for kids because [ABG] isn’t really kid-friendly right now. I know that in my middle school years, I would’ve appreciated someone that I could look up to.

In your mind, which networks would be good homes for the show? Rae: I think HBO, FX, or Comedy Central; if I had the deal that Louis C.K. has, and I’m just not a “name” — I don’t have the experience that Louis C.K. has, but that’s what I want. He edits, writes, produces everything for the series and just gives it to [Comedy Central] at the end of the day. That’s what I want to do, and I’d love that opportunity. Otherwise, it’s not really worth it for me to go to television, because I feel like we’re still being talked about and still being examined, and I think that the show alone, since networks are paying attention, will prove that there is an audience for this type of content. That’s what I want.

You’ve mentioned before that the entertainment industry makes room for a select few black figures in our national media landscape. As a consequence, do you feel responsible for reconfiguring black representations each time you write for ABG? Rae: Well that’s the thing I wanted to combat in a sense. Black comedy since the 90s is this specific thing, and I don’t find that type of comedy funny anymore. And it was 90s, almost slapstick, sort of making fun of ghetto stereotypes, and it’s this specific race-based comedy that I wanted to get away from. I created ABG specifically with a black
lead to share in this wider comedy that existed in Seinfeld, in Curb Your Enthusiasm, and whatever is associated with white comedy. Because even throughout high school, people would think I was funny, but they'd think I was white funny. And I was like, “What is white funny? What does that mean? I can’t be funny? I’m not funny in a black way?” So in creating ABG, I wanted to include these little things that we all go through, and then specify them with these black girl problems, you know — racist boss, or hair problems, and things like that — so that you couldn’t relegate this humor as just solely black. There’s nothing just black about it. I wanted it to be relatable to other people. Why can’t I watch George Lopez or Friends and find that hilarious? So that’s something that I struggle with because I do want more people to watch [ABG]. I want more people to get it, and not just dismiss it as this black thing. But at the same time, I want them to appreciate it because there are these black characters, a main black lead, and you can still find her funny — and relate to her.

The awkward comedies that are popular on TV right now often include a token black character in their ensemble. I think 30 Rock would be way more interesting if it were Tracy Morgan’s show, or if it was just a different show all together. Do you worry about being compared to widely seen black comedies, as was the case with Dave Chappelle, Aaron McGruder, and the Wayans Brothers in recent years?

Rae: Sometimes I do. Even with the season finale, the fact that J chooses White Jay. J chooses White Jay because they had a connection, they had chemistry, and she got comfortable around him.

She was more herself.

Rae: Yeah. She was more herself around him. And [it was received as], “Oh, you’re against black love? You’re destroying black love. This was planned from the start. How could you?” Things like that, you just have to take in stride. I don’t necessarily feel a responsibility to uphold certain old forms of belief. I don’t find that important. But, sometimes I do feel a pressure to because there isn’t much of a mainstream representation. I do feel a pressure to do a good job, to entertain, and to make people think. And that’s my goal anyway; that’s what I want to do.

Can I be real for a second? I went H.A.M. on the press surrounding you and ABG to prepare for this interview. I was really put off by some of the interviewers’ esoteric questions. Specifically, Michel Martin [of NPR] and Fredricka Whitfield [of CNN], both of whom seemed eager to link ABG’s “universal” appeal with its nearly all-black cast and writers. Are you surprised by the idea of a black comedy with “universal” appeal in what might be a “post-racial” era?

Rae: The title was my only concern. I’ve been told repeatedly that I should have just called it Awkward Girl, but I’m not just an awkward girl; I’m an awkward black girl. So, I wanted to make that clear. If you’re afraid to watch the series because it has the word “black” in it, then that’s on you.

Like with the finale? Those message forums are insane.

Rae: I just stopped reading it because I got so upset. People are crazy!

Why do you think people are so upset that J chose White Jay?

Rae: I really don’t know. I thought that it was obvious. I thought that in the sense of a romantic comedy, people saw it coming. Honestly, I think that people just didn’t expect her to end up with a white guy. I think it just has to do with some of the social norms that we have. I guess not everybody is ready for it. There are so many politics involved with that decision that people just project their own personal beliefs onto the series. I think that has a lot to do with it.
In my opinion, bitches were really trippin' about dialogue containing “no lesbo” and “tranny” in episode eleven. What is your take on the whole situation? Does this type of reaction hinder your comedic liberty in future episodes?

Rae: It doesn’t hinder mine, but it does hinder my writing team’s, in the sense that [co-producer] Tracy [Oliver] and I go back and forth, and we struggle with what is offensive and what isn’t. Honestly, “tranny” — we didn’t even think about it. We didn’t write that particular line, and we were reading over it, and we scratched out other things because we thought, “OK, maybe that would go over some people’s heads or be too offensive.” But that one we just sort of glazed over because we didn’t think it was a derogatory term. It came out as a surprise. “No lesbo” I’m not even counting because if you don’t understand that “no lesbo” is satire, or that we’re poking fun at the term [“no homo”], then stop watching the show.

It was also in [J’s] verse.

Rae: Exactly. There is so much behind that. “Tranny” — we just didn’t know that it was a derogatory term, and it’s crazy how it worked out, because even the way the line was written, our actress accidentally twisted the word. It was supposed to be “bitch in tranny heels,” not that that’s necessarily different, but it is different from what was said. So, it just shows you how it wasn’t intentional; we didn’t know that it was derogatory, but I think that it was taken a little bit too seriously given the context, and given the fact that it came out of CeCe’s mouth, and she’s known for saying off-handed, crazy things. So, it was a big deal.

Within this context, how do you self-insure against the unpredictability of fan reaction while using other complicated words? Don’t make me pull a V-Nasty; just answer the question.

Rae: We can’t. I’ve never censored myself from the first episode. If I cross something out because [it] is offensive, it’s because it really is offensive and I’m not thinking. Other than that, we poke fun at everything, and we will continue to poke fun at everything. I think that it promotes discussion and dialogue. That episode, the fact that we did say “tranny,” it educated me and others on the fact that that is considered a derogatory term. We’ll test out all the words and see what’s derogatory, and see what works and what doesn’t work, as long as it promotes dialogue and discussion. That works for me.

I think this is the best place to be in as a writer. What, is YouTube going to cancel your show?

Rae: Right. That’s true.

So, you’re not even up against time block issues or anything.

Rae: People could stop watching. That’s all you can do.

Do you consider yourself a satirist?

Rae: I do. I love satire.

The Boondocks creator Aaron McGruder has said, “Satire is the least commercially viable form of comedy.” He also said, “Cable is the only place where you can still be honest and actually have fun.” Where would you say ABG falls, between those two statements?

Rae: I think it has elements of satire, but it doesn’t completely go over people’s heads. I know that Aaron McGruder is awesome at what he does, but sometimes people don’t necessarily get his references. We don’t go that deep into it. I think that we’re superficial enough that people can get it, still laugh, and relate.

How does it feel to be an audience-elected representative for every black girl who feels confined by her own awkwardness?

Rae: It’s pretty awesome. The only time it’s not awesome is when I meet someone and they just expect me to be really awkward, like, “What are you going to do next?” or, “That’s so cute that...”
you did that.” Personally, I’m not J. I don’t think a lot of people realize that I’m not necessarily [the] character. If I post a status, or if I tweet something, people are quick to say, “Oh, that’s so awkward,” and it’s not. So, that’s the only drawback, but otherwise, I love it. I happily accept that role.

After doing other series, Dorm Diaries and The “F” Word, what lessons were especially helpful when creating ABG?

Rae: So many lessons. I want to be like Adam Sandler in that sense, where he just employs all his friends and it seems like they have such an awesome time. That’s what I want to do. Lessons learned: Treat it like an actual show. With Dorm Diaries, I was really immature about it and releasing whenever I could, and didn’t really promote it too hard. I just did it. Fly Guys, I tried to treat it like a real television show by having it premiere every Monday at a specific time, and [there was] the fact that it was geared to a certain length of seven minutes each episode, and [we] really promoted it. For ABG, I think I just learned some of the lessons, like I know that people have short attention spans, so the first episode was strategically short, and then we would lengthen them over time. And different kinds of audience engagement — that’s really important, and setting up a fan page, and a Twitter page, the different social networking elements I learned and took a lot from Fly Guys and incorporated into ABG. There’s just so much more that I learned from the mistakes. This is just a whole different experience.

ABG’s first season relied on contribution-based funding. Under that model, do fans often feel entitled to some creative input? If so, do you consider this a drawback of ABG’s Kickstarter campaign?

Rae: Oh, man! [This applies] specifically for episode ten, [which] was our “experimental” episode. We wanted to do a fun Halloween episode. Tracy and I have this thing where we like to poke fun at black Greek life, and so we thought it fit episode ten. That is our most controversial episode, in terms of people downright hating it or just loving it. The people who hated it and contributed to Kickstarter were saying things like, “Lemme get my money back for this,” “You’re selling out,” “You’re changing your vision,” “This is ridiculous,” or they would say things like, “I love the ninth episode, but ten? Oh, no, no, no, no, this is over.” It is kind of frustrating when people do contribute, and we appreciate their contributions, but [not] get them to start “contributing” to our creativity. We’re not going to stick to one particular formula; we’re going to create. And they gave us money to produce and create — that’s what we’re doing.

You’ve successfully played with the formulas of
horror, sketch comedy and mockumentaries. What other genres and/or narrative conventions interest you?
Rae: I really like what Community does, in terms of playing with different genres throughout the show. I don’t know if we’ll explore that just yet. Just in general, outside of ABG, I really love coming-of-age stories. That’s another genre I want to take on.

Are there any characters you had in mind for ABG, but omitted before filming? If so, who were they?
Rae: There was one character I wanted to put in, but I didn’t want to offend anyone. I had [written] a stuttering character. I wasn’t necessarily making fun of the fact that this character stutters, but the fact that people felt they had to act differently because the person stutters. It was early on and I didn’t feel like explaining that character, but we may bring back this notion of how people feel like they have to act differently around people who have some sort of handicap, disability, or impediment.

Which ABG characters do you find most successful and why?
Rae: Everyone always talks about Darius [Tristen Winger]. He’s a fan favorite. I guess people can relate to not being able to hear someone, or just baby-voiced people in general. CeCe [Sujata Day] — people respond really well to her because they want a friend like her. And J [Issa Rae], of course, because I feel like people relate the most to her.

Harris improvises a lot of dialogue for her character, correct?
Rae: Definitely. She adds her own nuances to lines, or like, “I had thought it was an open audition?” was all her.

What about, “Hope you saved me some sapodillas, gurl!”
Rae: [Laughs] No, we wrote that, but the way that was said was perfectly disgusting. That’s just her adding on.

You say ABG began “guerrilla-style” with “The Stop Sign,” a no-budget, technically imperfect production, for which you assembled a cast and crew of high school and college friends and even used your dad’s office as a location. Tell me about the initial players, how you know them, and who came to join ABG as the season progressed.
Rae: The first episode started off with Andrew [Allan James] and my best friend Devin was behind the camera. She was just down to help me. She knew about the idea for a while. I’d always admired Andrew from Stanford because he’s just an incredible dancer, and they used to have a bunch of dance teams at school and we’d go to all the shows and he just stood out. He’s just amazing. He talked to me about the fact that he wanted to get into acting, and so I just thought it was the perfect opportunity. For episode two, Tracy just happened to be in town and Madison [T. Shockley, III] had actually reached out to me to help him with his own project. Then I just got them both involved. Pretty much as the series progressed, people reached out to me and I would rather work with people who want to be a part of the project, as opposed to me seeking out people. It’s been a process of reconnecting with old friends and just working with them. I think [there were] maybe about two or three actors we had to solicit: Sujata Day, Leah [Antoinette] and Hanna — they’re hired actors, but they just fit right in.

What factors led to ABG’s increasing production values throughout the first season?
Rae: Well, Tracy came on as a producer for episode four and we had an amazing cinematographer, Shea Vanderpoort, who is just very passionate about the way things look and is an amazing artist, director, and cinematographer. He pretty much lent all his equipment to the series and made all production changes — the cinematic value is pretty much all him.

What led to Donald Glover’s guest appearance in the season finale?
Rae: I’d been stalking him. I really have a love for him. Tracy was taking meetings for her own projects and for ABG, and she happened to meet with one woman who knew Donald personally, and during that time he was following me on Twitter, because his sister is a fan of the show. So everything just came together and he asked Tracy and me to come to the studio, and we hung out with him at the studio. We told him about how we wanted him to be in an episode. He said to just let him know. And then when it came to the season finale, we pulled out all the stops and contacted him, and we basically had to drive nine hours to Tahoe to get him in the show, because the time he was going to be in the states was limited because he was doing a European tour. Tahoe was the only close city in California, so we made it happen, and he was incredibly down.

Both Doublemint Twins songs remind me of Thug-nificent and the Lethal Interjection Crew’s music.
featured in The Boondocks. What led you to write diegetic music for the show?
Rae: Doublemint Twins actually came before ABG. I’ve started twenty rap groups in my life, and Doublemint Twins were the most consistent in terms of putting out music. I wanted to add them as a soundtrack to the series just because of J’s love for violent, ridiculous rap music. So it just worked out. [Doublemint Twins] started close to the same time as ABG, and I was like, “This is perfect for the opening song. J should be rapping to this in her car.” We shot a music video for “Booty Shawts,” but I haven’t put it out yet because I’m kind of scared, and I don’t think my friends are going to understand the implications [for their] real, legitimate jobs.

Why are you taking ABG on a college tour?
Rae: We’ve been getting requests from different schools to come and speak on different subjects — either what it takes to finance a web series or what this series means for mainstream media — and so we just decided to try to see if people wanted us to talk to their schools and bring us out. We thought it’d be a good way to raise money and sort of make a living off of a tour, since we couldn’t off of the series. Also, it’s a lot of promoting; it’s a good way to promote the series, like we’re on a campaign with every school we visit. So, it seemed like the best way to spread the word, grassroots-style.

What’s up with season two?
Rae: Storyline-wise, we’re obviously going to explore interracial dating, and we’re going to meet J’s and White Jay’s family. We’re going to see what happens with this new boss, who is sort of the opposite of Boss Lady in terms of his focus on political correctness. We’re going to get to know a little bit more about CeCe as well as the series progresses, and introduce a new receptionist character. It should be fun.

Apart from the same played-out bullshit everyone echoes once they get their stacks up, what is your advice for film- and media-makers without a red cent in their budgets?
Rae: If you’re serious about producing content, then you have to learn how to do everything. At N.Y.F.A., I didn’t even take the year-length course; I took a six-week intensive training [course] about lighting, about editing, about producing, and then started [writing] on my own. I think it’s really important to just learn how to do everything. I think that to compete, you have to know all trades, and just do it, stop making excuses, and make your vision happen. You don’t need money in this generation to start.

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I’ve always fantasized about remaking the Pokémon movie. There’s a much darker story to be told about a world where wild animals are captured, enslaved, and then condemned to spend their entire lives fighting against other Pokémon. And for what? Ultimately, they do it so that aspiring teenagers can essentially collect merit badges and make a few Pokédollars on the side. I thought my time with this pop cultural pandemic was over. Yet here I am, a film production student interested in conceiving a live-action film about the trials and tribulations of Pallet Town. I wanted to write about the remake film to criticize Hollywood for its continuous regurgitation of popular culture, but it’s become clear to me that I am participating within the very trend of “pop-culture recycling” in Hollywood that I had originally sought to critique.

A growing stream of films in Hollywood leech onto pre-existing products of media culture and repurpose them as new conceptions of old ideas, rather than attempting to produce something truly novel in theme or content. Despite my own guilty fascination with comic book hero movies, straightforward remakes of old films, and other forms of cinematic adaptations, I can’t help but envy those who experienced the earliest years of cinema — when having an original idea was the rule rather than the exception. When the medium itself was still in a process of exploration, discovery, and experimentation, I imagine audiences still being able to appreciate a film simply for the fact that the technology existed at all. Now industry moguls seem to assume that audiences have seen all there is to be seen, and they are more than willing to
sacrifice content for commerce. Consider the language used by Allen J. Scott of the Center for Globalization and Policy Research, who argues that Hollywood operates within a “complex machinery of distribution and marketing” and it is through this machine that “Hollywood’s existence as a productive agglomeration is sustained, while the images and narratives it creates are dispersed to a far-flung and ever expanding circle of consumers” (Allen 34). I am willing to accept the notion that I am a consumer of films, but I would venture to say that my needs as a consumer are not being met. Maybe it is “safe” or “practical” to reintroduce imagined worlds that audiences have already shown enthusiasm for, but for me it is endlessly more valuable to hear a story that I could never have imagined but will never forget.

It’s easy to see that this trend has accelerated in recent years. This year alone is ripe with remakes. *Mirror Mirror* (2012) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) are set to come out, both of which are new takes on the story of *Snow White*, the 1937 Disney cult classic. 2012 will also include a remake of Paul Verhoeven’s *Total Recall* (1990), originally based on a sci-fi short story by Philip K. Dick, and a revision of the 1995 sci-fi police thriller *Judge Dredd*, originally based on a comic series originated in the 1970s. By the time you read this, a 3D makeover of the immensely popular *Titanic* (1997) should be in theaters; however, I will not be among the hordes of people spending three hours and $18 on a good cry.

Keep in mind that this was not always standard practice in Hollywood. We shouldn’t forget that there have been plenty of films with unique stories and premises. There have been films based on scripts that were written with the exclusive purpose of realizing them through sound and image. There have been cinematic articulations of novels that are unique for the way they visually articulate an author’s literary imagination. We have all heard, “The book is better than the movie,” but it seems that we have entered a moment where we can ourselves saying, “The book is better than the original Swedish version of the movie, which is better than the American version, all of which are better than the impending graphic novel,” which can be argued for Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2009). In a recent article from *The Guardian*, Charles Gant speaks about American director David Fincher’s version of the Swedish crime novel, describing how, “Even Fincher set his *Girl with the Dragon


*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011, dir. David Fincher)
Tattoo in Sweden, eschewing the usual remake tactic of transplanting the action to the U.S. The resulting movie felt authentic, as long as you overlook the fact the characters are speaking English. Unique, sadly, not so much” (Gant). I agree with Gant in that a loss of originality in mainstream cinema does have an air of sadness to it. It raises questions about what the general public values in the films they see and what they have come to expect from filmmaking as a general practice. Have we arrived at a moment when films will only be judged based on how authentic they are in relation to an original version? Has Hollywood exhausted the genre of the crime film to the extent that filmmakers must look to the far reaches of the world to find unique premises worth making movies about? In any case, it is encouraging to hear that I am not alone in my dissatisfaction with this moment of redundancy in Hollywood.

As film students, we are often exposed to writers like Susan Sontag, who make it quite clear that film culture has lost its luster by becoming a capitalist deviation from a once wondrous creative practice. Sontag goes as far as saying that the kinds of films that wander into the mainstream consciousness can be seen as part and parcel of “the decay of cinema” as she once knew it, her word choice implying that cinema was once alive but has since died and slowly begun to rot. She argues that we have reached a moment when films are more and more often characterized by “a policy of bloated, derivative film-making, a brazen combinatory or recombinatory art, in the hope of reproducing past successes,” and that audiences have slowly but surely been pacified into a comfortable acceptance of these types of films (Sontag). It seems that the average moviegoer should be capable of recognizing the emergence of these particular trends but it is unclear how many of them really have a problem with it.

Other authors have taken a similar interest in criticizing current cinematic trends. In his article, “The Same and the New: Cape Fear and the Hollywood Remake as Metanarrative Discourse,” Michael A. Arnzen compares J. Lee Thompson’s 1962 film Cape Fear with Martin Scorsese’s 1991 remake of the film in order to try to paint a picture of what qualifies an effectively “remade” film. Although he attempts to show how Scorsese’s film can be valued for the new directorial perspective that it provides, he still opens his article with a critical tone about the transparent commercial interests inherent in the remake, suggesting that “a remake presents film to audience as capital — rather than aesthetic — product” (Arnzen). Like Arnzen, I think it is important to find redeeming qualities in an otherwise dismal state of affairs. On the other hand, it is very unsettling to think that profit-seeking, marketing strategies, and economics will likely continue to take precedence in a medium that was first and foremost a creative experiment in perception and artistic expression.

In other words, criticism of the remake seems to be a question of intent. Are these films being remake because their originals have left something to be desired, or is the remake just a way to guarantee box office success? Perhaps it’s only fair to recognize the give and take of both of these motivating factors in Hollywood. Producers, investors, and directors alike need to feel that enough people will be interested in their film to prevent them from facing financial loss. However, even filmmakers working in mainstream Hollywood should aspire to maintain the creative ambition that drew them to filmmaking to begin with. All artists must contend with this issue if they intend to have commercially successful careers. This is especially the case with filmmakers who intend to make big studio remakes such as Gus Van Sant’s 1998 remake of the infamous Psycho (1960). In an interview from literary magazine The Believer, Van Sant describes his ambivalent feelings toward making an adaptation, saying, “the reason that I suggested Psycho to them was partly the artistic appropriation side, but it was also partly because I had been in the business long enough that I was aware of certain executives’ desires. The most interesting films that studios want to be making are sequels” (Rockingham). Although it was Van Sant’s own idea to redo a Hitchcock cult classic, his
response suggests that he was also driven by a desire to survive within an industry that is often dictated by the expectations of executives who are more interested in a film that pays than a film that inspires.

Van Sant’s remake of Psycho was an attempt to recreate one of the most infamous horror movies of all time. Van Sant used contemporary Hollywood celebrities and gave the film a makeover with its use of color; however, this was not enough to allow the contemporary version to succeed. Roger Ebert gives an illuminating analogy in his review of the film, saying, “Attending this new version, I felt oddly as if I were watching a provincial stock company doing the best it could without the Broadway cast” (Ebert). That is to say, just because Hitchcock did it doesn’t mean you can, too, Gus.

The inherent flaw with the second Psycho is that it is removed from the historical moment that allowed the original to have the unprecedented impact that it did in the 1960s. In his shot-by-shot rendition of the infamous shower scene, Van Sant seems to pride himself on making his film “look” like the original, but I am not sure that he does much more than that. Anne Heche vaguely resembles and halfheartedly acts like the Marion Crane character, but lacks the intensity of the original performance by Janet Leigh. The close-up on the showerhead, the shadowy figure approaching through the curtain, and the unsuspecting blonde bather are all there. The scene is rearticulated detail by detail, but to me, this is the film’s pitfall. In trying to emulate Hitchcock’s original, Van Sant made a film that did not contribute much more to Psycho than contemporary actors and color film. A remake of this kind can be a perilous, futile, and expensive endeavor. The film’s $60 million budget and $21 million domestic gross certainly attest to this.

Remaking classics isn’t the only strategy employed by executive bigwigs to guarantee the commercial success of their films. The trend of taking hugely popular cultural icons and inserting them into Hollywood seems to be more prevalent than straightforward remakes of films. Take the superhero or comic book film, for example. Spider-Man, X-Men, Superman, The Incredible Hulk, and Batman constitute only a handful of comic book heroes that have appeared in graphic novels and numerous other cinematic reiterations. These characters alone boast a total of 22 films among them: three for Spider-Man (with an impending fourth in 2012), five for X-Men, five for Superman, two for Hulk, and seven for Batman (with an impending eighth in 2012). Audiences fondly recall the comics, cartoons, and action figures of these popular characters, and if the film does well, they may be so inclined to buy the DVD, the video game based on the movie, or even the action figure remodeled to resemble the newest cinematic version of the hero. Superheroes have left the two-dimensional plane of the comic strip and now move fluidly through a laundry list of highly profitable ancillary markets. The theatrical exhibition represents only one phase within a complex network of commercial exploitation.

I have seen many of these twenty-two superhero films and will admit that I have lost much of my interest in seeing any more. The last film to have any significant impact on me was Christopher Nolan’s rendition of Batman in The Dark Knight (2008), which stood apart from all the other films because Nolan seemed to have striven for something that is not present in the previous iterations. Nolan’s film represents what any gimmicky pop culture remake should strive for, because he does justice to...
to the character while simultaneously looking deeper into the imagined world to find a far more complex universe at its core. If we can suspend our disbelief for a moment and try to actually imagine what a real-life Gotham City would be like, how could it be anything but deeply disturbing and violent? As Roger B. Rollin describes in a 1970 article about comics, these heroes represent “the fulfillment of our fantasies as well as of our moral sense,” and it seems to me the earlier films do not adequately allegorize the darker side of contemporary American life (Rollin 432). While Van Sant’s *Psycho* failed commercially because it didn’t find ways to contribute something more to its original, to me *The Dark Knight* succeeded because it was Batman as I’d never seen before.

Despite my enthusiasm for Christopher Nolan’s take on Batman, I can’t help but think that the prevalence of adaptations in Hollywood has left very little room for unique stories to emerge. We live in an age when it is simpler and more profitable to create films that do not have to be explained to us because they *have already* been explained to us. Generating buzz about Batman only requires that his name be uttered or the infamous silhouette of a bat be shown, whereas new and unique stories require synopsis, a detailed trailer, good word of mouth, or even festival success. Putting myself in the shoes of a studio executive, I can see why they would choose to keep stories simple, familiar, and therefore profitable, but as a consumer I find this problematic. Is my favorite film a remake? No, I can’t say it is. Would I rather see a film with an outcome that I already know, or is it worth something to experience the suspense and curiosity that comes with unique stories? I’ll certainly take the latter. Would I rather encounter the same ten characters for the rest of my life, or is there something to be valued in spending time with new people and personalities? I think you get the point. Unless I can someday infiltrate Hollywood and make changes from the bottom up, for now I will do the little I can to demand more of Hollywood by continuously voicing my discontent, paying to see good films with original stories, and quieting the voice in my head that wants to remake the Pokémon movie.


Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) in *Parks and Recreation* (2009 - Present)
Amy Poehler is my hero. She is 5’2”, platinum blonde, Planned Parenthood supporter, mother of two, married to Will Arnett of *Arrested Development* fame, she swears like a sailor, and she is funny. Tears coming out of your eyes, falling out of your chair, gasping for breath funny. And not only is she aware of how funny she is, she understands the power that comedy possesses.

Speaking about the early days of her career at *Saturday Night Live* (1975-), Tina Fey drew upon a pivotal Poehler moment:

“She did something vulgar as a joke. I can’t remember what it was exactly, except it was dirty and loud and “unladylike.” Jimmy Fallon...turned to her and in a faux-squeamish voice said, ‘Stop that! It’s not cute! I don’t like it.’ Amy dropped what she was doing, went black in the eyes for a second, and wheeled around on him. “I don’t fucking care if you like it.”

With that exchange, a cosmic shift took place. Amy made it clear that she wasn’t there to be cute. She wasn’t there to play wives and girlfriends in the boys’ scenes. She was there to do what she wanted to do” (Fey, 144).

When asked about the American Apparel ads that have inundated pop culture (emaciated girls in spandex and leotards, on the cusp of being nude), Poehler attacked.

“[The] ads are fucking gross, man.” she said. “Look, I love beautiful girls too. I think everyone should be free to have their knee socks and their sweaty shorts, but I’m over it. I’m over this weird, exhausted girl. I’m over the girl that’s tired and freezing and hungry. I like bossy girls -- I always have. I like people filled with life. I’m over this weird media thing with all this, like, hollow-eyed, empty, party crap.”

In a recent Saturday Night Live cameo, Poehler came back to the news segment “Weekend Update” to make several cutting comments on Republican congressman Darrell Issa’s all
male panel discussing birth control health insurance coverage. And in a candid moment when the closing music was already playing and the camera began to track away, Poehler leaned across the news desk, looking straight into the lens, and shouted, “DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!” The moment of passionate outburst speaks to women across the nation.

She is a beacon of hope in the stagnant waters of the American Apparel, Twilight, and Sarah Palin 21st century post-feminism. Hilarious hope. And it is not only in words that Poehler takes a fighting stand; it is in action on Parks and Recreation (2009-), the show that places this female comedian in potentially the most powerful position since Lucille Ball on I Love Lucy (1951-1957). But where Lucy was confined in domesticity and overruled time and time again by her husband, Leslie Knope (Poehler’s character) is actively pursuing the career of her dreams while dating the man of her dreams. On top of that, a thread of female community and support runs through the series. Leslie looks to her best friend, Ann Perkins, for support on every issue, seeks the help of the sarcastic but ultimately kind April Ludgate, and works alongside the sassy and confident Donna Meagle in practically every episode. Parks and Recreation even fulfills the criteria of the feminist Bechdel test for media, which was developed by Liz Wallace and put into practice by Alison Bechdel. This includes: 1) the film, book, show, etc. has at least two women characters, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something other than a man. It would be practically impossible to find an episode of Parks and Recreation that doesn’t ace this test.

There are a few foundational elements to Parks and Recreation that position Leslie as powerful, as equal, and as woman. The first, Leslie as powerful, is conveyed through the basic information that gets relayed episode after episode — Leslie is good at her job. In fact, she’s really good at her job. In episode ten of season four, entitled “Citizen Knope,” Leslie proves at every turn how triumphantly talented she is at her work. The opening of the episode consists of Leslie sneaking into her office, which she has been temporarily suspended from, and stealing data so that she may continue to work from home. Not doing her job is unbearable, and Leslie excels at every project she touches. Finally, although Leslie has been suspended, she can-
not remain unproductive; she forms a citizen’s group that rallies to make real changes. In every instance where Leslie has power taken from her, she works immediately to reclaim it. This is Leslie as powerful.

The second, Leslie as equal, is Leslie’s position in relation to the men she is surrounded by. The most formidable male character is Ron Swanson, the purest form of masculinity exaggerated. Ron can build anything out of wood, he eats restaurants full of bacon, and he works for the government because he hates government enough to attempt ruin from the inside. Understanding this dichotomy, it would seem that Leslie and Ron would be positioned against each other in a battle of the sexes, but the show finds repeat opportunities to reinforce their equality. In the same episode, “Citizen Knope,” Ron breaks his rule on never giving gifts because he feels so grateful toward Leslie and her impeccable gift-giving that he bands the office together to get her a quality present. He is moved to tears over her present to him. He and the office even agree to run her campaign, offering to work under Leslie to help her succeed. It would be easy to position Ron and Leslie against one another, but time and again, the show finds ways to make the macho man and career woman equals. This is Leslie as equal.

Finally, Leslie’s womanhood in the face of her career is not compromised. The real test of this feminist program is the relationship Leslie has with her romantic interest, Ben Wyatt. All too common is the relationship versus career dilemma that television and film tend to propose for women as though the categories must be mutually exclusive. In Parks and Recreation, however, Leslie has it all. There was a time in the show when Leslie broke it off with Ben so that she could run for office. Later, when they came to be a couple again, Ben chose Leslie over his job and resigned entirely for her. Finally, when she was struggling to run her campaign, Ben came to work under her. The way in which Leslie and her career are of the utmost importance to both characters is revolutionary for television. Even further, Ben gender-bends by occupying a role most often filled by the constant, nurturing, and supportive-under-any-circumstance wife character. Ultimately, as a brilliant career woman, Leslie does not have to sacrifice her womanhood for even a minute, because of her successful relationship with the progressive Ben. Leslie is a well-rounded character who is successfully progressive because of these three elements — as woman, as equal and as powerful.

Leslie is just as powerful as Amy Poehler herself has proven to be. Both are fearless when it comes to discussing women’s issues, and Poehler knows how to harness the power of comedy in order to further the cause. Whether she is playing Hillary Clinton during the 2008 election and reaching mass audiences, or Amber the one-legged prostitute who farts every time she hops on Saturday Night Live, Poehler isn’t afraid to go for the joke, fight for the cause, and she doesn’t fucking care if you like it. Of course, we fucking love it.


Passing between floors, he spots a pistol in the man’s overcoat. Within the compact elevator there is no time to stall, and with deft passivity he steals a kiss the audience has long pined for. Revealing a duality of passion and vengeance within an instant, he turns on a dime to deal ruthless blows to the assassin. As his heel unmercifully crushes his adversary’s skull, leaving his lover behind in psychological anguish, Ryan Gosling establishes that Nicolas Winding Refn’s 2011 film Drive is playing true to cinematic form. From Akira Kurosawa’s indulgent samurai and Sergio Leone’s callous gunman to Jean-Pierre Melville’s solitary gangsters, Drive’s unnamed protagonist walks a road well trodden. As outcasts with an apathetic cool, violence is no stranger to their grim underworlds.

Clad in a beige peacoat and cloaked beneath a dark fedora, Alain Delon stealthily breaks into a Citroën DS. His eyes look past the rain-covered windshield as he methodically attempts to start the car’s ignition, solemnly presenting the assassin’s life as one that ordains detachment from the world. Depicting an underworld comprised of villainous heroes surrounded by muted colors or moody shades of grey and with a knack for fine automobiles, director Jean-Pierre Melville reigned as France’s master of the bourgeois gangster flick. Aligning himself with neither bank of the Nouvelle Vague movement at its peak, he is nevertheless considered “the father of the New Wave.” Melville’s oeuvre is itself a study of masculinity, as during the 1960s he worked with France’s three most popular male actors: Jean-Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon, and Lino Ventura. Belmondo, of Jean-Luc Godard fame, provides a broody yet comedic foil to the serious figure of Alain De-
lon, whom Melville specifically sought to silently haunt the screenplay of his 1967 masterpiece, *Le Samouraï*.

The taciturn protagonists of *Drive* and *Le Samouraï* are remarkably similar in various respects. One could even note the films’ unique electronic scores, albeit the sense conveyed through electrifying current Los Angeles with attitude reminiscent of 1980s new wave music is starkly different from the futuristic sentimentalty evoked by the classicism of Paris. On top of this, each film evades subjecting itself to a single genre. Melville drew upon an archetypal Americana gangster, similar to that of Frank Tuttle’s 1942 film *This Gun for Hire*. Yet its form alludes to the loneliness and seclusion of the Japanese samurai, the assassin and guardian whose ultimate truth lies in death. Just as Rick Altman states that “it is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another” (Altman 34), Melville exquisitely strung together the semantics of the gangster film with the syntax of immense loneliness that follows the sole proprietor of the samurai genre.

*Drive* follows suit; while set within the world of a current Los Angeles crime world, it details the endeavors of a man whose work varies from professional movie stunt car driver to expert criminal taxi. Leading man Ryan Gosling lacks even a name, credited simply as “Driver.” While this leads to slightly frustrating interactions between characters, the intention is valid. The film wishes to speak from the perspective of someone who has concealed his identity, enabling him to succeed within his subversive life of crime.

The ronin of *Yojimbo*, Akira Kurosawa’s 1961 tale of a masterless samurai wandering Japan’s medieval roads in search of work, obscured his identity in a similar manner. Under query by one of the town’s rival gangs to reveal himself, his gaze wanders beyond the window as he fabricates an identity that translates roughly to “Mulberry Field thirty-year-old.” Upon its release, *Yojimbo*, whose title means “bodyguard,” revolutionized the tropes of the samurai film due to its comically violent plot. The samurai of *Yojimbo* emphasizes himself as a rogue killer for hire; similarly, Melville aimed to recreate the honor and loneliness of the legendary figure within *Le Samouraï*. In a Melvillian homage to the classic Hollywood police line-up, Alain De-
lon’s assassin persona, Jef Costello, is revealed by the police. The disclosure of his identity damages his integrity as an assassin — a gun for hire under investigation cannot be trusted. This revelation impedes Costello’s work, causing a struggle as his nefarious connections refuse their camaraderie. A life of isolation leaves him with no one to turn to. Even his apartment is ill furnished, containing merely rows of cigarettes and a caged bird that bears sole witness to his seclusion. Yet Costello endeavors to continue his life of crime, the mechanics of a hit man ingrained within him. As his identity has been unveiled, it can ultimately only lead to disaster.

In Drive, Gosling refuses to select an identity, which bears an attempt at contextualizing him with Clint Eastwood’s onscreen persona, “the Man with No Name.” To further untangle a web of connections, Sergio Leone’s trilogy originated as a direct western restructur-

“...They grasp feeble worlds, their lawlessness warranted by the conviction that with one final crime they may be able to retire into oblivion...”

ing of Kurosawa’s savage films. Despite the fact that Eastwood is referred to subtly as “Joe” or other mute monikers, his identity is built upon his resilience and potential to impart justice within the outlaw communities via ruthless violence. Gosling’s character, the Driver, seems a far cry from a modern Eastwood, although his end goal is also vaguer than the obvious bundle of cash. Drive ventures past underworld burglary as the Driver’s shady midnight escapades become intermixed with the melodrama of romantic interest. His professional life becomes entangled with his neighbor’s struggle to raise her son, and her husband’s release from prison only further snarls up the circumstances. Yet, Carey Mulligan’s character Irene presents a soft-spoken and endearing femininity to a piece that focuses on illegitimate vocations. A joyride along the Los Angeles River and a reserved relationship with Irene’s son develop Gosling’s character as caring and civil, though it is a civility he emphatically disregards when placed in danger. It is the melodramatic elements that validate his ferocity; his shrouded romantic affections for Irene drive his ambitions to come to her family’s aid. As the Driver attempts to release his neighbor’s family from the pressures of living under crooked debt, Nicolas Winding Refn allows the melodramatic relationships to be thoroughly explored.

What enables the melodrama in Drive is simply negated in Le Samourai. Melville’s meticulous and evocative fabrication of masculinity within his dark criminal realm famously denies roles of gender. His protagonists at a glance represent figures from American cinema’s past, and his films emphasize the struggles of the French Resistance or concern criminal worlds. Centering around these types of characters enables what French film theorist and Melville enthusiast Ginette Vincendeau described as “homosocial” cinema, or film in which the world that the characters inhabit is almost entirely male. For while Costello’s former lover serves as a convenient alibi for his murderous actions and a charming piano player turns her head to his crime, Melville notoriously denies his films romance. Focusing instead on the idiosyncrasies of the illicit worlds he invents, his characters — such as Costello — are invigorated by survival and money. They grasp feeble worlds, their lawlessness warranted by the conviction that with one final crime they may be able to retire into oblivion, as they have successfully triumphed over the ennui of a capitalistic systematic hegemony. Yet Costello’s lawlessness is two-sided, for the criminal languor Melville romances leads to a world-weariness of a life in disconnect.

Melville further manipulates genre by stripping Le Samourai of the thriller aspect of the American noir film, which he so adores. Delon plays the role calculatedly, speaking only when necessary to direct the story, another as-
pect shared by the protagonist of Drive. Deconstructing Costello’s two assassinations, Vincendeau uncovers that they reveal the character’s ritualistic nature rather than his passion. Each killing is executed monotonously: Costello wears white Adidas gloves standard to Melville’s gangsters and takes his hands out of his pockets without a gun. While the next shot reveals the man he is attempting to kill holding a gun to Costello, miraculously it is Costello’s gloved hand which appears firing the gun, successfully assassinating his victim. Calculated editing tricks the viewer into recognizing Costello has succeeded in the crime miraculously. While a concise plot summary of the film would have it seemingly centered on action and death, in reality, Melville exposes the hidden internal assumptions of the genre by toying with the conventions of cinema.

With the Driver trapped inside a hotel room after his con has gone awry and leaving Irene’s husband dead, Drive utilizes bloodshed and exhilarating chase sequences to a different effect. The Driver, motivated by the unjust debt placed upon Irene, exhibits a merciless passion that is quite the opposite of Delon’s calculated movements. The gruesome ferocity aided by contemporary cinematic slow motion adds a hyperreality to the action of thwarting his killers. Yet, this action is validated within the narrative by the Driver’s ritual isolation, an art in its devotion to self and vocation. Similar to the moral coding of westerns like The Wild Bunch, in which gruesome action is claimed acceptable for loyalty and fidelity, the viewer is encouraged to endorse the underdog.

Delon’s Costello in Le Samouraï reaches an unfortunate and dismal fate. Chased by a colossal team of police — even by cinema standards — Costello nearly frees himself before ultimately allowing himself to be abdicated. Paid in advance for his next crime, Costello knows it will be his last. In one of cinema’s most magnificent turns of fate, Costello attempts his last hit with the elegance and sophistication of a samurai who has spent his entire life unaccompanied in his exploits. His appointment to kill the female pianist is fulfilled by his own murder. Establishing his obligatory intention to kill her, he draws his gun. The bloodthirsty Parisian police force surrounds the doorways of the dark nightclub, executing Costello. When the police investigate Costello’s revolver, they find it empty, a metaphor that corresponds directly to the ritual harakiri of the samurai.
Drive's Driver amends a trope of the noir conclusion in favor of a more western standard. He is allowed to survive his grisly escapade; however, the film’s closing shot depicts him struggling to claim his breath, forcing viewers to deliberate the significance of either his living or dying. He is allowed to walk free, yet he leaves the money behind, perhaps a tribute to the potentially good inner nature of the protagonists of Kurosawa’s and Leone’s films. It is a gesture that rejects the greed and violence of his opponents, furthering him toward an ideal of sincerity.

Jean-Pierre Melville’s genius cinematic approach of reconstructing the famed American noir hero for the French public quickly came to an end. Le Samouraï stands as the pinnacle of his popularity in France, as well as the last films created in his famed Rue Jenner studio, which burned to the ground just as filming was completed. Although his next film, L’armée Des Ombres, or Army of Shadows (1969), received critical acclaim and cultural attention for its depiction of the French resistance, it did not achieve sensational success and Melville took this nonfulfillment personally. Melville’s life was contained within the ashes of his Rue Jenner studio. It remains interesting to note, however, that the only true fatality of the fire was Costello’s caged bird, sole companion to Melville’s lost samurai.

In Drive, the Driver plays with the ideals of a hero, and from the get-go, his persona implores that to live lawfully is out of the question. His scorpion-embroidered gold jacket likens his identity to ideals defined by characters such as “Batman,” heroes with a virtuous defiance. The opportunity to earn an honest living as a racecar driver appeals as a valid means of living, even with the possibility of provisional fatherhood subtly suggested. However, it is evident that a life on a racetrack isn’t what Gosling’s character of the “Driver” had envisioned. Once pressured, Drive’s characters deliver violence with cringing intensity. The Driver and his scorpion jacket are allowed to survive, begging the question of whether the unnamed protagonist will rise again.

In linking these films the discussion seems almost haphazard, crossing national borders to link characters not by genre but through the dissection of similarities within their endeavors. The cinema is persistently retrospective and, if contemplated with an attentive frame, the characters of these films seem to be in conversation with one another. These shadow character’s attributes have been solidified historically, derived from murky periods in which their loneliness and devotion to their profession is amplified. A mystique surrounds their actions as their heroic portrayal is not territory specific. These classically notorious and silent outcasts have long haunted the cinema, and it is seemingly their enterprise to continue.


