No Woman's Land: The Bad Projections of Inhibited Intentionality in Film

Claire Drummond
Department of English
McGill University, Montreal
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Abstract

Cultural theorist Elaine Scarry speaks of the narrative shape of the world as projected outward from the human body. This plot becomes complicated when worlds are projected from the inhibited and tenuous subject positions of women living under the reign of heteropatriarchy. Such bad projections reveal not a clear field of opportunity – i.e. the linear narrative landscapes of conventional, masculine cinematic space – but opaque and impassable topologies. *No Woman's Land* explores films whose subjects navigate the perils of cinematic spaces, times and worlds that weren't built to accommodate them, namely Barbara Loden's 1970 feminist classic *Wanda*, Todd Haynes' 1993 domestic thriller *[SAFE]* and Jonathan Glazer's 2014 science fiction film *Under the Skin.* The films I have selected are driven by anything other than action, movement, or intentionality, which begs the question: where is there left to go when the world is someone else's oyster? The narrative and visual forms of these films are indelibly shaped and distorted by the gendered violence that their protagonists endure – the violence of becoming female.

La théoricienne culturelle Elaine Scarry parle du récit narratif du monde comme étant projeté vers l'extérieur par le corps humain. Cette idée se complique lorsque des mondes sont projetés de la position restreinte et précaire de la femme vivant sous l'étreint de l'hétéropatriarcat. De telles projections douteuses nous indiquent aucun champ d'opportunité – point de paysage narratif linéaire venant de l'espace masculin conventionnel. Elles révèlent plutôt des topologies opaques et impraticables. *No Woman's Land* explore des films les sujets desquels naviguent les périls d'espaces cinématiques – des temps et des mondes qui n'ont pas été bâtis pour les accommoder, comme dans le classique féministe *Wanda* (1970) de Barbara Loden, le *thriller* domestique *[SAFE]* (1993) de Todd Haynes, et le film de science-fiction *Under the Skin* (2014) de Jonathan Glazer. Ces films que j'ai sélectionnés ont comme force motrice n'importe quels éléments *autre* que l'action, le mouvement, ou l'intentionnalité, ce qui nous amène à la question suivante : quelle espace nous reste-t-il lorsque le monde appartient à quelqu'un d'autre? Les formes narratives et visuelles de ces films sont marquées et déformées par la violence genrée que ses protagonistes doivent endurer – la violence de devenir femelle.

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Intro: An Oyster That Belongs to Someone Else

> Absence can exist only as a consequence of the other; it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain. . . . Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; immobility (by the hum of the wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades). (Barthes 13-14)

Cultural theorist Vivian Sobchack writes that women experience their bodies as discontinuous with the world, inhabiting "space tentatively, in a structure of self-contradiction that is inhibiting and self-distancing and that makes their bodies — as related to their intentionality — less a transparent capacity for action and movement than a hermeneutic problem" (Sobchack 33). Women experience the world through the intentions of others rather than themselves—an oyster that belongs to somebody else. Etymologically speaking, "intention" is a movement toward as well as an extension and expansion outward. Film theorist Elaine Scarry speaks of the ways in which the narrative shape of the world is projected outward from the human body (Scarry 38); thereby this plot becomes complicated when projected from contradictory, inhibited and tenuous female subjectivities. Following affect theorist Laura Marks, such bad projections reveal not a clear field of opportunity—what she calls the "optical" image of conventional, masculine cinematic space—but opaque and impassable landscapes. As the saying goes, there's no country for women. Throughout this project, I work with Sara Ahmed's understanding of the term "woman", as including whoever travels under the sign of "woman" — specifically understanding womanhood as a symbolic order rather than any form of a biological fact. In the following, borrowing from the theoretical realm of affect theory: namely, theorists Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed and Laura Marks, I explore the spatial and temporal complications of film worlds projected from tentative female subjectivities. I situate my research within contemporary feminist affect theory due to its capacity to address the crises of

embodiment, temporality and spatiality when it comes to living within a body and a world that were never meant for you[1].

Optical visuality, in Laura Marks' terms, "sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space," thereby allowing the viewer the perspective of "an all-perceiving subject" (Marks 162). The films that I have chosen feature women suspended within and confounded by deep space, as constituted through long shots and long takes, delineating the ways in which distinct forms and deep space may not apply when emanating from the inhibited and tentative subjectivities of women. In this MA thesis project, I analyze films whose narratives foreclose the dominant subject position of the all-perceiving subject—narratives that are driven by something other than action, movement and intentionality. I explore films whose subjects navigate the perils of cinematic spaces, times and worlds that weren't built to accommodate them, namely Barbara Loden's 1970 feminist classic *Wanda*, Todd Haynes' 1993 domestic thriller *[SAFE]* and Jonathan Glazer's 2014 science fiction film *Under the Skin*. Throughout *No Woman's Land*, I will work with an understanding of cinematic time as constituted by editing and narrative, and filmic space as built by changes in distance and editing. It should be noted, further, that the unfolding of my own thought in what follows is driven by something other than action, movement and intentionality amidst the complications and inhibitions inherent in my occupation of authorial space as a woman.

Feminist theorist Ariella Azoulay writes about the ways in which the current legislation against sexual violence as well as its encompassing discourse circulate around conceptions of consent and confession. According to Azoulay, the category of consent is circumstantial and

[1] Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* delineates the ways in which affect theory has emerged as a reaction

spatial, defined by "whether the woman agreed to be with the man in the pool, in his room, or in her home", thereby restricting the category of consent within the walls of private domestic space, which remains ever "in the grip of the ghosts of their sexual domination" (Azoulay 233). Further, confession places women in the position of having to confess to her "actions… even if she isn't to blame for them" (Azoulay 233). Thus the culture surrounding sexual violence makes the mistaken assumption that women move through the world under the aegis of citizenship (i.e. a body and intention with the capacity for political action, movement and protection), yet the quotidian continuation of gendered violence and hatred against women exposes the ways in which women are noncitizens whose "integration within the political community of citizen [is] not yet completed" (Azoulay 234). The three heroines within the films I have chosen are adrift in the world, moving outside of the bounds of the pools, rooms and homes that have been mistaken for women's circumstantial consent, nevertheless running up against the brutality of the limits of their partial citizenship within no woman's land.

In analyzing narrative movements within film worlds that emanate from bad projections, I aim to illuminate the fault lines within contemporary narratives surrounding systemic sexual violence wherein the categories of consent and consequent confession entrap women in "a promise not of her own making" (Azoulay 213). The shape of this project itself will mimic the wandering and opaque paths that these heroines take. I do not aim toward discrete conclusions, nor do I pretend to entirely understand the films that I have chosen to analyze. I cannot see these films from enough distance in order to perceive them as distinct or coherent forms. As a woman in the world, I too am adrift in the debris of gendered violence and hatred and so I cannot position myself above these works – I can only think alongside them. I position myself in a yielding-knowing manner in opposition to the masculine Western humanist subject's supposed

mastery over the time-space continuum (Marks 151). In my thinking and writing, I mime the wayward structures of these films. This project will be composed of two parts: a theoretical component and a research-creation component. In this project's theoretical component, I analyze the narrative trajectories of the female noncitizen. From here, I will ask what other orbits, if any, might be available for women through a research creation exploration of the tentative and mimetic relationships between women, specifically using the medium of film to explore my emulative relationship to my mother. In this experimental portrait, I turn toward the speculative medium of filmmaking in order to imagine other more liveable worlds built along the instability and precarity inherent in occupying feminine space.

Chapter 1 -- Running Away from Everything: The Inhibitions of Wide Open Space in Barbara Loden's *Wanda*

I begin *No Woman's Land* by asking: what does it mean for a film world to be projected from a body with no consistent, dependable intentionality; what does it mean for a world to extend or expand outward from nowhere? What is the narrative shape of a world that emanates from the inhibited intentionalities of women? In Scarry's formulation, the narrative shape of the world extends first from the body, toward shelter toward world (Scarry 38). In the following, I will analyze the problems of embodied and worldly space for women.

> She's really running away from everything. She's trying to get out of the… she doesn't know what she wants. But she knows what she doesn't want. And she's trying to get out of this very ugly type of existence. But she doesn't have the equipment that a person that has been exposed a little bit to… different kind of people that would help her. And she doesn't know how to get out of her problem but she's trying the best thing she can. She can't cope with life, she has no equipment, she can't do anything: she can't hold a job, she doesn't know how to take care of children… life is a mystery to her. And she's trying the best thing she can, which is just really to drop out… a lot of people do this, and they become very passive. This is one type of person we have in our society…a person that completely resigns and lets everything walk over them. (Loden)

This is Barbara Loden speaking about her 1970 feminist classic film *Wanda* on the Mike Douglas Show in 1971. Loden speaks in a meandering and apologetic manner, trailing off, her eyes downcast, avoiding eye contact with the interviewer in a time-honoured manner of feminine expression: her hesitance, her ambivalence about occupying conversational space in a world that was never built to accommodate her readable in her tenuous body language (Ahmed 11). *Wanda* is a film that emanates from the ambivalent space of its eponymous protagonist - a film constituted by "she doesn'ts" and "she can'ts," a world constituted through absence, or rather a world constituted specifically by the absent presence of its protagonist. What does it mean to run

away from everything? And how long can you run for, before the running itself runs out? Wanda's specific running time is exactly one hour and forty-three minutes.

The cinematic time of *Wanda* (constituted through its editing and narrative) is elliptical: between one moment and the next, it is unclear how much time has passed (minutes, days, years, months, who is to say?). In short, the narrative of the film goes as such: 1. Wanda leaves her sister, her father and her husband in quick succession within the film's first fifteen minutes. 2. Wanda attaches herself to a balding businessman, spending the night with him and in the morning he swiftly dumps her at the side of the road. 3. Wanda wanders for a little while, meandering through a shopping mall, finding herself at a movie theatre where she promptly falls asleep, and during this lapse of time someone steals all of her money from her purse. 4. She stumbles into a bar where she happens upon a man named Mr. Dennis in the middle of a hold-up. She attaches herself to him and from here on out, the film progresses according to his intentionality (he intends to rob a bank, and Wanda becomes his ambivalent accomplice). 5. They plan a heist while on the road, making occasional pit stops in cheap motels and at gas stations, where Mr. Dennis steals snacks and beer. 6. They carry out the heist, which goes awry and Mr. Dennis is shot dead. 7. Wanda finds herself at another bar, where a man picks her up. They drive around in his shiny red convertible, where he tries to sexually assault Wanda while she screams and kicks him off of her, running into the forest. 8. Wanda ends up at another nondescript bar, surrounded by strangers smoking cigarettes and beer. Wanda gazes downward, her expression despondent, and the frame freezes on her. The end. The narrative, as I've roughly outlined it, goes in circles, a mundane series of men, bars and cars, repetitions of the nature of love for women: the promise of a form of recognition and reciprocity that never arrives. As Lauren Berlant describes in *The Female Complaint*, for women, "love is the gift that keeps on

taking" (Berlant 1): in Berlant's formulation, for women, 1 + 1 = 0. Wanda's score in the film's beginning, middle and end is exactly 0. In the film's middle, Wanda matter-of-factly states: "I don't have anything, never did have anything, never will have anything." In this swift sentence, Wanda describes the film's temporality: a past, present and future constituted through dispossession. The film's narrative itself, moving in circles, traces the shape of 0, mapping out Berlant's formulation. In other words, in *Wanda*, Wanda kills time.

In what follows, I will perform a more detailed formal analysis of the film's narrative unfolding, as well as the way in which the narrative is strung together through editing. The bounded and seamless time (narrative, editing) and space (changes in distance, editing) of traditional narrative cinema are rendered turbulent and truncated in *Wanda*, as the film's world emanates from the subtractive logic Berlant describes. Loden's impetus for the writing of this screenplay was a newspaper article she happened upon that detailed the brief story of a woman charged with robbing a bank who said "thank you" to the judge upon reception of a twenty-year prison sentence, a film driven by the overarching question: "what pain, what hopelessness could make a person desire to be put away? How could imprisonment be relief?" (Léger 10). One possible answer to this question that *Wanda* posits is that the four walls of a prison may be a preferable space of shelter to the institutionalized domestic space in which one has to be someone's mother, someone's wife: a different and potentially more bleak form of confinement. What might it mean, then, for a prison cell to be a more desirable form of shelter than a house?

Wanda takes place in the forgotten landscapes of rural American backwaters, opening with meandering shots of working class quotidian life: a panorama of piles of rubble, a coal mine, the drone of machinery, an elderly woman saying her rosaries, a screaming child whose mother slowly and exhaustedly arises from bed to collect him, the child proceeding to hang from

her shoulder like an appendage. In her meandering contemplation on the film, *Suite for Barbara Loden,* Nathalie Léger writes that upon seeing this mother within the first few moments of *Wanda*, "we think this must be her, this must be the heroine" (Léger 8). "Come on, honey, have some coffee," says the wife, and her husband responds by slamming the door and storming off to work ("the wife," "the mother," these are the only unfortunate names that I have to refer to this otherwise nameless woman). The slamming of the door rouses a pile of bones sleeping on the couch: the camera lingers for a moment on her tangled nest of blond hair, her slack arms struggling to support the weight of her head, the child's wails and the low-grade sound of operating machinery providing the banal soundtrack for the machinations of this desolate domestic scene. "He's mad 'cause I'm here" says Wanda, the camera ambivalently settling its gaze onto her frame, looking side to side for a moment before resting on her exhausted figure as she struggles to get off the couch: the film tenuously chooses her as our protagonist. The film thereby employs a kind of formal fake-out in its establishment of our heroine: we think "the wife," "the mother" is our leading lady at first, but *Wanda* asks us to think again. Wanda is not the wife, and not the mother: she is the negative space of these feminine forms, constituted through the film's sequencing as their afterimage: she is a simulacra of femininity, of the first woman who represents the prescribed terms of womanhood within this world (mother, wife). This woman is her sister — fittingly, the etymology of "relative" is to have reference: Wanda is a kind of body double of her sister's always-already exhausted feminine form.

Femininity's dominant mode is mimesis, constituted through exemplarity, and specifically the bad examples of what cultural theorist Sianne Ngai terms a form of "diseased selfhood" wherein the best examples of femininity are the bad ones (Ngai 130). In a chapter entitled "Envy" from Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, she describes that "feminine identifications in

particular—that is, phantasmatic alignments with women —become coeval with mimetic acts of self-transformation 'after the fashion' of another as model" (Ngai 151). Ngai's text centres itself within the psychology of homosocial group formations, yet Wanda does not exhibit any signs of a desire to exist within any kind of group, as the film proceeds to detail her journey into social orbit, as she leaves her worldly attachments in her wake; to recall Barbara Loden's contemplation on her film, Wanda is a woman who, "can't cope with life, she has no equipment, she can't do anything: she can't hold a job, she doesn't know how to take care of children… life is a mystery to her" (Loden). I propose that Wanda's lacking "equipment" is what makes her a convincing model of femininity. In Ngai's formulation, the best examples of femininity are the bad ones, as bad examples compel a reevaluation of "what it is that they supposedly exemplify" (Ngai 166). This conception of the bad example and the bad subject will provide a theoretical framework for the following pages. Thereby Wanda's bad exemplarity points to the ways in which femininity itself was never really working to begin with. Wanda's lacklustre performance as a human woman becomes a point of contention between her and her future partner, but I will return to this a little later on.

Wanda sits disheveled on the couch with her head in her hands and in an editorial sleight of hand, all of a sudden she appears outside amidst an anthracite landscape. This ellipsis establishes the film's temporality as fundamentally untrustworthy, as though termites have gotten to its structure, rendering it porous and unstable. A small and nearly indistinguishable white speck reveals itself to us in a slow zoom within an otherwise grey topology: it's Wanda, no bigger than an ant, "the forbidding horizon is choked up to the sky, trucks are maneuvering in the dust. It's her, it's Wanda" (Léger 9). A languid long shot proceeds, tracking Wanda as she plods from left to right across the landscape, across the screen. In *The Last Great American Picture*

Show, film theorist Bérénice Reynaud notes that, "the diegetic space of the film is structured without a vanishing point and its architecture of reverse-angle shots does not follow the rules of classical narrative filmmaking" (Reynaud 237). Even in this long shot, there is no sky, no blue, no horizon, only the relentless grey of gravel, complicating the relationship between subject and world. According to Renaissance perspective, "the representation sets up a triangulated relationship with the unseen spectator positioned at the apex in relation to a flat horizon line at which parallel lines converge" (Sobchack 20). This triangulation thereby places the viewer within a position of all-knowing mastery, a position that Laura Marks calls an optical form of visuality over the onscreen landscapes in her film theory text *The Skin of the Film*. In this monotonous industrial landscape, there is no horizon, no coherent viewer perpspective. Horizon, from Greek horizōn (kuklos), means "limiting (circle)." In *Wanda*, the horizon becomes a floating white blip: the horizon becomes Wanda herself. Wanda is the void around which the film's world spins, around which perspective itself begins to disintegrate; the world that emanates from her is a limiting circle, a spiral of inhibited intentionality—the world of a subject without prospects.

Wanda is a film with no horizon — in other words, *Wanda* is a film bereft of orientation. In *The Promise of Happiness*, affect theorist Sara Ahmed writes that happiness provides a horizon for experience, the proverbial carrot on a stick:

> If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow. The temporality of this following does matter. Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed toward certain objects, which point toward that which is not yet present. When we follow things, we aim for happiness, as if happiness is what you get if you reach certain points. (Ahmed 26)

In *Wanda*, there is no happiness, no object toward which the film turns. *Wanda* is directed toward nothing — there is no carrot, no stick. In *Wanda,* there is never a sense that Wanda is trying to get anywhere or to anyone: there is nothing specific about the hapless way in which she moves through the film. Ahmed continues, "The promise of happiness is the promise that the lines we follow will get us there, where the 'there' acquires its value by not being 'here.' This is why happiness is crucial to the energy or 'forward direction' of narrative" (Ahmed 32). Wanda does move forward but does not follow lines: *Wanda* moves, rather, in circles. Thereby the temporality of the film is not counted in seconds, minutes or hours, but rather in temporal ellipses and gaps in experience.

The landscape sequence leads us to Wanda's arrival at a toiling man picking coal, tossing it into a pail, his languid body creased and cast by a lifetime of mining: he is presumably her father. She prompts him for some money. He tells her he doesn't have much, that he wishes he had more, but that he can spare a little for her. She takes the money, thanks him, and proceeds to make perfunctory conversation: she asks him if he's going to be picking coal today, to which he gives a long-winded reply, "Yes, I'll pick a little coal, I ain't going to do much now, all I'm going to do is pick one more pail…" he trails on for a series of minutes about work in the mines, a possible fishing trip, as the camera lingers on Wanda's bored expression: she glances around, enduring her father's words. Wanda's sister and father, the familial attachments that organize her worldly life, appear in the film's opening moments, and never again. In a rough jump cut, a movement that is characteristic of the film's editing at large, Wanda boards a bus into town, leaving her father in the coal dust. The bus bumbles Wanda along as she sits in a beam of light that leaves her overexposed, drowned out by the sun, the white silhouette of a woman, a cipher of femininity.

A courtroom lies in wait. “Wanda Goranski?” asks the judge, as Wanda’s husband, a nondescript white man, shifts anxiously in the judge’s midst, brow furrowed, arms crossed. “She wouldn’t even care enough to come to court,” declares the husband. “Are those your children over there?” asks the judge, pointing to two screeching rugrats squirming in the arms of a young blonde woman, a woman whose resemblance to Wanda bears remarking. “And who’s that lady?” asks the judge to which the husband replies “That’s Miss Goda, she’s been helping take care of the kids. We kinda wanna get married ‘cause the kids need a mother.” Miss Goda, it becomes clear, is Wanda’s replacement: Wanda’s body double (the duplicate of a duplicate). Wanda peeks out of the doorway to the courtroom, making an ambivalent entrance. She sidles up to the judge adorned with hair rollers, a cigarette pursed between her lips, passing by her children without so much as a second glance, seemingly completely unfazed by their presence — the ambush ensues. The judge cites the charges being brought against Wanda, namely the desertion of her children and husband, asking what she has to say for herself, to which she replies “nothing… listen judge, if he wants a divorce, just give it to him.” Wanda cedes to her replacement: Miss Goda will become the wife, the mother of these children, slotted into the absence left in Wanda’s wake, ‘cause the kids need a mother.

Wanda visits the office of her employer at a textile factory in order to collect her paycheque, where he tells her that she’s already been paid everything she’s owed. Wanda asks for more work, to which he replies that she’s “just too slow in our operations and we can’t use you.” Wanda says she could learn, to which he snaps back, “I’m sorry, my dear, that’s just the best I can do for you. You have to take it as it stands. You’re just too slow for sewing operations and that’s it.” In other words, the best he can do for Wanda is nothing at all. Wanda is a parasite who “produces[s] nothing” in Michael Serres’ terms (Serres 3). She is too slow for the world’s

existing economies, from the economy of domestic labour to the workplace: her husband complains in court that she was a "lousy wife", she is simply "too slow" for marriage and motherhood, too slow for sewing, too slow for any of the prescribed positions available to her. This moment in the film marks Wanda's transition into a parasitic kind of economy: that of the hitchhiker. It is as though Wanda's feminine form as "wife," much like the film's structure, is eroding and disintegrated. As the film (however ambivalently) emanates from her arrested subjectivity, the film's structure and the form from which it emanates are riddled with holes. The film's establishing sequences thereby become disestablishing: the remains of the "landlocked daily routine" of Wanda's life (being a sister, daughter, wife and mother), already hanging by a thread, are featured by the film only to be severed. From here on out, Wanda "casts off," which in Serres' terms is "to sever all bonds" (Serres 99). All this transpires in the film's opening 15 minutes, there is still an hour and twenty-seven minutes left.

Hiding in Plain Sight

Perhaps "sever" is too severe a word in Wanda's case. In Suite for Barbara Loden, Léger notes further that Wanda is:

> The story of a woman who has lost something important but doesn't know exactly what, her children, her husband, her life, something else perhaps but we don't know what, a woman who leaves her husband, her children, who breaks up — but without violence, without having thought about it…. And? And nothing. (Léger 12)

Wanda's casting off is slow, uneventful: it's nothing. Biographer and novelist Marion Meade asks in her article on *Wanda*, "Where do you go after you reject the only life society permits? And once a woman gains her freedom, what can she do with it? The answer: nowhere and nothing" (Reynaud 224). In the following pages, I will navigate the ways in which *Wanda* takes place in the middle of nowhere, further exploring the specific nothingness of Wanda herself: the

ways in which she is a cipher of femininity. From here on out, *Wanda* becomes a wandering road movie, detailing Wanda's movement through nondescript landscapes without landmarks: she is going nowhere in stark opposition to the humanist subject's domination of one's environment constituted by and through "the controlling distance from the environment so well served by vision" (Marks 139-140). In the second act of *Wanda*, the road movie, our heroine moves in circles as though tracing the number "0," the limiting circle, the inhibiting horizon of nothingness.

In *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*, Marxist Feminist theorist Silvia Federici writes that, "In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker" (Federici 17). Thereby the housewife is a function of capital, performing the invisible domestic labour of cooking, cleaning, fucking and raising children. Federici continues:

> A lot of us recognize that we marry for money and security; but it is time to make it clear that while the love or money involved is very little, the work that awaits us is enormous. This is why older women always tell us, 'Enjoy your freedom while you can, buy whatever you want now.' But unfortunately it is almost impossible to enjoy any freedom if, from the earliest days of your life, you are trained to be docile, subservient, dependent and, most importantly, to sacrifice yourself and even to get pleasure from it. If you don't like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, and your abnormality. (Federici 17)

Wanda, from the film's beginning, is established as a deficient housewife — she neglects to clean, to cook, to care for the children: according to the extant expectations of what it means to be a woman in the world, she describes herself, laughing, as "just no good!" The charges brought against Wanda by her husband are that she simply doesn't care: she "doesn't care about anything, she was a lousy wife, always bumming around, drinking. Never took care of us, never took care of the kids. I used to get up for work, make my own breakfast, change the kids. Come

home from work, she's lying around on the couch, kids are dirty, there's diapers on the floor." The film's inaugural moments follow Wanda's social death, her final severance from the attachments that organize her present (sister, daughter, mother, wife), the bonds that necessitate "what it means to have a life" for a woman in an all-too-often cruelly optimistic mode of existence (Berlant 13).

Lauren Berlant describes cruel optimism as:

> …a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world…Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object. (Berlant 24).

Thereby for women, the significantly problematic object/scene of desire would be the promise of the fulfilment of a form of romantic and familial love that never comes: a husband who demands a convincing performance of the physical and emotional labour of the housewife. For Wanda, attachment in itself is significantly problematic: Wanda has no attachment to attachment[2].

Wanda plods through a shopping mall: she hasn't got any place to be. She gazes at mannequins in store windows who appear larger, more life-size, than she does. Léger writes that, "Wanda is taking refuge in what she sees: a plain dress with opaque tights, a double-breasted check suit, a blonde fringe, a price tag, each detail more charged in substance and meaning than

[2] The film's inaugural moments delineate the object/scene of desire of the nuclear family and Wanda's subsequent abandonment of it: Wanda sacrifices her occupation of the prescribed terms of femininity, a position that is itself constituted by and through sacrifice. She gives up the ghost of femininity, she gives up the terms of her "life" as a woman. The film's remainder navigates the complications of what is to come in her afterlife, what comes after the loss of the continuity of femininity's determined form. This begs the question: for women who are not wives or mothers, whose place is anywhere but the home, where else is there left to go in a world that wasn't built to accommodate them (Ahmed 10)?

she is" (Léger 27); in this scene, the object world appears more vital than Wanda herself, the veneer of mannequin faces juxtaposed with her disheveled appearance, her downcast eyes, the downward turn of the corner of her lips. Léger writes that Wanda "does look perfectly dead" (Léger 117). She is there, but not there, an absent presence, or a present absence of sorts: she lives, yet she lives not[3].

To Wanda is to Wander

In Michael Serres' formulation of "casting off," he details the journey of a rocket ship into outer space (Serres 121). Wanda is not afforded such a vehicle — rather, she is afforded the borrowed vehicles of others: the cars of the men she happens to meet serve as her only available rocket ships. Wanda hitches a ride with another run-of-the-mill white man and the camera cuts abruptly to a scene of the morning after: the man sneaks around the room while Wanda sleeps, trying and failing to abandon her without a sound. He bumps into the wall with his suitcase, rousing Wanda from her slumber. She begins to dress in a panic, exclaiming "Hey where are you going… just a minute, I'll be just a minute, wait a minute!". Wanda's casting off is off to a rough start: with no car and no money, Wanda's only option is to be a hitchhiker, a passenger. The man

[3] The trope of the eidolon delineates a female figure who has come back from the dead, the same but different — a formulation of femininity that looms in my mind throughout my contemplation of the films I have chosen, as they portray women whose relationship to life and being alive is fundamentally ambivalent. Euripides' *Alcestis* delineates the trope of the eidolon, wherein the spectre of a woman comes back from the dead, an uncanny spectre of femininity. Alcestis tells the tale of a wife who sacrifices herself to save her husband's life, Admetus, a man condemned to death for breaking a promise to the gods unless someone offers to die in his stead. By a twist of fate, Hercules ends up staying with Admetus after Alcestis' death, and in appreciation of Admestus' hospitality, Hercules vows to bring Alcestis back from the dead: she returns to her marital home, a simulacra of herself. Upon seeing her again, Admetus whines:
"O this is terrible? What trick is this?
Fancy or fact? She seems to live, yet lives not.
She breathes but speaks not---stands with open eyes,
Yet sees not, smiles not---pale almost as when
She sank into my arms. This is not life" (Euripides 121).
In thinking about the heroines I have chosen, I am thinking about them as inhabiting the negative space of what it means to have a life — inhabiting "not life".

is already out the door, engine running, and Wanda proceeds to force her way into the car, from which he promptly ejects her, dumping her at an ice cream stand (where, in a moment of unexpected tenderness, the counter attendant wordlessly hands her a free ice cream cone). This is the problem with people: they are always leaving — even as Wanda is the one who is leaving her life, casting off, men still find a way to leave her.

In a video essay entitled "Woman in a Landscape," Cristina Alvarez Lopez and Adrian Martin note that Wanda is perpetually on the move throughout the film, that the camera has a difficult time keeping her in the centre of the shot:

> …the figure of Wanda tends to be always a bit decentred in the film frame, jammed in or blocked from view by the elements of her surroundings. She is always on the verge of escaping at the margins of the screen, even the camera makes a show of struggling to keep her in view (Lopez and Martin)

Thereby *Wanda* runs the risk of leaving Wanda behind (or is it the other way around?). As Wanda moves through her surroundings, the landscapes in which she finds herself suspended occasionally swallow her up, the camera labouring to keep her in its line of sight. She appears at the periphery of the frame, and when she is centred, she is often poorly lit or washed out, appearing as the spectre of a woman. On the bus, Wanda appears ghastly and overexposed, drowned by the light. As she paces outside of the courthouse where her soon-to-be ex-husband and children wait for her inside, the camera's view of her is repeatedly obstructed by passing cars. As she stands outside of her boss' office, our view of her is hindered by window panes and finished garments in shiny blue plastic bags. Recall, further, the camera's ambivalent selection of her as our protagonist in the film's opening sequence. It is as though Wanda is boring the camera.

Here, I take boring to mean two things: first, Wanda's slow, meandering movements would seem to lack the tension required to generate narrative momentum: her occupation of the film's world is tenuous, bereft of action or intention. One can imagine that in response to the question "where are you going?" Wanda would answer with an ambivalent shrug. It is as though the camera has a difficult time justifying its focus on her: in some moments, it loses her as her image is swallowed by grey landscapes and passing cars as though the film world is swallowing her up. In other moments, it gets distracted by the surfaces and objects within Wanda's encompassing world. Second, I want to propose that Wanda is boring *to* the camera. Marks describes *interested* perception as constitutive of the image:

> …the definition of image is that which is isolated from its context by one's (interested) perception, which is informed by memory and actualized in the body. The interestedness of perception depends upon the memory of what counts as useful information. (Marks 146)

In the meanderings of *Wanda,* very little seems to count as "useful information" and thereby the image comes to be constituted through a kind of bored and wayward perception. In "Stuplimity" from Sianne Ngai's seminal affect theory text *Ugly Feelings,* Ngai describes boredom as characterized by a *deficiency of affect,* paralyzing rather than strengthening heart innervation (Ngai 262). Boredom thereby functions in stark opposition to the sublime as delineated by Kant, characterized ultimately by the edification of a "self-ennoble" humanist subject:

> …the passivity, duration, and ignoble status of boredom would seem to contradict nearly all aspects of the sublime, not only in its initial effect of shocked surprise bordering on terror, an emotion that is sharp and fleeting, but also in the subsequent transformation of this terror 'into a feeling of tranquil superiority'—the serene, self-ennobling admiration for the colossal object in which Kant's sublime culminates. (Ngai 268-269)

In *boring* the camera, Wanda thereby becomes an icon of the "stuplime" in Ngai's terms — a figure adrift in the "common muck of language" (Ngai 278). *Wanda* relies on a heroine who

"…at times deliberately risks seeming obtuse, as opposed to making claims for spiritual transcendence or ironic distance" (Ngai 278)[4].

Wanda meanders into a movie theatre and promptly falls asleep as the projector whirs, a lapse in time wherein someone evidently steals all of her money out of her white patent leather purse (it is unclear whether or not she ever had any money in her purse to begin with, as this tote becomes a mysterious black, or white, box of sorts — its contents never revealed to us). As Stanley Kaufman observes, "Wanda, I guess, is meant as a homonym for wander" (Kaufman 24). Even interior spaces: the house, the motel, the mall, are roads for Wanda. Recall the film's opening sequence, for example, wherein she's pictured as a couch-surfer. She is always on the move within spaces of the interior and the exterior: for Wanda, every space is transitory, liminal. In *Wanda*, the question becomes: where isn't the road? Even the house is a road for Wanda as she is only ever pictured inhabiting space in temporary and nomadic manners.

There is a difference, it should be noted, between wandering and being lost: in being lost, there is nevertheless an implied destination in mind, one has gone "off the beaten track," so to speak, but the beaten track is still a possibility. In wandering, the beaten track is a foregone conclusion: wandering is an aimless, wayward pursuit[5]. Etymologically speaking, wandering is related to the wind and so to wander is to navigate space in a drifting, aerial capacity, somewhere

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[4] Ngai notes, further, that "The shocking and the boring prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible" (Ngai 262). What might it mean, then, for a film to emanate from a fundamentally disengaged subjectivity such as Wanda? How might we engage as viewers, specifically, through a kind of disengagement?

[5] Sobchack delineates three forms of being lost — going round in circles, not knowing where you are and not knowing how to get where you're going (Sobchack 23-27). These forms of being lost depend on a self invested in getting *somewhere*, whereas wandering does not necessarily require the narrative of a self who needs to be *somewhere* or anywhere, and thereby the temporality of wandering has a fundamentally ambivalent and unmoored relationship to past, present and future.

above the beaten track, moving by and of the air rather than the earth. In another editorial ellipsis, suddenly Wanda is inside of a bar where a certain Mr. Dennis is conducting a holdup. He tells her that they're closed, that she has to leave, but she pushes past him, saying she needs to use the bathroom. He paces back and forth with the affect of a ticking time bomb, shouting, "what, are you taking a bath in there?" Wanda eventually exits the bathroom, and Mr. Dennis grabs her by the arm, dragging her with him and exclaiming that they're leaving. Wanda thanks him, recalling the film's impetus, a woman thanking a judge for her prison sentence: what hopelessness could make an agitated, volatile man like Mr. Dennis seem like a relief?

The film's narrative is touch-and-go: generically speaking, *Wanda* is a road movie, yet the film has a hard time actually getting on the road, as our protagonist lacks the component tools of what drives a road movie narrative in the traditional sense, a genre largely dominated by "masculine escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology" - a car of one's own, the open road, action and movement (Cohan and Hark 3). Mr. Dennis marches along the street, dubiously looking into the windows of the cars parked along its edges as Wanda runs behind him, trying to keep up. He finds one whose doors are open and hops in. Wanda asks what he's doing to which he succinctly replies, "get in." He fiddles with the car's wires and the engine starts as Wanda pulls something from the rearview mirror: it's the keys. "Why didn't you just use these?" she says to which he barks back, "You wanna walk, get out! Go ahead, hurry up, make up your mind." Wanda stays put, gazing downwards and saying neither yes nor no: "the silence that we call consent," in Léger's terms (Léger 118). By default, Wanda has become attached to a frenetic criminal, and not a very good one at that.

Once on the road, Mr. Dennis has Wanda read the newspaper to him: as she reads, it becomes clear that the article is about Mr. Dennis' holdup in the bar where they met, an

occurrence she'd previously been oblivious to. She asks him what he's trying to get her into and he pulls over to the side of the road, imploring her to get out. She looks to the wasteland outside of her window, and then back at the waste man sitting beside her: these are her two meagre options, "I didn't do anything," she says. Mr. Dennis makes a pitstop where he tries to convince an older gentleman to be his accomplice: "You don't have to do anything, just drive." But the man is unconvinced, saying "I can't do it, I cannot do it… I've got my mind made up. I won't do it." During their conversation, Wanda is pictured quietly curled up in the background, observing the men as they talk. In a rough jump cut that has by now become part and parcel of the film's editing at large, Wanda and Mr. Dennis are back on the road. "Do you drive?" he asks, to which she replies, "Yeah, I guess so, kind of." Wanda drives, more or less, inadvertently filling in the gap left by the man who refused Mr. Dennis' offer.

From here on out, Mr. Dennis' anxious and frenetic movements propel the film as he and Wanda move toward the hold-up he has planned at the Third National Bank. In a chapter from *Ugly Feelings* entitled "Anxiety," Ngai writes that anxiety is an "expectant emotion" angled toward the "configuration of the world in general, or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of the self" and thereby anxiety has a specifically spatial dimension wherein it is "invoked not only as an affective response to an anticipated or projected event, but also as something 'projected' onto others in the sense of an outward propulsion or displacement" (Ngai 210). Therefore *Wanda* is, from this point forward, projected from the agitated intentionality of Mr. Dennis in lieu of Wanda's intentionality. Further, Ngai writes that this anxious propulsion manifests itself as a thrownness through space, a projective and projectile spatial configuration (Ngai 212). Thereby, Wanda embarks on a parasitic form of casting off: she attaches herself to Mr. Dennis' trajectory as their stolen car falls through space. Wanda's escape route becomes a

form of "yielding to the other's desire to give [herself] a better chance of escaping it" (Léger 41): an escape, a dissolution through the intentionality of another.

Mr. Dennis and Wanda park the car in a field. She sits on the hood of the car as they drink beer. The sun is setting, he puts his jacket around her shoulders in an unexpected moment of affection. He strokes her hair in a gesture that looks something like love, but then, falling back into character, he asks her, "Why don't you do something about your hair? It looks terrible." He suggests a hat, to which she replies that she doesn't have anything to buy a hat with: "I don't have anything, never did have anything, never will have anything… I'm stupid," to which Mr. Denis replies "you don't have anything, you're nothing. May as well be dead. You're not even a citizen of the United States," an ironically astute assessment of Wanda's situation, as well as the situation of those gendered female at large living in a country in which her "integration within the political community of citizen [is] not yet completed" (Azoulay 234). A toy airplane hums above them. Slugging a bottle of Jim Beam, Mr Dennis chases after it hollering "Come here, come back here! Come back!", jumping on the roof of their stolen car as though he's preparing for battle. Scale in this moment becomes a question mark: how big, exactly, *are* Mr. Dennis and Wanda? In a political sense, Wanda is akin to an insect: she is poor, unemployed, unattached and female, a form of bare life — under the aegis of citizenship, she is relatively invisible, a faint buzz in the arena of the sovereign, an arena in which her systemic erasure is everyday and ordinary (Rankine 32). Further, Wanda and Mr. Dennis are operating within a parasitic economy wherein they do not buy and sell, but rather steal, producing nothing, a world perhaps more suited to bugs than to the civilized human (Serres 4).

The narrative shape of the world offered by capitalism according to Berlant's estimation in *Cruel Optimism* is one of attachment to the scenes of desire that constitute the world as we know it, a fantasy that is "fraying" in her terms:

> …upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment. (Berlant 3)

Wanda attaches herself to a sinking ship, which is just another way to say that she is casting off (when nothing is at stake, what is the difference, really, between going up or going down?). Mr Dennis becomes Wanda's floating root, her flotsam — she attaches to a man who is unattached, always already a lost cause, thereby becoming a form of non-attachment. In another editorial ellipsis, the film cuts to a motel room, Wanda's belly swollen beneath a blue maternity dress: has Wanda left the confines of her marriage, her children, only to enter the enclosure of another man, another child? They're rehearsing their future bank heist; Mr. Dennis has written it down step by step and implores her to memorize it. Wanda moans, "I can't do this" and Mr. Dennis punches her belly, revealing it to be the pillow it really is, "ah, come on!" he cajoles. The film provides several false trajectories of upward mobility and durable intimacy, introducing narrative tension only to reveal it as a ruse: the narrative of the "good life," of upward mobility — a husband, a wife and babies — introduced only to soon be revealed as a pillow, a ruse. The only possible "cushion for enjoyment" in this instance is the cushion under Wanda's shirt, and it gets punched — there will be no enjoyment here.

Mr. Dennis writes a narrative summary of their future heist: 1. Get to the house. 2. Gain entrance. They proceed to carry out the baroque first phase of the plan, showing up at the house of Mr. Anderson, the bank's manager, and holding his family hostage, tying them up to their

couch and placing what Mr. Dennis calls a "real live bomb" on their laps. With Mr. Dennis' gun in his side, Mr. Anderson drives to the bank, instructed to drive "straight ahead" in a hint toward a teleological movement that concludes only in death. Wanda travels in tow behind them, but they lose her somewhere along the way. As they make their way to the Third National Bank, the camera moves through several shot-reverse shots between Wanda and Mr. Dennis until it seemingly becomes unhinged, swinging back and forth between them, looping around in a dizzying manner, generating a time hole into which Wanda tumbles. Wanda pulls up beside another car, but the men inside are not Mr. Dennis and Mr. Anderson (just another couple of nondescript white men). Mr. Dennis is now inside the bank, gazing into an open safe, beads of sweat pouring from his perennially furrowed forehead. Wanda is still on her way, but she's too late. Police swarm Mr. Dennis and the camera cuts to a bar where his death is being announced on the news.

Dead Centre, Dead End

In the film's final moments, Wanda is pictured encompassed by strangers laughing, drinking and smoking cigarettes. An off-camera voice bleats, "how bout a hot dog?", someone hands her one and she eats apathetically (in this film, 1 + 1 doesn't *exactly* equal zero, as Wanda does get an ice cream cone and a hotdog, not to mention a ham sandwich, some bar chips and a plate of spaghetti). Her face bereft, her eyes downcast, the image quality turns grainy, disintegrating as the frame freezes on her: this is one of the film's only moments in which she is pictured dead centre. By "dead centre" here, I quite literally mean a centre with no pulse. In this moment, there is nowhere left to go — not even the middle of nowhere. The film's final moment bears a striking resemblance to Todd Haynes' 1993 atmospheric thriller *[SAFE]*, in which Carol, the film's protagonist, is pictured dead centre in the frame, looking into the mirror and

proclaiming, “I love you, I really love you. I love you,” her words falling flat, as the “you” that Carol refers to is the audience rather than herself. Carol’s gaze into the mirror is a moment of cinematic direct address — the “you” in her proclamation of self-love is *us*; Carol’s “you” in this moment is transformed into the production of an impersonal, nonsingular feminine subjectivity, opening toward a confusion between viewer and viewed (Ngai 163). The final resting places of these films are thereby fundamentally unsettled, featuring a sort of doubled death — the cessation of a filmic world driven by an always already absent subjectivity. In *Wanda* and *[SAFE]*, the logical conclusion of a film world projected from a dead centre is a dead end — an unceremonious filmic flatlining — landscapes emanating from a cipher, whole worlds structured by absence (perhaps “hole worlds” would be a more appropriate turn of phrase here). These dead endings are “[portraits] of absence, of death without the dead” in Susan Sontag’s terms, or rather, a portrait of death without the relief of a definitive death (Sontag 50).

Chapter 2 -- Cocoon Theory: Barriers to Human Intimacy in Todd Haynes' *[SAFE]*

> Home is where the heart is. But take one foot out of the frame and things get sketchy fast. At the unwanted knock on the door, or the sudden ring of the phone at night, you can feel the uncanny resemblance between the dazed state of trauma and the cocooning we now call home. The home cocoon lives in a vital state — open, emergent, vulnerable and jumpy. (Stewart 55)

[SAFE] is a cocoon film, following its protagonist, Carol White, as she seeks relief from the environmental illness from which she suffers. The problem with environmental illness, the film posits, is that wherever you go, there it is; escape from "environment" is an entirely impossible pursuit, for it is everywhere — there is no body without a surrounding (environment's etymology is from the French word for "surrounding," environ). The film's title is a kind of open cocoon, encompassed by the embrace of square brackets (an open embrace, a play on the very concept of safety — it is bracketed, but the embrace of a bracket must always remain open to accommodate the word it encloses, a never entirely closed enclosure). In the film's first act, Carol is pictured being infiltrated and isolated by her upper-middle class environment in California's affluent San Fernando valley: the "fumes" of her landlocked daily routine are killing her. The film's narrative progresses as such: 1. Carol's upper-middle class life is established: she lives in a suburban mansion complete with a garden and a Mercedes: she picks up the dry-cleaning, re-decorates her marital home, goes to aerobics, visits a girlfriend who flatly reveals that her eldest brother has just died, quickly pivoting toward talking about her re-decorated den, claiming that she's suing the contractor (in this world, death is just another decorating disaster). 2. Carol chokes on exhaust while driving. Her health begins to deteriorate. She seeks medical help — the doctor tells her she will be "just fine." 3. Carol gets a haircut and manicure in a makeover sequence accompanied by the portentous sounds of chemical bubbling. When her new "look" is revealed in the mirror (a perm), her nose starts to bleed. Her condition

worsens. When she returns home, her husband attempts to make sexual advances toward her, which she refuses — he throws a mild but nevertheless violent tantrum at his apparent lack of access to his wife's body. He apologizes the next morning, embracing her, causing her to vomit — it would seem that *he* is making her sick. 4. Carol continues to be tested by her doctor, who now makes a recommendation that she see a psychiatrist, proposing that the problem is simply in her head. 5. Carol hyperventilates at a girlfriend's baby shower. Upon returning home, she writes a letter to a treatment centre she saw a flyer about at the health club. Greg interrupts her, she asks, "Oh God what is this? Where am I? Right now?" to which he blankly replies, "you're in Greg and Carol's house." 6. Carol sees an allergy specialist to try to determine what she is specifically allergic to. She has a reaction to milk — Carol is a self-described "milkaholic" — but the problem, as the doctor admits, is that they can find the *cause* of reactions, but they cannot stop them. 7. Carol seeks other more liveable environments -- she moves to another room in her house away from her husband, begins to try to get "clear" from environmental toxins. She goes to pick up the dry-cleaning, where they're spraying chemicals, and she has a seizure -- she's rushed to the hospital where she watches an advertisement for the Wrenwood Center on television. 8. Carol moves to the Wrenwood center, where the cure that is offered is isolation from her life as she knew it coupled with a New Age form of self-love. 9. Carol's treatment continues to no avail. She thinks the problem may be that her cabin is close to the highway. 10. At the film's close, Carol is living in a tiny white structure that resembles an igloo with no windows. She approaches the mirror, proclaims "I love you, I really love you" — a line scripted at the beginning of her stay by the centre's director — an "uncompelling, unconvincing" proclamation of self-love, as film theorist Mary Ann Doane describes. Additionally uncanny about this affirmation is the fact that the "you" that Carol refers to is really *us* — she gazes

directly into the camera (Doane 9). Thereby the film's narrative structure is organized by the domestic spaces in which Carol seeks but does not find shelter, nor relief—the film's narrative traces her slow cocooning inward. *[SAFE]* follows what film theorist Amy Taubin refers to as a more "linear narrative," but I argue that the film follows a false linear trajectory—a film that unfolds a narrative of self-love without a self to do the loving. The instability of the false narrative of self-love, rather, collapses in on itself.

[SAFE] opens with a first-person driving shot leading into Carol's garage, followed by a sequence in which Carol and her husband, Greg, are pictured having sex — or rather, Greg is pictured having sex *at* or *near* Carol more than anything else — his writhing, moaning body completely oblivious to the dissociated and listless woman beneath him enduring his physical presence. Carol's body moves mechanically, her expression affectless and affectionless, perfunctorily stroking his back as she waits for it to be over, as she waits for her sexual duties as a housewife to finish: she is waiting to punch out. The film's early moments establish Carol's life as an upper-middle class "home-maker," as she calls it — gardening, ordering her house-keeper, Fulvia, around, telling a team of movers where to put the sofa she's ordered (which is black rather than teal and thereby doesn't go with anything in their house, which has a stringent pastel palette). In the film's following moments, Carol drives to the furniture store to rectify the problem of the black sofa and as she makes her way home, the car is invaded by sound and exhaust: a radio broadcast features a fundamentalist Christian woman phoning in to babble things like, "when I go to bed and I pull up those covers, I say, 'Jesus, I'll see you in the morning!" as exhaust billows from the truck in front of Carol. Amidst a series of shot-reverse-shots detailing the movement between Carol versus the exhaust, Carol is overtaken by a coughing fit, consumed by the intake of sonic and environmental pollution. She pulls over into a

parking garage and the shot-reverse-shots begin to move toward breakneck speed — she spirals down the levels of the parking garage, her breathing becoming increasingly constricted, as though her environment (the car, the radio, the exhaust, the parking garage) are spiralling around her like a boa constrictor, strangling her. She finally reaches a frame bereft of any other vehicles and she screeches to a halt, opening the door and struggling to regain her composure. In this shot, Carol appears tiny, a framing device that is characteristic of the film as a whole, in which she, like Wanda, appears inhibited and constricted by wide open spaces. The open road, for example, is not a site of possibility for Carol, nor for Wanda, but is rather a site of impossibility — the formula for the spaces of these films would seem to be: the wider the shot, the more expansive the landscape, the bigger the problem. When on her way to the Wrenwood treatment centre, vast landscapes are pictured outside of Carol's taxi window, one following the other. A desert highway, an expanse of rolling green hills and blue skies, a suburb nestled in the foothills of New Mexico. Being viewed through the window of a car, this point of view, itself, becomes diseased, laden with the fumes of cars and modernity, the very same fumes that attacked her in the parking garage. Carol, like Wanda, is attempting to cast off, but rather than casting off by moving out into the world, Carol casts off by slowly cocooning inward in an attempt to amputate her environ, her surroundings. *[SAFE]* thus begs the question: in a world that emanates from an absent or inhibited intentionality, when the world itself is pared down, what is left?

There is No Person Without a World

Whereas the temporality and spatiality of *Wanda* are elliptical, taking place in the middle of nowhen and nowhere, the time and place of *[SAFE]* are meticulously indexed. During the film's opening sequence, a title reading "SAN FERNANDO VALLEY 1987" marks the screen. The film painfully details the time-scape of Carol's environment: the seemingly endless series of

carpeted soft-hued rooms in the upper-middle class suburban mansion in which she lives, the sickly pink and blue palette of the health club she attends where women wear high top sneakers and spandex, all indelibly marked by the saccharine pastel aesthetics of the 1980s. Women's time, historically, has been organized along the lines of quotidian domestic rituals. Chantal Akerman's seminal feminist film *Jeanne Dielman 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels,* a noted influence upon Haynes in the making of *[SAFE],* tracks the daily rituals of a woman named Jeanne, a widow who turns tricks in her bedroom during the day while her son is away at school (Doane 8). The film is strung together by the slow, painful duration of women's time — bathing, the labour of grooming one's self, cooking, cleaning, fucking — within the confines of domestic space. Slowly, Jeanne's routine goes *off,* and the fibres of Jeanne's world begin to break apart across the span of the film's three and a half hours until an unexpected orgasm during a visit with a client prompts her, in the film's final minutes, to murder him. The film's shots are rigorously composed, appearing much like domestic still life paintings indexing Jeanne's quotidian feminized labour practices. Hopper painted lonely women wearing blank, faraway stares, alienated and suspended within domestic environments, viewed through windows and doorways. *Jeanne Dielman* and *[SAFE]* look much like what a Hopper painting might look like from the interior of one of the desolate domestic scenes he portrayed, detailing the ways in which things aren't any less bleak on the inside.

[SAFE] tracks a similar durational breakdown of women's time as constituted through quotidian domestic rituals — the everyday begins to disintegrate. Yet *[SAFE]* lacks the puncture of a definitive climax in its narrative structure — there is no such catharsis in *[SAFE]*. Haynes has noted that he considered *[SAFE]* to be like Akerman's masterpiece, but set in an airport, wherein, "All traces of human life, or natural life, have been excluded and taken over. Air is

controlled and space is controlled. There's no trace of humankind, of the mess of human beings" (Doane 8). *[SAFE]* is thereby organized by a disembodied, dissociated form of women's time devoid of any trace of the mess of human beings. In the film's early stages, Carol is pictured going to aerobics, wherein her biology as a human woman is questioned in a ritualized exchange of female envy — "You know Carol, you do not sweat" to which another woman replies, "Oh I hate you!" Further, Carol outsources a large quantity of her domestic labour — cooking and cleaning — to Fulvia, her Latina housekeeper as well as several other nameless Latinx folks — a form of feminized time and feminized domestic labour once removed.

The narrative of *[SAFE]* unfolds slowly, painfully. The film tracks the painful duration between one moment and the next, delineating the slow apocalypse of an "unendurable duration" in Mary Ann Doane's terms:

> The specificity of the film lies in the painful duration of that time in between events, the time exactly proper to the woman (in particular the housewife) in a patriarchal society. This is, in filmic terms, the time of the long take. Although *Safe* is not as rigorous in its observance of real time, the events of the film—the delivery of a couch, a baby shower, picking up the dry cleaning — have the same sense of an extensive, repetitive, and almost unendurable duration. (Doane 9)

[SAFE] thereby, in a way, fills in many of the gaps in time created by Wanda, taking place in the duration between one moment and the next. But even in this filling in, there is still the structuring absence of Carol's pain: the film takes place within the "unendurable duration" of chronic illness, of pain without definitive cause, or rather pain whose definitive cause is *everything*. *[SAFE]* takes place within the unbridgeable gap of the inexpressibility of physical pain. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that:

> When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no

> reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. (Scarry 3)

Thereby the narrative of *[SAFE]* traces a kind of invisible geography — taking place in the ellipses between one moment and the next, in the gap between one body and another. In other words, the narrative of *[SAFE],* rather than being "linear" as Amy Taubin contends, is more of a gap or a hole somewhere below the earth's surface.

[SAFE] details the ways in which gendered violence inheres in the banality of the everyday. The film's mise-en-scene is saturated by implicit forms of brutality, describing the ways in which forms of violence that we cannot always explicitly *see* nevertheless organize the distribution of bodies in space as well as the ways in which women hang in the balance of inhospitable worldly topologies. Cinematic space in Haynes' film (constituted through editing and changes in distance) is a constricting entity — indeed, the film tracks Carol's movement from the seemingly endless rooms in her suburban mansion into progressively smaller and smaller spaces until at the film's end, she is living in a cocoon-igloo hybrid of sorts. The space of *[SAFE]* is constituted through an oscillation between long shots of Carol on the outer limits of wide open public and private spaces, as well as medium close-ups of Carol wherein she is dead centre in the frame. In her initial visit to the doctor, Carol is pictured to the far right of the frame, diminished within the nauseous Pepto-Bismol pink landscape of his office. As Carol prepares coffee in the kitchen after dinner, she is pictured at the far left of the frame, eclipsed by the kitchen doorway. At the salon, as Carol's hair stylist reveals her new look in the mirror, Carol is pictured dead centre as her nose begins to bleed. Back at home, Carol sits in bed while Greg tells her that her new haircut looks "sexy." She denies his advances — she has not been feeling well — and Greg throws a small tantrum, saying "nobody has a fucking headache every night of the fucking week," throwing his watch out of the frame. He sits like a petulant child sulking in the

middle of the shot — Carol sits up in bed the far left of the frame, back on the margins — "I know it's not normal but I can't help it." At yet another doctor's visit, Carol sits on the right edge of the screen as her husband and her doctor speak as though she's not even in the room about her condition, which the doctor describes as "stress-related," handing Greg a referral to a psychiatrist across Carol's blank, resigned frame. At the psychiatrist's office, Carol is dead centre on a leather couch while he stares at her without a shred of empathy or care in his expression. At her girlfriend's baby shower, Carol hyperventilates as a child sits on her lap — again, smack in the middle. In the doctor's office during allergy tests, she's on the far right of the frame, heaving as she has a reaction to milk — "this is a big one, Carol! Milk's a biggie," a disturbingly upbeat assessment of Carol's plight, gesticulating as though he's speaking to a small child rather than a woman whose health hangs in the balance. I propose that this filmic movement between margin and centre renders the film's topologies spinning spaces — a spinning that culminates in Carol's cocoon at the film's close.

Once at the Wrenwood centre, Carol goes walking, an ant in the landscape much akin to Wanda navigating the anthracite landscape in *Wanda.* Carol narrates a letter home to Greg and Rory as the landscape sequence ensues — she is walking and writing at the same time, noting that she's feeling a little better, that she's eating healthfully, that the desert landscape is beautiful. Just as she makes this observation, she reaches the highway and nearly gets hit by a passing truck — even the middle of nowhere has its limits. In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Michel de Certeau notes the ways in which walking opens up *gaps in the spatial continuum*:

> Asyndeton is the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences. In the same way, in walking [she] selects and fragments the space traversed; [she] skips over links and whole parts that it omits. From this point of view, every walk constantly leaps, or skips like a child, hopping on one foot. It practices the ellipsis of conjunctive loci… Asyndeton, by elision, creates a 'less,' opens gaps in the spatial continuum. (De Certeau 87)

In *[SAFE],* Carol is not running away from everything, but is rather *walking* away from everything. Further, her manner of walking, as I've mentioned previously, does not necessarily adhere to De Certeau's description: she does not leap or skip like a child (she may never have been a child to begin with, but more on this in a moment), nor does she hop on one foot — these manners of moving are far too playful a description of Carol's bipedal movements through space. She walks, rather, like an alien impersonating a woman — her movements are ambivalent. De Certeau's formulation takes for granted that the ground under one's feet is a stable entity — a "common ground" of sorts rather than a terrestrial surface that is fundamentally inhospitable to your body (Ahmed 10). Even as walking opens up gaps in the spatial continuum, it does not *eliminate* the very problem of the spatial continuum altogether — as we have seen repeatedly, space is a hermeneutic problem for women as opposed to an arena that lends itself to action and/or mastery, and as Anne Carson notes in *The Autobiography of Red,* "there is no person without a world" (Carson 82). In *[SAFE],* the spatial oscillation between margin and centre exerts a kind of gravitational pull on the film's pictured worlds, as though its topologies are spinning around the absent centre of Carol's non-person. *[SAFE]* thereby has a kind of abyssal temporality and spatiality, occupying the "unendurable duration," the "no reality" of the female condition — of living in someone else's oyster. Femininity, thereby, is a temporal and spatial sickness, a disease of disorientation that has its own gravitational pull: a condition for which there is no known cure.

Most Women Do Not Creep by Daylight

In "Wages Against Housework," Silvia Federici writes that:

> It is important to recognize that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job like other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, and the

> subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class. True, under capitalism every worker is manipulated and exploited and his or her relation to capital is totally mystified. The wage gives the impression of a fair deal: you work and you get paid, hence you and your boss each get what's owed; while in reality the wage, rather than paying for the work you do, hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit. But the wage at least recognizes that you are a worker, and you can bargain and struggle around and against the terms and the quantity of that wage, the terms and the quantity of that work. To have a wage means to be part of a social contract, and there is no doubt concerning its meaning: you work, not because you like it, or because it comes naturally to you, but because it is the only condition under which you are allowed to live. The difference with housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage. In turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it, except in the privatized kitchen-bedroom quarrel that all society agrees to ridicule, thereby further reducing the protagonist of a struggle. We are seen as nagging bitches, not as workers in struggle. (Federici 16)

The emotional and physical labour of femininity is rationalized by Capital's divisions of labour into masculine and feminine spheres as an inherent component of all feminized bodies, an appeal to the "internal" nature of women — *she must love to give since she gives so much*; domestic work, specifically because it is assumed to be done *because of* and *for* love, is thereby rationalized by Capital as love rather than labour. This labour of love is meant to be fulfilling as opposed to a gift that keeps on taking, in Berlant's terms. The maxim *give love, get love* does not apply to women, for whom the maxim is, simply: give love, give love — a dead end. The position of *giving,* of the skilled and yet unpaid work of domestic and emotional labour, is the existing "social contract" for women, the prescribed terms of femininity — after all, if you are not someone's wife, someone's mother, someone's unpaid therapist, then who and *what* are you? *Wanda* and *[SAFE]* answer: nobody. The "not mother," "not wife," the "nagging bitch" is a cipher.

When Carol goes to see a psychiatrist whom her doctor recommends, the doctor makes an appeal to what is happening "in" Carol. This depth model of femininity, as Federici gestures towards, is to erroneously assume that femininity *has depth* to begin with. In Richard White's analysis of the film, he asks in a manner verging on judgmental, "Does she possess the depth of personality that would make sense of that 'in'?" (White 48). The distinction between a "self" and a world simply does not hold for women, for whom self and world are tenuous entities. White ignores the ways in which some bodies were never given a "self" to begin with, as well as the ways in which a dissociated subject position for women can be a necessary tactic of survival in enduring a body and a world that was "never supposed to have been hers" (Azoulay 233). Carol's subjectivity is one of dislocation -- she is alienated from herself and the world in which she finds herself suspended. When Carol is not driving, she is walking, moving much like an alien impersonating a woman. At night, she orbits along the perimeters of her world as well as the film frame while she's meant to be sleeping like the other humans. She looks at photos of her family in which she appears, her expression baffled as though she can't make sense of the past that constitutes her present. Her body, rather than containing a capacity for action, is a site wherein the signifying chain of human embodiment and femininity begin to break down. As Carol's condition worsens, she can no longer perform the intimate labour of femininity, nor of normative personhood — she can't wear makeup anymore, she no longer sleeps with her husband — his proximity to her makes her sick, his embrace causes her to vomit. When a child sits on her lap, she cannot offer it motherly affection — rather, she hyperventilates. Recall the film's first scene in which Carol is pictured mechanically performing the duties of the housewife — her frame silently enduring the intimate labour of femininity, the silence that we call consent. When Carol refuses Greg's sexual advances, he throws a fit — the marital bed entraps her in a

"promise not of her own making" — it is no wonder that she creeps rather than sleeps at night (Azoulay 213). It is proximity to others, on the prescribed terms of femininity, that is making Carol sick. Proximity to others, however, is a nearly unavoidable feature of being alive — to exist, to be someone someplace, is to have "relations with other people, networks of social support and stability, community building" (Doane 8).

In her short story, "Roy Spivey", published in the June 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, Miranda July writes that "we're all children when we sleep," but perhaps the problem for Carol is that she was never a child to begin with — there is barely any reference made throughout the film to Carol's past, that there is any coherent past that constitutes her present (July). In one of the film's earlier moments, Carol is pictured having a phatic conversation with someone she calls "mother" (someone who could very well be her mother-in-law, their exact relationship to one another is never made explicit) and yet they speak to each other like strangers — "That's fine, he's fine, they're fine. I will, I will mother. I'll talk to you soon. Okay. Okay. Bye-bye" she says, hanging up. The film's only other allusion to the past that constitutes Carol's present is during the sequence in which she is pictured sitting upright in bed writing to the Wrenwood centre:

> My name is Carol White, and I live in southern California. I saw your notice at the health club near my house and decided to write and tell you a little bit about myself. For some time now I have not been feeling up to par? And was hoping your organization might be of some help. I'm originally from Texas, although I've lived in the L.A. area most of my life. I had asthma as a child, but it never really got in the way of school or recreation. I've always thought of myself as someone with a pretty normal upbringing? And as basically a healthy person, but for the past several months that has all started to change. Suddenly I find myself feeling sick.

Carol intonations end in an upward lilt in the time-honoured manner of feminine expression as though even she is not entirely convinced by what she's saying, as though she can't quite believe that she has a past that tethers her to the present — that she had asthma, that she had a normal upbringing. As Greg enters the room and asks her what she's doing, Carol says "Oh God, what's

this? Where am I, right now?" Greg wears a confused expression and replies that they are in "Greg and Carol's house." The moorings that tether Carol to the world in which she resides are thereby too tenuous, too unstable, to root her firmly in her reality. In "The Misery the World is Made of" from his book on Haynes' cinema, Rob White comments on Carol's somnambulant otherworldliness, writing that, "She could be a vampire in the making, or half-phantom, or she could be scouting the perimeter for the best escape route" (White 47). Perhaps, then, Carol was never really a child to begin with — she was, and is, rather, half-phantom, not quite human, and so she cannot sleep; her unconvincing and inchoate reality (emanating from her partial citizenship) thereby do not allow her to surrender to the vulnerability of sleep.

Love Makes Melancholia Look Like Desire: We Can Never Know How Much We've Lost

The marital bed, rather than being a space of rest for Carol, is a twilight zone of sorts, a "state of exception," in Ariella Azoulay's terms, in which she is abandoned each night anew by the sovereign body (Azoulay 231). In *Desire/Love,* Lauren Berlant writes of the opening scene of *[SAFE]* in which Carol and her husband are pictured having bad sex that:

> Amidst the unpleasant sound of sexual grunting, the camera cuts sadistically to the husband's pulsating back, framing the wife's dead eyes and the pleasureless, maternal patting motion she bestows on him as he comes. The angle of lighting on her ivory face suggest at once a holy and an ordinary martyrdom, a *woman's* martyrdom, that well-known *figura* of marital endurance that hovers as though waiting for life to resume, a life of safety and silence, a dearth of surprise, a syncopated regularity (Berlant 432)

An article has been circulating recently on my Twitter and Facebook feeds whose title reads "FEMALE DRAGONFLIES FAKE DEATH TO AVOID MALES HARASSING THEM FOR SEX," detailing the ways in which female dragonflies fall from the sky and play dead until the offending suitor finally leaves them alone (Osborne). In this scene of bad sex, Carol is pictured playing dead, her expression listless, "waiting for life to resume" — but what kind of a life?

Carol is silent in this scene, the silence, as Léger writes, that we mistake for consent (Léger 118). I wonder — where does one draw the line between bad sex and rape? Indeed, the very question of consent becomes difficult to determine when speaking of moving through the tangled web of intimate worlds from the inhibited intentionality of a feminized subject position. Historically, women in marriage were assumed to have given a form of "irrevocable consent" due to spoken vows: their consent to marital sex was assumed due to their status as a wife, as legal property (Bergen 19). On a global scale, the concept that rape can and does occur within the confines of a marriage is still a rather new concept. As Raquel Kennedy Bergen notes in her 2016 overview of marital rape research in the Unites States:

> …it was not until 1993 that rape in marriage was criminalized under at least one of the sexual offense codes in all 50 states. Prior to this time, a husband could not legally be sanctioned for raping his wife because of what is commonly understood as the marital rape or spousal exemption (Bergen and Barnhill 2006; X 1999). This is reflected most commonly in traditional rape statutes in the United States; for example, the 1997 Illinois statute that defined rape as 'sexual intercourse with a female, not his wife, by force and against her will'. (Bergen 20)

The criminalization of Marital rape in the United States began in the mid-1970s, a shockingly contemporary period during which California state senator Bob Wilson exclaimed "If you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?" (Russell 132). It is no accident that marital rape was only legitimized as a crime the very year that *[SAFE]* itself was made.

Ariella Azoulay's primary example of rape in *The Civil Contract of Photography* is an instance in which a woman enters a "private" domestic space with a male acquaintance (note: in this example, no vows in the eyes of the law have been taken), yet this does not necessarily take into account instances of rape in which women, technically, *have* made a promise — *until death do them part* — a promise that nevertheless makes the mistaken assumption that women are protected under the aegis of citizenship. Azoulay continues:

> The legislation against rape and the new discourse on rape have placed women's consent to have sexual relations with men at the center of the debate on the assumption that women are ordinary citizens and that rape is expressive of a violation of one of their own rights. (Azoulay 231)

Until death do them part thereby does not take into the account the death that women are already living — their status as a partial citizen, existing within the twilight zone of what Azoulay calls a "state of exception," continually abandoned by the realm of citizenship — a matter that is exposed by the rape of women in immense numbers, each time anew (Azoulay 231). It is with a heavy heart that I write this, in a seemingly never-ending moment in which none of my friends' (married and otherwise) rapists have been convicted; in a moment in which Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's harrowing testimony of her sexual assault was de-legitimized on a national scale; a moment in which a bloated orange effigy of hetero-capitalist patriarchy outed himself as a perpetrator of gendered violence (stating that he makes no qualms about "grabbing them by the pussy" without consent) only to be elected president of the United States.

The landscapes of the domestic are rendered impersonal institutions of the intimate in *[SAFE]*. Richard White writes of Carol's progressively disintegrating health within *[SAFE]* that, "Domestic safety is becoming uncomfortable for her" (White 47). I want to propose, rather, that domestic safety is merely a quaint notion for women, for whom worldly spaces of shelter do not exist[6]. The concept of a room of one's own is rendered an impossibility in *[SAFE]*. As Carol orbits at night, she is brusquely interrupted by security guards — they shine a blinding light at her, asking her if everything's alright — she replies yes. When she goes back inside, Greg is awake waiting for her at the top of the stairs — "What's are you doing, honey?". Richard White

[6] Worldly refuge, in any case, no longer exists, as Donna Haraway claims that "the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge" as the "reserves of the earth have been drained, burned, depleted, poisoned, exterminated and otherwise exhausted" (Haraway 100).

writes of Greg's vigilance as making "the nocturnal house a security zone too; he does the patrol car's work on the inside" — thereby the boundaries between the interior and exterior of domestic zones are not clearly demarcated in *[SAFE]* but are flattened (White 47). Further, the walls of a home offer no respite from chemicals — domestic space is just another chemical environment, rife with pollutants (aerosol deodorant cans, the fumes of cleaning products, the noxious presence of men who demand your affections — patriarchy in *[SAFE]* is airborne). The world is thus too much within the home in *[SAFE]* — the home, rather than offering a respite from the world, is saturated by its fumes. During Carol's first night at the Wrenwood centre, Carol goes back to her safe house and begins to wail hopelessly — allotted a mere minute of weeping before Claire, the director of Wrenwood, appears. She enters the house without knocking, offering Carol unsolicited emotional support. Claire quickly intervenes and delivers a disingenuous, falsely sentimental speech about self-love (a speech that, it should be noted, nobody asked her to make):

> You know, when I first came here, I couldn't even walk. I'd been living 6 miles from this chemical factory, this was in Michigan, that was leaking, like, 15 gallons of chemical byproducts every day. When I got here, all I could do was just sit in my safe room and every day, every hour of every day, I would look at myself in the mirror and I would say to myself, 'Claire, I love you. I really love you'. At the end of the month, I could leave my room and shortly thereafter, I was walking. For me, this was a gift. This whole thing was a gift. Because everything got taken away from me, everything in the material world. And what was left was me.

Here, Claire tries to make the female complaint **—** *that love for women is a gift that keeps on taking* **—** into a New Age form of cruel optimism wherein the relation of reciprocity that promises a "good life" is between me, myself and I. As Haynes describes in an interview about the film, New Age rhetoric claims to "change the world through self-esteem or a softening of basic structures of resistance, but I see it as a reiteration of basic conservative arguments about

the self, which are closely aligned with masculinity and patriarchy" (Taubin 33). The remainder of *[SAFE]* is a harrowing account of the hollow centre at the heart of New Age narratives of self-love.

In Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's female Gothic short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," the story's narrative emanates from a woman in convalescence for "nervous troubles" (likely a hysterical feminized illness) living in a room with yellow wallpaper behind which, the narrator describes, a woman "creeps" like an insect — she sees her at nighttime as she writes that, "Most women do not creep by daylight" (Perkins-Gilman 15). At the story's close, the narrator, too, is creeping, as though her body has coalesced into the cocoon of the wallpaper. *[SAFE]* follows a similar cocoon narrative. Further, when Carol is asked to describe her childhood bedroom to another resident at the Wrenwood centre during a group therapy session, she says, "God this is… umm… I guess there's one I had with… had yellow wallpaper and…". At the Wrenwood treatment centre where Carol seeks treatment, there is a man named Lester who ambles along the margins of the grounds. He wears what looks much like a space suit — his entire skin covered by a white cocoon. His legs wobble as he walks, he moves tentatively in a state of perpetual orbit — he *creeps.* As *[SAFE]* progresses, Carol's walk becomes increasingly like Lester's. At the film's close, Carol is living in a small white igloo — a stone's throw away from Lester's cocoon: she is becoming Lester, becoming increasingly *creepy,* increasingly insect, anything other than human. The film's gravitational pull — Carol's movement between margin and centre — spins an anti-social cocoon around her until finally she's living in a sealed-off white structure with no windows. Her proclamation of self-love mirrors Claire's words — "I love you, I really love you," the camera slowly zooming in on her face until all that's left is Carol, herself and her — a

nonsingular female subjectivity composed of "I," "you" and the viewer, as her profession of self-love is a moment of cinematic direct address.

Berlant theorizes the film's beginning and end as a kind of displaced and displacing call-and-response:

> The fusion of 'I love you' with 'I love myself' is the verbal form of the bad sex we've seen, only now Carol White is in the active as well as the passive position, her skin swollen, reddened, and infected as though it were about to burst through itself. Because this scene takes place at the end of the film, we are led to think that it marks a change in the *something* from which White has been suffering. Yet this is only the logic of form. White's confused, deracinated performance of fulfillment repeats her paradoxical attachment to love as presence and, implicitly, as promise. In repeating the phrase, she embraces an impersonal structure of being that seems to secure the prospect of personal self-extension. Love marks the only name for survival that Carol White can conjure up. (Berlant 433)

The fusion of Carol, herself and her — of "I love you" (a you that includes both her *and* the viewer) with "I love myself" is simply a repetition, a hollow regurgitation, of the form of self-love that Claire preaches earlier in the film. When the world itself is stripped away from Carol, all that she is left with is *love,* and by no stretch of the imagination is this a happy ending. Carol is left with love's empty promise resonating in the hollow of the cocoon in which she resides at the film's close — the binding of Carol, herself and her is not a happy marriage, but rather a union haunted and alienated by love's enduring absence.

Chapter 3 – Femininity and Its Discontents in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*

I've run out of luck maybe. I shouldn't have to be alive now, in the year of our President, there was no other time. No woman should be in time. I am not a woman. I am a luckless thing. (Notley 7)

In this last chapter, I look more closely at femininity's component parts — that is, I end at the beginning. Yet, as I will come to elucidate, at the beginning of femininity is *another* femininity, and another (much like nesting dolls, but far messier). Jonathan Glazer's 2014 science-fiction film *Under the Skin* follows a narrative path of becoming human and becoming female (read: empathetic, caring). An alien played by Scarlett Johansson wearing the flesh of a woman is sent down to earth to seduce and reap male bodies, luring them into a black aqueous void — an extraterrestrial evisceration tank. She releases one of her victims —a lonely young man with a facial disfigurement — back into the waking world. As Ara Osterweil notes in her striking meditation on the film, it is specifically this transition into being human, female and empathetic that destroys the alien (Osterweil 47-48). The film opens with a small and barely perceptible white hole in the screen's middle. Light comes pouring through it and a series of circular otherworldly orbs are pictured floating in black space overlain by the sound of a woman's voice rehearsing the component parts of speech, "ga-ga-ga-duh-duh-duh," "ba-ba-ba," "ne-ne-ne-ne-ne-ne-ne-no," "feel, field, film, felt… foil, fail." Slowly these alien parts assemble themselves into an iris floating in a sea of white, a pupil expanding and contracting in keeping with the sounds its supposed host body is emitting: "foal, foals, foil, foils, pool, pool sound, soun-." The image of a babbling waterfall interrupts, followed by a motorcycle cutting through the near total darkness of a mountainous landscape. The motorcycle pulls over at the side of the road as its driver (the alien's handler who trails and surveils her throughout the film) procures the anonymous body of a dead woman from a dark ditch, presumably raped and killed — she is the roadkill, the collateral damage, of patriarchy. Inside of brightly lit white void, a naked woman

strips the dead woman of her clothing, unflinchingly removing her stockings, underwear, jacket and shirt with the precision of a butcher removing the skin of a slaughtered animal. The live woman (but, as I will discuss in the following pages, *how alive is she?*) cloaks herself in the victim's unceremonious death shroud: this is our protagonist, our alien. A single tear falls from the dead woman's eye as the alien stands over her. The alien crouches down — in a more sentimental film, the alien might wipe the single tear from the victim's eye — but rather she procures an ant that has been crawling on the dead woman's belly, bringing it up to her face for closer examination. To the alien, the tears, the insect and the dead woman are the stuff of science fiction.

The film's narrative unfolds as follows: 1. The alien's handler procures the dead body of an anonymous woman presumably raped and killed from the side of the road. The alien strips the woman and dons her macabre accoutrements. 2. The alien visits a shopping mall, purchases makeup and a faux-fur coat. She begins to drive around, hunting unsuspecting lonely men. She develops a script through a process of trial and error — she asks for directions, makes small talk, laughs at their jokes (albeit inaudible ones through their thick Scottish accents), asks if they have a girlfriend, asks if they think she's pretty. 3. She lures them into an extraterrestrial evisceration tank — an inky black void that swallows them whole. 4. A man, woman, baby and dog are pictured at the beach, but the alien's sights are set on a lone swimmer in a wetsuit. She chats him up while the woman and dog begin to drown. The woman's husband swims out after her, and the lone swimmer in the wetsuit follows him. The man, woman and dog are swallowed by the sea, as the lone swimmer makes his way back to shore, lying breathless and exhausted on the sand. The alien pounces, bludgeoning him to death with a stone. The baby, still alive, shrieks and cries, but the alien takes no notice. 5. The alien proceeds to reap male victims, one of whom notices that

the sun blaring into her eyes while she drives does not appear to bother or otherwise affect her. The alien's handler examines her form, her eyes, looking for a telltale fissure in her feminine veneer. From here on out, the alien's performance as a human woman begins to unravel. 6. The alien begins to study women rather than men out of the window of her van. She takes them in through her eye, her pupil contracted, eye wide open. Her face is superimposed upon a composite image of anonymous female bodies, blending into their multiplicity. 7. The alien's van gets attacked by a group of men in the film's first overt display of the threat of gendered violence. 8. The alien picks up a man with a facial disfigurement who tells her that he's never had a girlfriend or friend. She seduces him — he begins to sink into the evisceration tank, but she releases him. 9. The alien goes rogue — she abandons the van, and proceeds on a false narrative path of becoming human. She treats herself to a piece of black forest cake that she regurgitates and cannot swallow. A man takes her in and proceeds to display chivalry in her direction, making her dinner, giving her a bed to sleep in, carrying her in his arms through a puddle. Once alone in her borrowed room, the alien examines her body in the mirror — this, it would seem, is the alien's inaugural mirror phase. 10. The man and the alien attempt sex. After two thrusts, the alien pushes him off of her and jumps up from the bed, examining her vagina with a lamp. 11. Alienated by the trappings of human intimacy, the alien goes to the forest. She meets a logger, who asks if she's alone — the alien's script has been turned on her. She finds a temporary shelter for hikers and falls asleep. She awakens to find the logger groping her body. She runs away, he follows. 12. The logger tackles her, attempting to rape her, and while he tears her clothes from her body, he tears her skin, as the feminine exoskeleton the alien has been wearing begins to peel from her body. He sets the alien aflame and she enters a clearing where her body turns to ember. The end. In the following, I will perform a close analysis of the temporality of *Under the Skin* as

constituted through the film's narrative unfolding. I propose that the film proceeds according to the repetitive shape of gendered violence — the alien slips into the skin of a woman raped and killed in the film's beginning only to meet the same fate at the film's close.

The Best Examples are the Bad Ones

The resemblance between the alien and the woman from whom she procures her feminine guise is remarkable — they are the same size, as the alien slips seamlessly into her clothing, with similar bone structure and dark black hair. The actress playing the dead woman could, for all intents and purposes, be Scarlett Johansson's body double. Yet, in a strange and no doubt strategic casting decision, it is Scarlett Johansson who is playing the double's double — a mise-en-abyme of femininity. Johansson herself is the "sex symbol of our precarious times" (Gorfinkel 1), as Elena Gorfinkel notes, as well as an actress "all too human, yet otherworldly" as Ara Osterweil posits (Osterweil 46). The alien slips into the dead woman's bra, stockings, sweater, skirt, heels and jacket. The film's first moments depict the mimesis and repetition inherent in femininity's form — the ease with which one woman can slip into the skin of another (Ngai 151). From here, I will delve a little deeper into Sianne Ngai's conception of envy and its critical, if underused, potential. It might be a stretch too far to posit that the alien's mimetic transformation into the appearance of a woman is motivated by envy. Nevertheless, I posit that *Under the Skin* is a remarkable commentary on the mimetic nature of femininity itself. The alien's feminine metamorphosis points to the instability at the heart of femininity, as femininity is a nonsingular form. On mimetic femininity, Sianne Ngai notes that:

> …its ability to highlight a refusal to idealize quality X, even an ability to attack its potential for idealization by transforming X into something nonsingular and replicable, while at the same time enabling acknowledgment of its culturally imposed desirability. (Ngai 161-162)

The casting of Scarlett Johansson as the film's heroine thereby throws the desiring look of the spectator into crisis — what does it mean for the sex symbol of our precarious times to play an alien? What does it mean, moreover, to *identify* with an alien as Ara Osterweil does so vividly in confessing that "I have never before so identified with a female protagonist in a feature film" (I admit that the feeling is mutual — I, too, have never before felt so exemplified by a heroine) (Osterweil 47)? The culturally imposed desirability of Johansson's feminine form begins to break apart, as her very form is rendered nonsingular, replicable and exemplary — she is the double's double. Ngai continues in stating that:

> …when the production of nonsingular or compound identity is at stake, the best kind of examples are always the bad ones. This in turn suggests that bad examples of X might be good for group X, since they compel its members to constantly question, reevaluate, and even redefine what it is that they supposedly exemplify. (Ngai 166)

Johansson's bad exemplarity thereby necessitates a reevaluation of the precarious gender she evidently embodies. In exemplifying the ways in which "to be female is to be alien," as Osterweil so incisively notes, *Under the Skin* navigates the fatal flaws that inhere in the prescribed terms of femininity within our world (Osterweil 44).

The alien enters a shopping mall, fingers a faux fur coat on the rack, picks up a pink cardigan, stretching it between her hands and examining its texture. Anonymous women are pictured at the makeup counter having eye shadow and lotion applied to their bodies — a saleswoman holds a mirror up to an older woman wearing a freshly applied face of makeup — she nods. Evidently, whatever it is she's being sold, she'll take it. This montage begs the question: what could be more strange, more alien, than our world's synthetic fabric of femininity? Whether to call the alien a woman or not is a point of contention in criticism surrounding the film — J Hoberman refers to the alien as "an implacable agendered It" (Gorfinkel 12). The alien steps into her van, but this is not her space ship, her vehicle for casting

off. *Under the Skin,* rather, travails the reversal of a casting off — a casting *in* or *on* earth; outer space is *earth* for the alien. She adorns herself with lipstick in a compact mirror, donning the skin of the film's inaugural female victim. The alien begins to prowl, taking mimetic femininity into the streets of Glasgow. Mimesis, Laura Marks writes, "is a form of yielding to one's environment, rather than dominating it, and thus offers a radical alternative to the controlling distance from the environment so well served by vision" (Marks 139-140). She continues:

> Mimesis shifts the hierarchical relationship between subject and object, indeed dissolves the dichotomy between the two, such that erstwhile subjects take on the physical, material qualities of objects, while objects take on the perceptive and knowledgeable qualities of subjects. Mimesis is an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it. (Marks 141)

In her mimetic femininity, the alien delineates the dangers of yielding to a world that is inhospitable to women.

The alien begins to stalk her prey — men in hats, hoods and suits flicker and disappear across the screen. The alien lies, or rather *drives* in wait for her victims, as her cruising is filmed through first person driving shots. In an interview about the film, Glazer cites that, "One of the challenges was to capture her gaze, which is devoid of subjectivity because she has none" (Stasukevich 45). What does it mean, then, to look at a world from the position, specifically, of an alien? Elena Gorfinkel writes that, "The film's formal fixation on sensorial flooding and estrangement of cinematic vision extends from a concern with the nature of an alien embodiment, in the absence of a legible subjectivity to ground it" (Gorfinkel 4). The film's vision, thereby, is fundamentally ungrounded, unmoored from the worldly attachments that organize the present — seen through the eyes of a mimetic and alien subjectivity. *Under the Skin* is shot almost entirely with hidden cameras built into the interiors of the van and in crew member's backpacks in shots that take place in the vehicle's exterior, thereby lacking the

intentional camera movement of traditional narrative cinema (Figlerowicz 53). In *Under the Skin,* through the eyes of the alien, the camera lens performs a sort of empathetic function: the world seen through the eyes of the other, a vantage point that renders the quotidian rituals of our world strange. This is a vantage point of terrestrial landscapes built through the constructed will and constitution of others — a fundamentally feminized form of vision, the world rendered "less a transparent capacity for action and movement than a hermeneutic problem" (Sobchack 33).

The alien employs the "mechanics of seduction" in film theorist Jonathan Romney's terms — what follows tracks her indoctrination into the economy of sex (Romney 23). Her lipstick, faux fur coat, acid wash jeans and cheap wig are signifiers of femininity borrowed from the macabre aesthetics of the opening sequence's unceremonious victim — a form of femininity that, as we learn in the film's inaugural minutes, kills. The ease with which the alien slips into the feminine exoskeleton of the raped and murdered unnamed women at the film's beginning constitutes this form of fatal femininity, in Sianne Ngai's terms, as a property that can be "lent" (Ngai 158). Gendered violence, as we will come to see, follows a mimetic and repetitive logic. The alien pulls over to the side of the road, asking for directions in a citation of the stereotype that women don't know how to drive — that only women, and not men, ask for directions.[7] The unnamed man tells her how to get where she's going — "am I keeping you from something?" she asks, smiling coyly — he's on his way to meet someone and so she drives on. The alien hunts, specifically, men that no one will miss — men that are unattached and lonely.

On one of her first attempts at abducting a victim, the alien begins to make small-talk and when the man's name is shouted from somewhere off-camera — "Andy!" — the alien quickly

[7] Sobchack writes of the ways in which "women laugh amongst themselves about what seems to us an over investment in men's negotiation of worldly space (Sobchack 30).

recoils and drives on: men with names, men tethered to the terrestrial realm of the present, are of no interest to her. She pulls over and asks for directions again — this time, one bites: "do you want a lift?" to which he replies, "aye, why not!" This one gets swapped out by another, and another, as she's pictured asking several men for directions and their names, making small talk until finally the alien is pictured laughing with a man swaddled in a green soccer scarf, his desire for her palpable. Glazer notes in an interview that these repeating scenes of the alien's flirtations elucidate the ways in which the alien's work resembles a boring "job" of sorts, so that "the alien takes on an aura reminiscent less of a femme fatale than of an obstinately cheerful airline hostess" (Figlerowicz 45). Elena Gorfinkel writes of this sequence that, "The alien's labor resembles therapy as much as seduction or abduction, as she coaxes details from her victims, makes them feel at ease, flirts and establishes their lack" (Gorfinkel 1). The alien quickly learns the rhythms of feminized labour and feminized time: an easily inhabited second skin. Thereby, in Ngai's terms, "A radically negative relationship to property thus subtends the forms of negative yet forceful self-assertion enabled through [the alien's] mimetic behaviour" (Ngai 158-159). *Under the Skin* proposes that to be female is to be a voided subject.

The alien lures her anonymous catch into an extraterrestrial evisceration tank: an inky black void. This void, as we come to learn, disembowels her victims, rendering them empty sacks, deflated balloons. She struts as he follows, performing an alien strip tease: she removes her jacket, he removes his, she removes her shirt, he follows — slowly, obliviously, he is sinking into the void, his gaze fixed on the temporary object of his desire. The alien's job script goes as follows: 1. Seduction. 2. Evisceration. Once they are lured into the void, they sink — that's it, that's all, as the film presents these first encounters as clean, methodical operations. Chance sexual encounters with strangers, for women, can be a fatal pursuit, indelibly haunted by the

perpetually looming possibility that they might be raped and killed. These early encounters, rather, are formulaic — scripted, repetitive and predictable.[8] For a short while, there are no alarms and no surprises. Adorned in the victim's death shroud, prey becomes predator — but not for long.

Berlant maintains that, "Banal or sublime, love's function is to mark the subject's binding to the scenes to which s/he must always return" (Berlant 439). The alien has no such binding — as we come to see, scenes of attachment mark a scene of impossibility for her. On a windy beach, the alien continues to stalk her prey: a man in a wetsuit living in a tent on the seashore, doing what he describes as "just hanging around" because he wanted to "get away from it all." As they chat, a woman and her dog begin to be swept out to sea — her husband and baby are on the shore, and the husband begins to swim after her as her body is swallowed by the sea. The alien watches from the shore, her expression blank and unaffected by the familial tragedy she beholds. This is the only scene of familial attachment in *Under the Skin* — a bond to which the sea pays no mind as she claims their bodies as her own, indifferent to their screams and their plight. During our current moment of ecological crisis, the profound indifference of nature to human suffering (as well as alien suffering) becomes the harbinger of a speculative and uncertain future. The alien's prey lies breathless, deflated, and she goes in for the kill, bludgeoning him with a rock. The baby cries nearby as the alien drags the body to the van, but the alien takes no notice. The female form that is not a mother and not a wife is an alien.

Once back on the road, a man in a passing car propositions the alien, yelling inaudibly through the window of her van: this is the alien's first introduction to misogyny — when

[8] What kind of world do we live in that would make encounters such as these seem like a relief to me?

travelling under the sign of "woman," the world is a perilous place, even if you're an alien (and aren't all women aliens?). This is the moment when her script, her performance of femininity, begins to rupture. In any case, she spots another potential suitor and follows her prey into a club, where he propositions her, asking her for a drink and a dance. The script of her "job" — wherein she does the propositioning — is beginning to run amok. Something has gone *off.* Nevertheless, for the time being, she manages to lure him into the void. He spots a past victim floating in the tank, corporeal flotsam. He reaches out to touch the body (can it even be called that, in its current state?) and it collapses in on itself like a punctured balloon, floating in space in a manner similar to what David Roche calls "a moving version of a Baconian figure" (Roche 57). In *Under the Skin,* human and alien embodiment alike are rendered strange. The body's innards are pictured moving along a vertical glowing red conveyor belt of sorts, viscous red fluid. A blazing thin red horizon line appears on an otherwise inky black screen, appearing more like a Rothko painting than a human body.[9] The human body in this moment is reduced to a thin red vertical line as well as a horizontal axis of pulverized organs — the apparent coherence of the human body (what's inside and what's outside) are rendered abstract and strange. The coherence of the human, thereby, becomes open and alien.

The alien sits in traffic. A man selling roses by the roadside delivers one to her window — another man sitting in traffic waves, he has bought her a rose. She accepts it, and it appears that its thorns have punctured her skin — she stares blankly at the red liquid on her hand. For a moment, we think that the alien may bleed when cut, that she may be *alive,* almost human, but the camera cuts to the man selling flowers bandaging his bleeding hand. The aliveness of the alien, as well as the very conception of "aliveness" itself is thrown into crisis by Marta

[9] See Mark Rothko's *Black, Red and Black,* 1968.

Figlerowicz, who writes that *Under the Skin* is "preoccupied with the possibility of realizing that one's aliveness has always been an illusion. [This realization concerns] not just the metaphoric spurts of life and death involved in sex, but also aliveness in its most basic biological sense" (Figlerowicz 41-42). *Under the Skin* becomes an exploration of the tangle of contradictions inherent in being a woman whose membership within the realm of human intentionality is a point of contention, whose status as human and as citizen is not yet considered vital by the terms of the world as it currently stands. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben describes bare life as suspended somewhere outside of human and divine law, a life form that is *not quite* life — a form of "life" that can be killed, raped and brutalized, with impunity (Agamben 73). The film's pedagogy concerns the perils of becoming female, as Ara Osterweil notes, as it is the alien's transition into animate feeling and empathy that is her undoing (Osterweil 48). *Under the Skin* thus traces a false narrative path of becoming human and becoming female, delineating the violence of the limits of humanity for women, who inhabit bare life and the negative space of citizenship. It is the alien's partial and incomplete abduction by the *human,* specifically, that is her undoing. Further, becoming human and becoming female are not, in any case, one and the same.

Between the Eye and the I

The alien is accompanied in her van by another victim, as the sun blares in through the window. Flummoxed by her body's listless reaction to the searing light, he asks, "your eyes — does the sun not hurt your eyes?" His concern for her eyes only lasts a moment, as his worry turns to desire, "your eyes, your lips, your black hair, you just look… amazing." When the alien leads him to the house that is home to the evisceration tank, he hesitates for a moment outside: the male victims are starting to suspect that something isn't quite right. The longer her stay on

earth, the more her feminine veneer begins to rupture: the film's duration, then, is characterized by the slow unravelling of the alien, of the violence of enduring the swells of feminized time. In an editorial ellipsis, the alien is pictured applying lipstick, ready for her coming inspection. Her handler circles her, examining the specificities of her form — the inspection, perhaps, triggered by her last victim's momentary questioning of her body's humanity. Sam Adams writes that in his scrutiny of her, "There's a sense in that scene that there's something not quite right with her that he's detecting, like a hairline fracture or a crack in the wing of an airplane" (Adams). His face inches from hers, he scans the surface of her. The camera moves into an intimate close up, panning slowly from her chin upwards, resting for a long while on her eye that has proven impervious to the sun, the apparent flaw in her human facade: her eye is the crack in the wing of the airplane. Berlant detects a fundamental instability in the feminized "I": "The 'I' is a scene for which the subject is always auditioning, a terrible fantasy of infinity and inexhaustible absorption that also terrorizes the subject with the threat of suspended animation" (Berlant 437). The alien's subjectivity, her "I", is emblematized by her eye. In the following scene, the alien observes a cacophony of shoppers, smokers, a man delivering boxes, mothers pushing strollers, women at work in a bakery overlain by the din of bagpipes, the grating sound of a truck backing up. The alien's gaze shifts beyond her male prey to women as they drift past her window, but the film does not posit that the alien is interested in their flesh beyond observation: her study of them, rather, is superfluous to her duties. She observes their movements, some move in groups, some alone. Another extreme close-up of the alien's eye ensues: wide open, pupil contracted in a gesture of sensorial overwhelm as she takes them in. The onscreen image begins to fray — burning yellow, gold, orange, the phantasm of anonymous female bodies superimposed on top of one another until they form an incoherent shimmering mass: a process of feminine subjective

disintegration — a mimetic process of making twoness in Sianne Ngai's terms, as well as threeness, fourness, fiveness, etc. (Ngai 153). The alien's face slowly emerges from the inchoate corporeal rubble — the alien, in this moment, becomes a composite of the women she observes — a nonsingular, unstable "I" constituted *through* and *by* her eye: an expanding and contracting aperture, an aporia.

Once on the road again, her van gets attacked by a group of men — they bang on the windows, climb on the roof, screaming. Momentarily stunned, she gazes in amazement at the display of violence around her before driving away. She pulls over at the side of the road and picks up another anonymous pedestrian man who says he's heading in the same direction to get groceries. He wears a hood, which he slowly removes, revealing a facial disfigurement to which the alien pays no mind — she's on the job, and it's what is on the inside, or rather, it's his very insides, that count. When asked if he has any friends, a girlfriend maybe, he says no. When asked if he gets lonely, he ambivalently nods. She begins to make her move, saying she noticed him looking at her, that she liked it — he's apprehensive — "this isn't Tesco's, is it?" he says, avoiding her advances. She takes his hand and puts it to her face, he's hooked. She brings him to the evisceration tank, and for the first time in the film, the void's encompassing environment is revealed: a burned-out house that should be a red herring for her male victims: a signal to run, but they are blinded by their desire. The void underneath her skin is revealed for a brief moment once they're in the evisceration tank as she walks backwards, luring the man with the facial disfigurement into the void as he sinks to his apparent death — her disfigurement and his revealed in turn. Like a child, he whimpers "dreaming, dreaming" in a self-soothing gesture — "yes, we are" she assures him. What might it mean to think through *Under the Skin* as a realist

rather than a science fiction film: as a harrowing portrait of humanity? In any case, one of the great poets of our time, Alice Notley, argues that,

> …life is a dream; that we construct reality in a dreamlike way; that we agree to be in the same dream; and that the only way to change reality is to recognize its dreamlike qualities and act as if it is malleable. (Nelson 4)

The violence of human relationality, the brutality of human contact lucidly portrayed by *Under the Skin,* is thereby a phantasm we've agreed upon — a malleable violence that can and must be perceived as an opening, an aporia, toward more liveable forms.

The alien catches a glimpse of herself in a burnt out mirror on the stairway and gazes curiously at the topology of her face — this, it would seem, is the alien's mirror phase, characterized, as Lacan posits through a conception of one's self through and by vision. Laura Marks summarizes this idea as follows: "The mirror-phase theory of subjectivity is based upon a fundamentally alienated selfhood that is constructed visually, when the infant comes into awareness of being seen from the outside" (Marks 150). A fly buzzes outside the window as the camera moves to a close-up of her eye, the insect becoming incorporated into her "I" — eye/I/fly coalesce. To become sentient of one's self as a woman is to become sentient of your relative invisibility in the eyes of the sovereign, of your status as a mere insect in the arena of the citizen body — to begin to know one's self and one's body as destructible and vulnerable. Ariella Azoulay builds from Agamben's conception of bare life in *The Civil Contract of Photography,* writing of the specificities of feminized bare life, writing that, "Despite all the changes in the status of rape, this space has been and remains abandoned and outside legal language, a twilight zone in which woman's abandonment continues" (Azoulay 238). To begin to know one's self as female is to begin to know one's self as a non-self and a non-human: to understand your body as *giving shape* to absence (Barthes 14). The alien releases the man with the facial disfigurement

back into the waking world and speeds away. He ambles waywardly through a field, in a traumatized daze from his evening's unexpected seduction/abduction. The alien's handler swiftly collects him as a woman watches from the second story of a nearby house, her expression blank and dazed: the expression of a bystander, unmoved by the brutality she beholds. *Under the Skin* in this moment becomes a scathing review of humanity — this apparently human woman's cold, listless gaze is no more human, no more empathetic, than that of the alien, who takes mercy on him. The alien parks the van, disappearing into the mist. From here on out, she navigates the forbidding horizon of being a woman in the world with no "equipment" for self-protection, traversing a world projected from an always already ambivalent, tenuous selfhood.

Conclusion -- Mimetic Skins: Under the Skin is Another Skin

I've been spliced into so many ones, that I can only be a single image, no one. (Notley 49)

The alien walks on the road in the mist, she is yet another ant in the landscape. Now a "free" woman, she begins to assimilate into the customs of the waking world, but assimilate she does not. Her hot pink top appears drastically out of place in the landscape of green, burnt orange, ochre and grey of Glasgow, her bare skin exposed to the elements. She treats herself to a piece of black forest cake and gracelessly, promptly, regurgitates it, spitting it onto the table in front of her. The alien's mouth is a closed circuit — it would seem that it is only her eye that lets the world in. Once again, she is relegated to the landscape, appearing in a long shot as a figure against a desolate background — she boards a bus where a man approaches her asking if she needs any help — "yes," she replies. He wraps her in his jacket, takes her to the grocery store, buys eggs and other provisions for the coming days. They watch comedy on the television, he laughs, eats his dinner, she sits baffled, her eyes flickering to and fro in tandem with the onscreen figure's motions, her food untouched. He does the dishes, plays the radio, tapping his feet along — she taps her finger on the table like a child attempting to mimic rhythm (Osterweil 49). The man prepares a bed for her, leaving her with a space heater and bidding her goodnight — but does the alien sleep? In the orange glow of the heater, the alien examines her body — a longer, more extended mirror phase that reveals nothing of what lies under the skin: the skin, the flesh, is an opaque, impassive landscape — indeed, what lies under the alien's skin is *nothing*, a void. The alien leans from one foot to the other, wiggles her toes, clasps her hands, turns to the side and studies the small of her back. The following morning, the man takes her on a walk to a castle, swaddling her in one of his coats. On a wooded path, they reach a large puddle, the alien pauses and the man picks her up: he is nothing if not chivalrous. The man, it appears, has happened upon a live-in girlfriend. Once back at home, they proceed to attempt sex. The

exchange for his hospitality, thereby, is sex. Nothing, not even kindness, would seem to be free in this world.

The man removes her jeans, her underwear, the death shroud of the film's inaugural dead woman. Sex would seem to ensue, but after a moment, the alien pushes him off of her and jumps up, launching herself with impressive speed to the edge of the bed, snatching a lamp and examining her vagina. In the following scene, the alien returns yet again to the landscape, and this time for good. She enters the forest. A logger approaches — even the wilderness is not an escape from the trappings of human life. He babbles on about the forest's acreage and continues to ask if she's alone — the alien nods. The script of the predator has been adopted by the logger. No one, unfortunately, has taught the alien to beware of strangers — most especially male strangers. She spots a shelter in the forest and enters, curling up on the floor and falling asleep. She hasn't learned, further, that spaces of shelter are merely a quaint notion for women in the world. Her body is superimposed upon an image of trees moving waywardly in the wind. Notably, the swaying trees take no notice of her body — the landscape is indifferent to her presence.

She awakens to find herself being groped by the logger and runs away, he follows, tackling her on the forest floor, her body eclipsed by his brute force. The sound of tearing accompanies the violence of the imagery — her sweater, her camisole, the borrowed second skin of the victim whose same fate she is about to meet. The man recoils, examining his hands, horrified — he's torn the alien's skin, her phantasmic feminine flesh hangs from her frame — a black, vaguely female-shaped silhouette lies underneath. Human intimacy and touch for women is thereby posited by the film as fraught and fatal — the violence of coming into contact with the world as an incomplete citizen. The alien proceeds to peel the skin suit from her body. She holds

the blinking mask of her face (or is it *the* face?) in her hands — the mask and the alien gaze at one another, two sides of the same coin. They look into each other's eyes like lovers might — this, I argue, is one of the film's only moments of tenderness — she holds her face delicately, alien flesh of her alien flesh: under the skin is another skin. We end where we began and thereby the film traces a fundamentally mimetic form, the form of becoming conscious of gender as loss (Ahmed 18). In the inaugural victim's death shroud, alien predator becomes prey.

The logger returns, dousing her in gasoline and setting her aflame. Our flaming creature runs into a clearing, collapsing on the snow-laden earth, her voided feminine form becoming a pile of burning embers, the ash of her body transmuted into falling snow. Luke Hortle and Hannah Stark write that, "The attempted rape of the alien, and her murder, take place firmly in our world" (Hortle and Stark 164). The alien, unfortunately, has succeeded in becoming female: the alien's rape and murder marks the moment that she becomes female, as that which marks the category of "woman" is the circular and repetitive brutality of feminized bare life wherein "all of them can be raped" (Azoulay 278): the inaugural violence of the partial citizenship of womanhood. Under the skin of femininity, thereby, is a void: the twilight zone, the state of exception, wherein our abandonment from the human is exposed by the rape and murder of our kind in immense numbers each time anew (Azoulay 231).

If a woman, an alien, is raped and killed in the forest and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? The form of love, for women, does not conquer all — *Under the Skin* becomes an index of the potential brutality of human touch and contact for women. Berlant writes that, "Since it is the ligament of patriotism and the family, love defines governmentality in its atomic form, as a mechanism of internal monitoring through which the subject replays desire as a plebiscite on the normal" and thereby love, on these prescribed terms, becomes a site of

impossibility for the non-normal, for the alien (Berlant 437). The film's final moments end where the film begins, moving in a circular motion— predator becomes prey, the alien in the skin of the victim of rape and murder becomes raped and murdered in turn. The film's narrative thereby traces the shape of a hole — the hole, specifically, within the fabric of citizenship and love. Citizenship, like love, is currently a site of impossibility for women, taking place within, "the mirage of social totality that enables the fractures of the social to not feel impossible, or to not be experienced", as Berlant posits in *Love/Desire* (Berlant 438). Feminized time, then, is indelibly shaped by the trauma of the fractures of the social, of partial citizenship. In *Cruel Optimism,* Berlant maintains further that trauma is "the place where the space-time continuum folds in on itself and becomes a black hole" (Berlant 84). *Wanda, [SAFE]* and *Under the Skin* thereby linger within the fractures, the holes, of the social.

In a moment wherein the cultural arena of the west is resounding with the cries of the #MeToo movement, I wonder what it might mean to think through this feminist movement as constituted by and through a form of envy, an affective response by no means ruled out by the phrase "Me, Too," and perhaps even invited by it. I conclude my meditation on these three dismal portraits of femininity with Sianne Ngai's following formulation:

> As a political as well as theoretical discourse, feminism necessarily implies a compound subject, or at the very least a nonsingular one. Indeed, as Wendy Brown suggests, there is an etymological sense in which the making of compound subjects is politics, insofar as the ancient Greek term politeia designates 'the singularly human practice of constituting a particular mode of collective life.' The political act of feminist group formation thus entails producing 'group feeling,' though not necessarily the antagonism-free, identification-based 'group feeling'. (Ngai 168)

Thereby, what might it mean to think through feminist movements as emanating from tentative, occasionally antagonistic subjectivities? How might we work *with* and *through* the nonsingular fragmentations inherent in occupying feminized space and time, as the state of contemporary

feminism is, in Ngai's terms, "internally divided or split, yet held together by this very split" (Ngai 168)? During an era wherein the category of femininity is indelibly marked by a degree of sexual trauma as millions of women proclaim "Me, Too," what might it mean to form feminist movements along the fault lines inherent in the forms of femininity and feminism?

MA Thesis Creative Component: *m(other)*

https://mcgill-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/claire_drummond_mail_mcgill_ca/EXu1MLQoVGZErBjvQRguemwB8gVPnhZxIUzVvN3juyowYA?e=HNspwR

m(other) is an experimental film portrait of three generations of women: myself, my sister, my mother, my grandmother and my great aunt. Much of this film was made in collaboration with my mother — she would take footage of me, I would take footage of her, and so on and so forth: the point-of-view of the filmmaker in this project is fundamentally plural. *m(other)* combines photography from our familial archive, as well as footage of myself, my sister, my mother and water that I've been collecting over the past three years. *m(other)* is an exploration of intergenerational femininity — a series of four fragments amalgamated over the past year and a half, portraying the emulative relationships that exist between the women in my family. The four individual parts are vignettes, much like short stories, synthesized by the project's overarching forms. Parts 1 and 3 are composed of voiceover narration and split-screen imagery, and parts 2 and 4 are composed of split-screen imagery overlain with slowed-down pop songs: 1 and 3, and 2 and 4 echo one another. The form of this project has been influenced by the work of eminent film theorist Laura Marks as well as affect theorist Sianne Ngai. Ngai writes in *Ugly Feelings* that mimesis is femininity's dominant mode. In *m(other),* mimesis becomes momesis becomes mommysis becomes mom-me-sis: I explore my emulative relationship with the women in my family through a split-screen format wherein I fold myself into the shapes of their figures and gestures. In this project, I trace a tangled web of intimacies and identifications between generations of women: the feminine "I" and the "you" in this work are rendered "I-oh-you", an unstable entity between self and other that works through the mimetic processes of

identification between women. Mimeticism, Laura Marks writes in *The Skin of the Film*, "has become a way to shelter the individual from the shock of the world" (Marks 143). Thereby, in this project, I have created a speculative and virtual space of accommodation and shelter for the feminized subject, for whom spaces of worldly shelter do not yet exist. The world in which we live was not built to accommodate women, as affect theorist Sara Ahmed maintains (Ahmed 10). As the saying goes, there's no country for women.

Women are not yet protected under the aegis of citizenship — a brutal matter exposed each time anew by the continuation of sexual violence against women in immense numbers (Azoulay 231). Worldly space is thereby a problem for women, for whom the world is someone else's oyster. Terrestrial topologies in cinema are represented by what Marks calls optical visuality, which "sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space," thereby allowing the viewer the perspective of "an all-perceiving subject" (Marks 162). In Marks' work, haptic visuality emerges in opposition to the optical, subjugating distinct forms with texture, a way of looking that is "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (Marks 162). The haptic, further, is a fundamentally mimetic medium, as it "draws upon… mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object", giving way to a relationship between self and other that is "yielding-knowing" in diametric opposition to the Western drive toward a mastery over one's surroundings (Marks 151). In *m(other),* distinct forms and deep space give way to the textures of water, skin, stone, wood, branches and snow. Mother and child, self and other, are fused and confused, rendered m(other). *m(other)* navigates the ways in which the feminized subject might seek solace in and through the mimesis at the heart of her subjectivity, as well as the ways in which the movement of mimesis runs against the grain of the myth of mastery. *m(other)* is a tenuous film world in which the coherent and discrete

forms of traditional narrative cinema are replaced by the unstable and plural textures and gestures of emulation. This project is an homage to the ugly and the beautiful feelings, the loving contradictions, that emerge in relationships between women.

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