

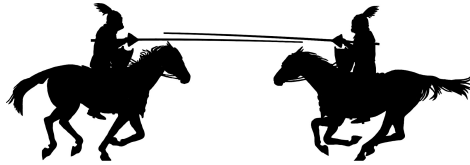
THE ARENA



Issue II

October 12, 2026

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DEDICATION

To our supporters, whether donors, contributors, editors, or readers, we extend a heartfelt thank you. You are helping to fuel an institution at UVA that builds a substantive conservative culture rather than simply tearing down the mainstream. We hope that you enjoy this product of the rigorous discussion and enthusiastic study that are the cornerstones of our Arena community.



NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Bombastic groups claiming conservatism, armed with incendiary takes and showy conferences, often reduce themselves to a mere form of popular entertainment. Similarly, much modern filmmaking leaves behind thoughtfulness in favor of accessibility and mass appeal. Paradoxically, though, conservatives often consider film to be something alien and elusive—just another area of the arts which has fallen under the sway of progressivism.

This dilemma led the Editors to choose film as the subject of Issue II. In publishing this issue, we aim to reconcile conservatism and film, contributing fresh intellectual rigor to both. Miss Thomas explores the shortcomings of contemporary femininity in film and what Kenneth Branagh gets right in *Cinderella*. Mr. Wilcoxon shows the power of filmic poetry in Welles's *Macbeth*. Miss Collins, drawing from Aristotle, discusses modern tragedy in two films from Damien Chazelle. Mr. Calabrese relates the struggles for human connection in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* to our own contemporary crisis of connection. Miss Parker contrasts two approaches to realizing Shakespearean absurdity on the silver screen. Finally, Mr. Nguyen meditates on themes of memory and the nature of film in *After Life*. Through these pieces, we reclaim some ceded ground on the front of film for the conservative tradition.

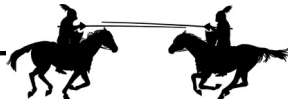
Sincerely,



Charles Wilcoxon and Zosia Collins, Co-Editors-in-Chief

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RECLAIMING
FILM



Keira Thomas
Charles Wilcoxon
Zosia Collins
Joseph Calabrese
Pamella Parker
Khoa Nguyen

True Femininity in *Cinderella*

Keira Thomas

In recent years, Hollywood's storytelling has deteriorated, with cycles of lazy writing and repeated characters and tropes. Filmmakers overextend franchises and, rather than developing new stories, remake old ones. Frequently, their contribution to the reimagining of a classic tale is to include whatever political or social agenda is trending, forcing each story to be topical. As of late, the portrayal of women has been the focus of these progressive upheavals we see on the silver screen.

In the quest for the acceptable woman, dependency on or actual romantic desire for men cannot be prioritized. Each woman must want to be the ultimate "girlboss," motivated by ambition and self-promotion. Of course, this is not to say that women who choose to remain single or to focus on careers and other goals are not feminine. There is absolutely nothing wrong in choosing these paths, but modern culture deems this particular paradigm to be the paragon for women. Apparently, women ought to be ambitious, but goodness forbid those ambitions center around marriage and family. An example of this on the screen is Rachel Zegler's interpretation of Snow White in the controversial 2025 remake of the original Disney classic. In press tours leading up to the release, Zegler, the lead actress, praised the rejection of antiquated ideals from the animated film, stating that Snow White "is not going to be saved by the prince, and she's not going to be dreaming about true love."¹ According to Zegler, a woman who actually wants a romantic relationship is intrinsically outdated and

antifeminist. Furthermore, Hollywood, instead of producing unique female characters, shapes heroines to merely replace the men in the story, abandoning any feminine qualities. In an ironic twist, the best woman is actually the best imitation of a man. It is as if Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is lurking behind the writers, begging them to unsex these women, lest viewers, in a world that has completely confused what womanhood is, actually see traditional femininity in a positive light.

Some, however, are not ready to abandon the fairytale or the idea that women can be compelling in a feminine way. Thankfully, Charles Perrault wrote a heroine that strays from this trend in the 2015 live action adaptation of *Cinderella*, directed by Kenneth Branagh. The remake of the Disney classic was a hit, earning several awards and nominations. In addition to stunning costuming and cinematography, the film was remarkable in its characters and storytelling. The plot remained relatively unchanged from the original, but with additional depth granted to characters and themes within the story. Viewers get to see more of Ella, the main character played by Lily James, as she grows up, loses her parents, and is gradually subjected to more hardship at the hand of her stepmother, allowing for more insight into her pitiful circumstances. Side characters like the king and the captain of the royal guard are given more dialogue and warmth, creating true emotional attachment to their arcs. The romance between Cinderella and the prince retains the fairytale aspects such as love-at-first-sight, but more time is devoted to

TRUE FEMININITY IN CINDERELLA

watching them choose and strive for each other, making their relationship all the more compelling and heart-warming.

In addition to simply giving more screentime and lines to these elements of the story, Perrault grants these characters a pursuit of virtue which strikes a poignant chord with audiences. Kit, the endearing prince, wrestles with love and responsibility as he strives to be the leader his kingdom deserves while also prioritizing a marriage centered around authentic affection and gift of self. His devotion to his father, his kingdom, and to Ella define him as a true Prince Charming, moving the audience to cheer on their romance.

The most compelling character, however, is rightfully the leading lady, Ella. As the movie delves in her childhood, it includes a heart wrenching scene at the beginning of the movie, in which her dying mother commends Ella to “have courage and be kind.”² This simple maxim defines Ella’s character and her fight for virtue. As her father remarries, this time to the wicked Lady Tremaine who has equally cruel daughters, and then dies himself, Ella holds on to these words, maintaining hope and compassion even as she is mistreated and undergoes grief after grief. Despite her stepfamily’s best attempts, she refuses to lose her own character and principles to bitterness and despair. When Kit first meets her, he is inspired by her strength of character and actually takes the “have courage and be kind” mantra back to his father and advisors. As he takes on the kingdom following his father’s death, he strives to meet the example of virtue set by Ella, having moved him to be the best man and ruler he can be. Moreover, his encouragement and example of healthy and strong masculinity move Ella to greater courage, depicting the exchange of virtue in their

relationship, sparked by her own inherent goodness.

One of the major questions of the story is how someone who has been wronged can still be good. Ella, following the famous scene where her stepsisters destroy her mother’s gown, comes face-to-face with this question, struggling to maintain her courage and kindness as despair threatens to corrupt her. However, she never stops pursuing the good and continues to choose charity and perseverance. This question is reintroduced in a later conversation with her stepmother, who monologues about her own tragedy of having lost two spouses before smashing the iconic glass slipper that Ella has kept from the ball. It is this final act of cruelty that leads Ella to fall apart, begging to know what she has done to deserve such mistreatment. The response from the stepmother is simple; she screams “Because you are young, and innocent, and good, and I—” before storming off, thus losing the fight to remain good in the face of hardship.³ She allowed tragedy to make her wicked, whereas Ella’s virtue has prevailed. Perrault avoids the pitfall of the not-evil-just-misunderstood villain by juxtaposing the stepmother, whose personal tragedies are nobody’s fault, with Ella, who has been consistently wronged by those who should have protected her and yet has still remained good.

In the end, Ella gets a happy fairytale ending; Kit finally finds her, and after a heartwarming proposal, the two are finally able to be together. Then comes one of the most powerful shots of the movie: as Ella and Kit leave her home hand-in-hand, the stepmother is in the background, made powerless because of Ella and Kit’s virtue and devotion to one another. Ella turns and, with Kit lovingly watching, forgives her stepmother before

walking off into happily ever after.

In addition to a lovely movie with idyllic music, costuming, and fantastical elements, Perrault, Branagh, and James succeeded in fashioning a heroine that is so powerful and yet so beautifully feminine. Ella's strength is not defined by great deeds or fiery independence or any other metric that ultimately reduces what a woman is. Rather, her power lies in her quiet but inspiring pursuit of virtue. This defines how she loves, as she gently shows Kit how to lead with service and chooses forgiveness over bitterness in her dealing with her stepfamily. Her femininity is not a hindrance to her happy ending but a defining part of who she is.

A respected philosopher and theologian of the 20th century, St. Edith Stein, once said "the world needs what women are, not what they have or do."⁴ Stein speaks to a poignant truth about femininity and rejects the proposed and degrading reinvention of female characters that are only inspiring because of their actions. Ella was no fierce leader, nor did she turn away others for the sake of her own singular success. She was powerful simply because she did not abandon her own character. Stein continues, "a

woman's soul is a shelter in which other souls can unfold."⁵ Once again, a mighty calling is given to women, who have a unique ability to nurture, protect, and inspire the souls of others. This is not a passive or weak vocation but rather one essential to the very foundations of a virtuous society. Despite her own trials, Ella maintains this shelter within herself, fostering fortitude and charity within Kit. Even when she leaves her stepmother's house, she does not lash out but rather gives the grace of forgiveness. Many aspects of this movie appeal to the feminine eye, such as Ella's stunning ballgown or the swoon worthy waltz between her and Kit. However, there is something fundamentally striking about a female character who is so strong and powerful in such a uniquely feminine way. Ella may not be the quintessential girlboss figure, but she shows that there is beauty and strength and goodness in simply living virtuously and loving well. Maybe heroines don't always need to be toppling stereotypes to be 'good' female characters. The pure and simple call to "have courage and be kind" may be the perfect inspiration.

TRUE FEMININITY IN CINDERELLA

Notes

1. NBC News, “Rachel Zegler Stirs Backlash over Old Comments about Disney ‘Snow White’ Live Action,” August 2023, accessed September 27, 2026, nbcnews.com, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/rachel-zegler-viral-backlash-snow-white-disney-live-action-rcna99848>

2. *Cinderella*, directed by Kenneth Branagh (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015), 5:22.

3. *Cinderella*, 1:24:11

4. Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 6.

5. Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 6.

Filmic Poetry: Where Orson Welles Builds on the Text of *Macbeth*

Charles Wilcoxon

Where is Shakespeare at his most powerful? Reliably captivating across his plays are his dramatic tension, imaginative worldbuilding, moral depth, and other triumphs. But what endures most prominently in my memory of Shakespeare tends to be those few lines which, perhaps even seeming superfluous at first, paint images that densely pack meaning into such a small package. These poetic images, however, can come second to what a director's first instinct may be when filming Shakespeare: adorning the film with the splendor of everything a camera can show, displaying period environments ranging from grand castles to bustling markets. But Grigori Kozintsev, in his essay "Hamlet' and 'King Lear': Stage and Film," stresses that in Shakespeare films, "[t]he aural has to be made visual. The poetic texture itself has to be transformed into a visual poetry, into dynamic organisation of film imagery."¹ Kozintsev's task was taking these poetic images and rendering their impact filmically. His approach embodies what Jack Jorgens calls "[t]he filmic mode, ... the mode of the film poet."²

Kozintsev is not the only Shakespeare film poet. Orson Welles, in his *Macbeth* (1948), plays the titular character, an intensely ambitious—yet conscientious—Scottish noble who first murders the king and then other innocent victims in a usurpation of the Scottish throne. Alongside Welles, Jeanette Nolan plays Lady Macbeth, who goads Macbeth on against his moral reservations, fueled by a cold ambition of her own. As director, Welles

combines visual poetry and aural poetry at multiple of those textual moments of densest meaning. In doing so, Welles augments the impact of Shakespeare's poetic images. However, Welles, like a true film poet, also goes beyond Shakespeare's images to create some of his own. The three examples of Welles's filmic poetry I will explore in this article show the power of the filmic mode, especially when combined with Shakespeare.

"Incarnadining" Beyond the Screen

To incarnadine, for readers unfamiliar with Shakespeare's prolific word inventions, means to make red. The Bard uses new diction here to show how Macbeth understands well the moral gravity of murdering King Duncan, not least immediately after he does the infamous deed. Horrified at what he has done, Macbeth asks

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this
blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand
will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.³

Shakespeare's image is an anti-baptism, one where Macbeth's guilt, symbolized by his victim's blood, not only cannot be washed away but, what is worse, taints all pure water. There is a sense of the beyond in Shakespeare's blood-red sea. In Macbeth's time, the sea was the border of the known world. Macbeth knows



Figure 1. Macbeth's bloody hand in the foreground. Still from *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles (Republic Pictures, 1948).

that his culpability will be so total that he can never escape it, for it cannot even be contained within his world's boundaries.

Welles uses Macbeth's bloody hand to great effect. He composes the shot of himself speaking the above lines so that his hand, although out of focus, dominates the foreground (Fig. 1). Welles has drawn our attention to Shakespeare's symbol of guilt. Then, as Welles says, "Making the green one red," his hand descends below the frame. Welles's movement of his hand mirrors the Shakespearean image of the bloody hand plunging into the vast seas. But where does Welles's hand go? When it leaves the frame, its location becomes ambiguous. The hand is not destroyed, but the camera hides it from us.

Beyond the aspect ratio, is there an infinite void? Of course, literally, outside of the camera frame remains the hand, as well as the set, cast crew, etc. Is the entire film production incarnadined? Or what if the hand is entering the real world as soon as it leaves the filmic world bounded by the frame? The movie theater, the town, and soon the entire actual world would thus be tainted by Macbeth's guilt. The answer to this ambiguity is not as important as the ambiguity itself. In fact, it is this uncertainty that makes Welles's decision so effective. The "multitudinous seas" of the text crash on coasts Macbeth will never see, but they are still finite, contained in his world, realizable in his imagination. We too can visualize an ocean being turned red by the blood spilt in foul

play. But we cannot even start to imagine the location and scope of the incarnadining guilt spread by Welles's corrupting hand. Welles takes advantage of a uniquely filmic contrast, that between what is shown within the frame and what is made ambiguous outside of it. When Welles moves his bloody hand from the former to the latter, we have no idea how far Macbeth's culpability spreads, and we're terrified.

Denying the Close-Up

Macbeth's crimes do not end with the murder of King Duncan. Desperate to secure his usurpation, Macbeth violently pursues anyone his paranoia labels a threat. As his ambition transforms him into a callous tyrant, his wife spirals into guilt-ridden mania, which climaxes in her suicide. Seyton, the only Scottish noble to remain loyal to Macbeth, tells the tyrant of his wife's death, and Macbeth's reaction haunts the page:

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a
word.
Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief
candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is told no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁴

In the "Tomorrow" speech, Macbeth brushes off his wife's death as inevitable and trivial while

denigrating his own existence. He does so with a series of images that characterize the nihilistic view of life he purports: life's tedium like personified, creeping, spiteful "tomorrow"; its misdirection through many "yesterdays" along a meandering path toward the death we all incurred by Adam and Eve; its smallness and insignificance like a "brief candle"; its amorphousness as a "walking shadow"; its meaninglessness like an actor with no audience or a story told arbitrarily and thoughtlessly. Whether this is a manifestation of a genuine nihilism overcoming Macbeth or the tyrant's attempt to manipulate himself by sheer poetic force into moral resignation, thus denying his having moral responsibility and avoiding any attendant psychological turmoil, is a question for another article. What I am concerned with here is the tone of the textual image—that of the zero, of despaired resignation—and how Welles builds upon it filmically.

Welles indeed augments this image also, doing so with a striking decision. Being an adept actor, you might expect Welles to shoot a close-up of his face for the duration of the "Tomorrow" speech. Instead, by the time he says "Tomorrow," Welles has faded and been replaced by a cloudy landscape (Fig. 2), which Welles sustains for the duration of the speech. In so doing, Welles directs our focus toward the world Macbeth is commenting on, a world of mist and cloud. And as we watch with Macbeth the clouds "[c]reep in this pretty pace," they evoke in their amorphism the "walking shadow" Macbeth attributes to his own life and represent in their vaporousness the "nothing" which Macbeth sees his life constituting. After we understand how Macbeth now views the world, Welles fades to a brief, crushing close-up of the tyrant (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. The cloudy landscape. Still from *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles (Republic Pictures, 1948).

Denying us the extended close-up is the most effective choice, and somewhat counterintuitively so: we would expect an intimate and moving performance from Welles to be the most compelling presentation. But I hold that the brief moment of seeing Welles's face carries tremendous weight—more than an extended close-up—precisely because of the time spent lingering on the clouds. Welles's filmic image, through both its resonance with Shakespeare's text and its profound simplicity, opens his audience's ears to the "Tomorrow" speech in a way that forces them to reckon with the bleakness of both the film and text. Welles rejects the instinct to show the actor's face, instead presenting a filmic image that both

builds upon the text and allows it to more fully breathe.

A Bell and Noose of Reckoning

We proceed from two filmic images that are directly inspired by Shakespearean images to one that is more originally Welles's. Shakespeare lays the textual groundwork, which Welles turns into an indictment against all the evil Macbeth has committed up to his mortal battle against the rebel army from England.

Before revealing Lady Macbeth's death, Seyton is instructed by Macbeth to "[h]ang those that talk of fear," a moment Welles holds to.⁵ In Shakespeare's text, Seyton ambiguously exits the play after this point. However, in



Figure 3. The crushing close-up. Still from *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles (Republic Pictures, 1948).

Welles's film, Seyton's story does not end in mystery. But first it is worth noting that the English army is led by Malcolm and Macduff, the former the son of King Duncan, the latter the patriarch of a family Macbeth heinously murdered. The importance Welles places on the army being led by those whom Macbeth's treachery most intimately afflicted is manifest in his original filmic image.

Both textually and filmically, the "alarum bell" heralds the arrival of Malcolm's army.⁶ Simultaneously in his film, Welles shows a hanged man swinging back and forth in the motion of a clapper causing the bell to sound.⁷ Thus, he reveals Seyton's fate: the usurper's most loyal noble hangs himself, perhaps consumed by a mental "talk of fear" that incurs

execution by hanging. By associating this image with the sound of the ringing bell, Welles links the substance of the alarm with that of the image. Seyton hanged represents the culmination of the brutality Macbeth stooped to so that he could gain and keep the throne, a brutality that went so far to not only rouse the rebellious vengeance of Malcolm and Macduff but to scare his most loyal follower into despaired suicide. Welles associates this brutality with the direct cause of the alarm's sounding because Welles sees the alarm, auditory evidence of Macbeth's imminent downfall, as a representation of the fate awaiting those who resort to criminality to satisfy their ambition. Macbeth actually faces the swinging Seyton and the consequences

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heralded by the alarm, thus beholding the effects of the transgressions before going off to the battle that is his ultimate demise.

The filmic mode works in Shakespeare films in a special way; poetic images can harmonize with the poetic text or, when original, can cohere well with the essentially poetic nature of any project bringing Shakespeare to film. Welles demonstrates this powerfully with his augmentations of Shakespeare's textual bloody sea and Macbethian nihilism, as well as with his original, thematically resonant bell whose clapper represents Macbeth's cumulative cruelty.

Filmic poetry, however, is not bound by Shakespeare nor even by films adapting originally theatrical drama. Any film can enter the filmic mode. A camera can show a great range of experiences with a realism far greater than the theater. But sometimes the most powerful image is not the most realistic or comprehensive rendering of the event but an image that embodies the narrative or thematic weight of the moment; this applies to all films, not just Shakespeare. Recognizing the filmic mode as one of film's most potent methods unlocks a new front of analysis for viewers, one that will leave you with images that are not just grand or enthralling but poetic.

Notes

1. Grigori Kozintsev, "'Hamlet' and 'King Lear': Stage and Film," in *Shakespeare 1971*, ed. Clifford Leech and John Margeson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 191.

2. Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 10.

3. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles (Washington DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed September 22, 2026, folger.edu, 2.2.78-81

4. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.20-31

5. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.3.43

6. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.57

7. *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles, 1:35:41; a high-quality visual still of this specific frame was unavailable

The Good Itch: Ancient Tragedy and Modern Cinema

Zosia Collins

At a recent reunion of high school friends, a polite but impassioned debate arose over *La La Land* and *Whiplash*, two movies directed by Damien Chazelle. *La La Land* is about an L.A. romance between Mia and Sebastian, who push each other in their separate crafts of acting and jazz until their artistic careers split them on divergent paths. *Whiplash* also features a prolific jazz player, Andrew, who comes under the authority of the verbally—and occasionally physically—abusive band director Fletcher. He rejects Fletcher’s cruelty, only to later cave to it and embody his own musical fury in a climactic final performance. The source of contention was that neither film has a “happy” ending, which was viscerally repellent to several of my friends. However, most would agree that the movies also do not have entirely unhappy endings. At the end of *La La Land*, we see Mia and Sebastian enjoying stardom in the areas of the arts they cherish, while Andrew’s drum solo at the end of *Whiplash* is an act of terrifying musical greatness. The modern watcher, like my high school friends and myself, is torn between celebrating the achievement of these characters’ “dreams” and an itching discontent about where Mia, Sebastian, and Andrew end up. In order to clear up this confusion, I suggest returning to the old masters: specifically, Aristotle speaks on the nature of endings of plays, a close cousin of movies, in his *Poetics*. I argue that by examining *La La Land* and *Whiplash* through the lens of Aristotle’s discussion of Greek tragedy, we can understand the true import of their endings and fully appreciate the significance of our discontent.

Assigning tragic status to *La La Land* and *Whiplash* might appear initially counterintuitive; after all, the ending scenes are somewhat ambiguous. We see that both Mia and Sebastian have achieved their respective dreams of career success, and Mia has even settled down with someone else. We see that Andrew has achieved a dazzling musical intensity. How do we know to view these endings as tragic? In order to draw this conclusion, we must examine the endings using the qualifications that Aristotle sets forth in his *Poetics*.

First, both films showcase a complex action. According to Aristotle, “A complex action is one . . . [which] is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both”¹, a reversal being “a change by which the action veers round to its opposite.”² For example, in Sophocles’ famous tragedy *Antigone*, King Creon of Thebes condemns the titular character to death for defying his royal orders and burying her disgraced brother; he hopes that in doing so, he will reinforce his own power as king. In reality, the murder of Antigone creates disastrous instability as the gods express outrage at her killing through natural disasters, calling the true weight of Creon’s authority into question. Thus, Creon’s actions create the *opposite* outcomes that he intended or expected and qualify as a reversal, suggesting that this is the complex action which is common to most tragedies.

In this sense, the endings of both *La La Land* and *Whiplash* are reversals; they flip what the characters expected or intended to be the

result of their actions. As Mia is headed to her final audition, it is in a moment of healing and resolution in her relationship with Sebastian. We share her hesitancy in believing that she will really get this role and cannot help but assume that whatever the outcome will be, Mia will be accompanied by Sebastian—who drove all the way to Boulder City, Nevada to find her after she left Los Angeles. However, the opposite ensues; Mia lands the role and then immediately splits from Sebastian. It is a dramatic break from all that we, alongside the characters, anticipated. Likewise, when Andrew walks back onto the stage at the JVC Jazz Festival after being publicly humiliated by Fletcher, he is trying to shame Fletcher by taking control of the band and playing a song, Caravan, that Fletcher is unprepared for. Andrew's intention is revenge, but as he utilizes music as a thing of rage and cruelty, he is paradoxically united with Fletcher in their musical fury. While he expected to hurt Fletcher, he actually drew closer to him through joining their musical passions. Thus, both *La La Land* and *Whiplash* climactically exemplify tragic complex actions.

Additionally, Aristotle claims that the tragic plot "ought to be so constructed that . . . he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place."³ In other words, the ending ought to have a haunting, emotionally devastating effect on the viewer. This, is undeniably true in both films. Anybody who has seen the ending of *La La Land* "melts with pity"; the final montage crafts the blissful future we were expecting for Mia and Sebastian, crescendoing into a joyful glimpse into a happy family life—before a slow, ultimately crushing decrescendo which finds Mia and Sebastian separate in the dark jazz bar, stuck in the reality that they have chosen. The final look between Mia and Sebastian before she exits the bar

arouses aching, profound pity and regret in the viewer. Regardless of whether you believe that Mia and Sebastian have ended up in a good place overall, something deep within you wants their relationship to work out. *Whiplash* similarly causes its audience to "thrill with horror"; how could you not when confronted with the cacophony of sound and whirlwind of motion juxtaposed with shots of beads of sweat on Andrew's brow and of drops of blood on his drum set? The tiny details within such intimate shots reveal the suffering and exertion of Andrew amid his vast triumph; we very much feel that this endeavor has finally broken him. The rage of his character is almost unbearable, and we fear where it will take him. The viewer can generally sense that what is going on is somehow very wrong, a sense relayed through our emotions.

In a similar vein, Aristotle describes the tragic hero, one "who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty."⁴ Although the disastrous ending of a tragedy might tempt us to pinpoint a true villain as the cause of despair, tragic characters are brought down by weakness rather than by immorality. In both *La La Land* and *Whiplash*, the tragic fault is not a vice but rather a weakness. Mia and Sebastian's weakness was a lack of faith in their relationship and a flagging will to keep it up. They decide that it would not be possible to pursue their careers *and* their relationship, and yet in the final montage we see a version of reality in which they are able to do both. Mia and Sebastian merely lacked the courage or imagination to pursue this track, bound by their tragic weakness. Andrew's weakness, meanwhile, is a caving to the brutal tactics of Fletcher which make music into a thing of rage and adverse passion. In his final

solo, we realize that he can no longer resist Fletcher's manipulation. Thus, our central characters are irresolute rather than villainous.

All of these tragic criteria combine and culminate in a direct human cost— although Aristotle does not speak to it directly in his *Poetics*, we can clearly trace it through many of the best Greek tragedies. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, the tragic actions are marked by a severing of interpersonal relationships. Antigone cuts herself off from her sister Ismene by deciding to bury their brother, since Ismene refuses to put her life on the line and defy the king's orders. King Creon likewise forsakes his relationship with both Antigone and his son Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone, by deciding to put Antigone to death. The tragic errors in *La La Land* and *Whiplash* are also characterized by the cutting off of relationships. Mia and Sebastian cut off their relationship to each other in their tragic error of pursuing career over love, and Andrew walks right out of his father's loving embrace, leaving him dumbfounded and tearful, in his tragic error of going back onto stage at the JVC Jazz Festival. The lack of deep, well-developed relationships at the end of the films suggests that the endings are tragic rather than otherwise.

Thus, the endings of *La La Land* and *Whiplash* fit well into the tragic mold laid out by Aristotle; when Aristotle claims that "the change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad," we must believe him.⁵ However, this is where our discussion of Greek tragedy becomes most interesting. Because although, as Aristotle says, the endings of tragedies are decidedly bad, Greek tragedy presents much more nuanced deliberations and decisions which lead up to those endings. In these tragedies, the main

character is not choosing a *bad* thing in their weakness; rather, they are choosing a good that is not actually the *highest* good. For example, in *Antigone*, King Creon correctly thinks that human law is good but fails to realize that it is not as good as divine law. In this sense, the weakness of the hero in their tragic error is really a weakness in judgement.

This is the same in *La La Land* and *Whiplash*. Mia and Sebastian's careers are not a bad thing; however, they are not as good as the relationship that they had. Andrew's pursuit of musical greatness is not a bad thing; it only becomes bad when it is mistakenly placed above his relationship with his father and is used as a form of revenge. Mia, Sebastian, and Andrew all choose things that they correctly see as good. Their folly is a blindness to the bigger picture and higher callings.

And yet, the modern viewer instinctively feels what a terribly difficult, perhaps impossible decision these characters are confronted with. With true brilliance, Chazelle harnesses light, color, and sound to bring the dreams that his characters pursue to life. We see the swirling, smiling figures of Hollywood high society and hear the raw, impeccably interwoven sounds of the jazz Andrew seeks to create. Towards the end of the movie, we agonize over which path the characters might take— and suddenly, we realize that we ourselves have entered into their decision. Chazelle's integration of us into the lives of his characters is so complete that we no longer view their tragic decision from an objective stance; we ourselves stumble on the verge of the tragic errors that Mia, Sebastian, and Andrew face. Like them, we falter in ordering the goods that they face; we, too, err in our judgement of artistic greatness and fame being better than the goodness of meaningful relationships. But is

THE GOOD ITCH: ANCIENT TRAGEDY AND MODERN CINEMA

this inner conflict one of Chazelle's creation—or is he merely giving shape to a conflict that already exists within us? I argue the latter. Chazelle's harnessing of the tragic medium allows us to uncover our own weakness of judgement alongside his characters through the

inner struggle we ourselves face upon witnessing his endings. The itch we're left with as the credits roll is a good one, since it makes us think—not only about the director's aims and the artistic mode, but also about our own tragic flaws which have been hauntingly unveiled.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994–2009), classics.mit.edu, Book X.

2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XI.

3. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XIV.

4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XIII.

5. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XIII.

Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: A Study on Human Connection

Joseph Calabrese

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) has marveled audiences for decades. Released initially to a mixed reception from critics and crowds alike, the film has steadily grown in popularity and now commonly numbers highly among the greatest American films (rated as the 3rd greatest American film by the BBC in 2015).¹ This ranking is indeed well deserved, as the movie boasts beautiful visuals, an excellent score, an incredible lead performance by James Stewart, and a thrilling plot. Above all, *Vertigo* is able to remain increasingly relevant to our own time; Stewart's character's disillusion with reality and obsessive state relate ominously well to the social disconnect and idealism of today.

Stewart plays Detective John "Scottie" Ferguson, who is afflicted by vertigo throughout the movie. This case of vertigo – accompanied by visuals of disorientation and mania – is used by Hitchcock to display Scottie's sense of disillusion with reality. Disillusion is the primary mechanism that moves Scottie throughout the film, appearing to begin early in the movie with the death of his policeman colleague. Slipping from a rooftop in close pursuit of a criminal, Scottie dangles from the edge and watches helplessly as his partner reaches out a hand to help, only to slip from the edge and plummet to his death. This situation gives him vertigo, and results in his retirement from the police force to address his trauma. Scottie's helplessness and failure surrounding the death of his colleague is a dramatic visualization of his inner psychological and behavioral confliction, which is revealed throughout the movie. Following his departure

from the force, Scottie accepts a job from his college friend Gavin Elster to investigate his wife Madeleine, whom Gavin believes to be possessed by her suicidal great-grandmother Carlotta Valdes. Scottie shadows Madeleine around town and, after rescuing her when she jumps into the San Francisco Bay, begins to fall in love with her. He becomes enamored by both her beauty and the intrigue surrounding her potential possession by Carlotta. The character of Carlotta, by virtue of Gavin's view that she possesses Madeleine, is a spiritual and mystical figure divorced from Scottie's mundane reality. Hitchcock conveys this by surrounding Madeleine with the color green in many of her scenes, which conveys the beauty of the scenes' natural environment and proves a jarring juxtaposition from the San Francisco cityscape. Not unlike Jay Gatsby's obsession with the green light on the dock, Scottie is obsessed with Madeleine and the glimmering charm she brings into his life.

Madeleine, however, is not the only woman in Scottie's life. Throughout the movie, he is accompanied by his close friend and ex-fiancé Midge, who helps him recover after the incident on the roof and assists in his quest to uncover the truth about Carlotta Valdes. If Madeleine is a preternatural and enchanted being, then Midge is presented as a perfectly mundane individual. She works a regular job, lives in an apartment, and is simply living her life in the background while Scottie chases after Madeleine. What is fascinating about Midge and Scottie is the fact that they were engaged when they were younger, broke off the

engagement, but remain extremely close friends. This suggests, in my opinion, the existence of unresolved feelings between the two of them, particularly as Midge becomes increasingly annoyed with Scottie's obsessive behavior toward Madeleine and even paints a portrait of herself as Carlotta to win over his attention. We do not know what caused their engagement to end, but I posit that Scottie is probably the one who called it off, as he does not reciprocate to Midge the same affection she has for him, and their clear potential for a healthy relationship remains floating in the air between them. Despite the great potential he has with Midge, Scottie chases after the married Madeleine, who is able to provide him with some kind of escape from reality, a grotesque vision of human connection, which eventually results in disaster. Hitchcock dares us to re-examine ourselves in light of Scottie's condition. What grounding are our own relationships upon? What kind of connection do we cultivate with the world? Scottie is a case-study for these questions, and the catastrophe that unfolds for him shows their importance.

Madeleine's plunge into the San Francisco Bay demonstrated her suicidal tendencies under Carlotta's spell to the dismay of Scottie and his attempts to cure her possession. Then, at the San Juan Bautista Mission, Madeleine runs away from Scottie to the top of the belltower while he struggles to overcome his vertigo to reach the top before her. He fails and is forced to watch her fall to her death. Scottie is lambasted by the authorities for his failure and eventually suffers a psychotic breakdown and is institutionalized for a time. Once released, he wanders the streets of San Francisco, reminiscing about Madeleine and uncertain of how to reassemble the fragments of his shattered dream until he meets a girl named

Judy who looks like her. He cultivates an extremely domineering and obsessive relationship with Judy. He follows her up to her apartment, pressures her into spending all her time with him, and practically orders her to change her hair and wardrobe to match Madeleine's appearance. His delight is only realized when she emerges from her closet as the spitting image of Madeleine, complete with a green glow filling the room from a neon sign outside. Scottie has turned Judy into something even more enchanting than Madeleine: she is the perfect object of his desire, a mold to create the perfect woman of his ideals and illuminations. But Scottie's delusions are shattered when he discovers that Judy is not only the mirror image of Madeleine, but is literally Madeleine herself, or at least the woman Scottie believed to be Madeleine. We discover that Gavin Elster concocted the story of Carlotta possessing Madeleine in order to murder his wife under the guise of her being insane. Gavin hired Judy to pretend to be his wife to deceive Scottie. Gavin murdered the real Madeleine Elster and threw her body from the belltower to give the illusion that she had committed suicide. Once he discovers the truth, Scottie drags Judy back to the Mission belltower and forces her to climb to the top once more, determined to follow her to the top and finally conquer his vertigo. At the top, Judy professes her love for Scottie and begs him to forgive her. But before he can respond, a nun appears behind them and frightens Judy, who loses balance and falls to her death. The credits roll as Scottie gazes down at where she fell, helpless as yet another person in his life has been lost to a mortal descent.

Vertigo weaves the thread of Scottie's attitude towards relationships with the individuals in his life and their effect on his

relationship with reality. He feels estranged from Midge, enticed by Madeleine and Carlotta, and domineering over Judy. Scottie's relationships here depict the ever-true reality of humanity that our own desires for connection are essential to our nature. From the time of the first man, we have been animated by the reality that it is not good to be alone. Relationships at every social level build upon each other in construction of the fundamental human desire for communion with others. Social relationships build upon each other: individuals form families; families form communities; communities form societies. Without a sense of connection on the individual level, all following elements of social cohesion become disjointed from one another and the world itself becomes separate from our own realities. Scottie serves as a case study for this lack of cohesion. His failure on the police force and subsequent vertigo catalyze his estrangement from reality which we see personified through his rejection of Midge and embracement of Madeleine. He ostracizes himself from the rest of the world, leading to his allurements by the otherness of Madeleine who reaches through the San Francisco cityscape as an unnatural connection.

This situation, as sad as it is, is not at all foreign to the world we find ourselves in today. The all-encompassing glow of artificial reality has been transforming our relationships into digital forms, if not fully substituting its own creations for the real world itself. And now with the rise of AI "companionship," the perceived necessity of human interaction is fading away. Ever more increasingly today, technology has become an agent instead of a tool, and the human connection present in reading, writing, and artwork dissolves itself into a vehicle for digital work. If we are now less connected and engaged with each other, then what does that

leave us with? The average person can now find himself possessed by a Carlotta—an animated ideal of a flawed socialization—who urges him away from the physical present and towards some kind of enchanted notion of the world not built upon humanity's relational nature. But this is not strictly limited to our use of AI. Around the world, rates of depression and mental breakdowns have grown, despite the supposed progressiveness of modern society. Radicalism and hatred spread like an ever-raging wildfire across the fields where discourse was once possible. Political debates degrade into mudslinging and spectacles, serving only as grotesque entertainment for a disillusioned population. Figures rise to power as ideologues professing whatever vaguely populist ideals they can think of to awaken an apathetic public, proposing manifestos to incite radical change without care for how a surface-level analysis of the world ignores the true complexity of society and its problems. These are the symptoms of a society in vertigo – a society forgetting where it even came from because of our inability to forge basic human connection.

Though it never made it to theaters, Hitchcock filmed an alternate ending to *Vertigo*. Instead of fading to black after Judy's death, we see Scottie return to Midge's apartment in San Francisco. We hear the radio broadcaster detail the search for bringing Gavin Elster to justice, while Midge and Scottie share a drink, looking out the window at the city below. Scottie rescues himself from his own prison of disillusion and returns to Midge, as we the audience dare to hope that the two of them might reconnect and reforge their own relationship. Though this ending was ultimately not part of Hitchcock's vision, it can very well still be part of our own reality. We have the option and the opportunity to live

HITCHCOCK'S VERTIGO: A STUDY ON HUMAN CONNECTION

with a sense of discipline and purpose, sanctifying the world itself by our witness to what is essential and good for all people. We can choose to return to the essential and basic

grandeur of human relationships which have formed everything we share today, if only we have the heart to abide in the world and accept reality for what it truly is.

Notes

1. BBC Culture, "The 100 Greatest American Films," July 20, 2015, bbc.com.

Presenting Shakespearean Absurdity to a Modern Audience

Pamella Parker

Imagine it's your wedding day. You're standing next to your father and your cousin in front of your entire community, about to marry a man you hardly know. You've seen him once before when he was passing through for work. He proposed to you about two days ago. Except he didn't propose to you really, he had his boss do it for him. He asks if your father will freely give you away. Your father says, yes, of course. You smile at him, ready to tell him, 'I do'. Suddenly, he pushes you into your father, calling you names and accusing you of cheating on him in front of all the guests. You protest your innocence, but the only one who believes you is your cousin. He leaves in a huff, and your family decides the best course of action is to fake your death. The next day, you're proven innocent. He feels horrible, and, thinking you to be dead, agrees to marry some stranger who looks like you to make up for his past actions. That stranger is actually you, so you marry him anyway.

The scenario described above is completely ludicrous. Who is this horrible man? Why on earth would anyone agree to marry him in the first place? Why would anyone agree to marry him a second time? But it's the implausible scenario that must be handled by any current director who wants to make an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The love story described is one of the two key romances in the play: Claudio and Hero's. Claudio, an Italian mercenary, comes to stay at Messina, Italy on his way back home after a war campaign. He's a typical Italian gentleman of

the time, trying to make a name for himself and gain social status through success in combat. His commanding officer Don Pedro, a prince of Aragon and Messina's feudal lord, agrees to broker a marriage between him and Hero, the governor of Messina's daughter. He then is tricked into believing Hero has cheated on him. Instead of talking to her about her supposed infidelity, he decides to reveal his suspicions to the entire city at their wedding. His actions ruin Hero. She fakes her own death, planning to run away to a convent if her family is unable to clear her name. Hero's family manages to convince Claudio of her innocence, and Claudio agrees to marry a cousin who looks like Hero as penance. Hero reveals herself, and she marries Claudio, wrapping up *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Shakespeare had three forms of play to work with: history, tragedy, and comedy. Technically, *Much Ado About Nothing* falls into the comedy category, and the ending should leave the audience feeling overjoyed at Claudio and Hero's nuptials. So, a director putting on a modern adaption must make a choice: either try to present Claudio and Hero's marriage as a happy ending or embrace the play's inherent peculiarity. Joss Whedon and Kenneth Branagh directed some of the most notable film adaptations of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Their versions of *Much Ado* couldn't be more different, from budget to artistic interpretation. Branagh guides the audience's eyes away from the problematic aspects of Claudio and Hero's marriage, while Whedon

conspicuously displays the oddities in their love story.

Branagh presents Hero and Claudio's marriage as conventional, using the beautiful setting and characters to present his audience from thinking too much about the two's love story. He sets the play in a stunning villa nestled in the beautiful Italian countryside. The villa is presented as a self-contained village, and the only 'outsiders' who the audience ever sees are the mercenaries coming home from war. Serious matters have no place in the villa. In the opening scene, the inhabitants of the villa laze about, eating grapes and listening to the governor's niece Beatrice orate. Shakespeare does not choose to have *Much Ado* open with Beatrice's poem. The poem appears later in the play, and it bemoans the fickleness of men.

Branagh's choice has two effects. Firstly, it lets the viewer know that men will be fickle, already preparing them for Claudio's sudden rejection of Hero. It also adds to the general leisure of the scene, as the poem provides entertainment for the characters as they laze in the sun. Their postures ooze lethargy. They sprawl all over everything, casually touching anyone they feel like. The clothes are all white, and most are in some partially undressed state, whether it's an open top or a critical button left undone. The scene seems sensual, setting the stage for the love story to come, marking the villa as a perfect environment for young love. The servants and the upper-class loll about together, and while it's clear that Leonato, the governor, and his daughter Hero are the upper class from their more polished speech, especially compared to Hero's vulgar maid Margaret, class distinctions are fluid. Shakespeare makes it clear that Leonato rules a town called Messina and that he owes fealty to the visiting Prince Pedro of Aragon. Branagh omits most of those details.

He never provides anything concrete about the situation for the audience. His beautiful landscapes, loose, half-on-clothes, lazy postures, and general luxury create an absolute paradise, made even more ethereal by the lack of details. The audience feels whisked away to another world where happiness abounds and love is in the air. The audience doesn't need to think too much about anything; they can instead focus on the gorgeous scenery and the radiant characters.

The entrance of the mercenaries further reinforces the idyllic image. Everyone is ecstatic to see Don Pedro, Benedict, and Claudio. Again, touches are carelessly exchanged, and the entire village strips, bathes, and changes into cleaner attire. The military men cleanse themselves from the dirty war they have just come from. By showing the mercenaries bathing, Branagh effectively communicates to the audience that war has no place in his Italian fairyland. The mercenaries wash away their dirt before entering. No physical reminders of serious matters can exist in Branagh's *Much Ado*. Branagh already has encouraged the viewer not to question the nitty gritty details of the situation. What is the town? What war were the mercenaries coming from? How do they all know each other? The pretty scenery, lazy attitudes, and casual interactions encourage the audience not to think too hard.

In Branagh's *Much Ado*, Claudio's vicious accusation of Hero seems completely out of place. His denunciation brings seriousness into what should be a joyous affair. It also mars the perfect happiness that seems to exist in Leonato's village. Claudio destroys the beautiful wedding decorations in his fury, disrupting the beautiful scenery that Branagh has carefully cultivated. Claudio's actions are so jarring that the audience needs the situation to be fixed. When Hero and Claudio get back

together, the audience doesn't mind that Claudio's been horrendous to Hero. They don't question the friar's suggestion that Hero fake her own death. They want the villa to return to the pretty paradise that it's been for most of the movie. Up to this point, the movie has made no particular demands on the audience's intellect. The audience has no reason to start thinking too deeply about Claudio's behavior. Claudio and Hero's marriage is the continuance of the blissful world the Branagh created. Their marriage is the kind of happy ending that Branagh's fairytale world requires.

Branagh's stellar casting also helps the audience make sense of Claudio and Hero's union. He casts Robert Sean Leonard as Claudio and Kate Beckinsale as Hero. At the time of filming, both actors were extremely young. Their youth gives the audience a way to understand the immaturity of their actions. The credit for the young casting doesn't go entirely to Branagh, of course. Shakespeare repeatedly describes both Hero and Claudio as youthful. Branagh takes Shakespeare's casting suggestion and runs with it. Neither of his picks for Claudio and Hero look like they could be older than 20. The actors' youth allows the audience to account for Claudio and Hero's impulsive decision to marry, and Claudio's decision to dramatically end his wedding. The two lovebirds make foolish choices because they are young. They do what silly teenagers who don't understand the gravity of marriage would do: decide to wed impulsively and then end a wedding based on an unverified accusation.

The two actors are also stunning. They are individually so physically attractive that it makes sense that they'd fall in love with each other at first sight. Perhaps unfairly, very attractive individuals are considered nothing more than their looks. Because their beauty

stands out, nobody considers their intelligence. In Branagh, Hero and Claudio are both so good looking that the audience focuses on their beauty instead of their judgment. It appears logical for two apparently brainless teens living in a fairytale to end up together.

Thus, Branagh makes Hero's and Claudio's unpalatable love story go down smoothly. He created a lover's paradise and put in two young disarmingly lovely actors. Everything about the scenario is perfect, and Branagh's set up is so good that the audience doesn't even care about Claudio's character defects or the implausibility of the match. It's a match made in a literal 'heaven', and the audience enjoys seeing it succeed.

Branagh's fairytale *Much Ado* is about as different from Joss Whedon's as can be. Joss Whedon's *Much Ado* was extremely low budget. He filmed the movie in about two weeks in his own home, funding its production himself. It has a cast of actors who had worked with Whedon before including Amy Acker, Nathan Fillion, Alexis Denisof, and Clark Gregg. It's a group project compared to Branagh's extravaganza. A low budget isn't always a bad thing, however. It meant that Whedon didn't have to please an audience to get a return on investment. He could do practically whatever he wanted with the play, even if his choices might make the play appear distasteful. Instead of trying to smooth over *Much Ado*'s unconventionality, he embraces it. He makes no attempt to explain Hero and Claudio's love story.

To begin with, the entire setting is bizarre. His version of *Much Ado* is black and white, giving it an early forties *His Girl Friday* feel. But the characters use modern pieces of technology, including phones and iPads. The characters also wear business suits and dresses that aren't

modern but aren't from an era like the forties. The setting is a blend of different times and eras that do not mesh well together. Whedon also makes no attempt to explain who exactly Don Pedro, Benedict, and Claudio are. They come to Leonato's house having won a 'war', but they pull up in limos with their captives bound with zip-ties. What war did they just come from? Are they even soldiers? What's with the zip ties? These questions practically scream themselves at the audience. Once Shakespeare's plot is ripped from the realm of Italian city states—where mercenary warfare was a common way to social climb and where extended stays at acquaintances' houses was normal—explaining needs to be done. Whedon doesn't explain, though. He simply lets the audience continue with a feeling of vague uneasiness that something is off in this black and white movie with iPads.

The actors who play Hero and Claudio aren't conventionally attractive either. Fran Kanz, who portrays Claudio, and Jillian Morges, who plays Hero, are not ugly by any means. They look like normal people, not the sort who dash off into a whirlwind spontaneous courtship. Hero barely speaks a word before Claudio decides he wants to marry her. Claudio's decision would only make sense if Hero were truly a dazzling beauty. A Hero who captures a man's attention without uttering a word would have to practically ooze feminine charm and beauty. Jillian Morges doesn't, not in the way she holds herself, in the way she dresses, or in the way she moves. The first time Claudio sees Hero, she's washing dishes. Nothing screams romantic like a little menial labor.

Whedon has his characters constantly drink alcohol. They drink when they're angry, they drink when they're happy, and they drink when they're plotting. They even have martinis when

they are snorkeling in a lake while moping about losing their girl to another man. No, that doesn't happen in Shakespeare. In Shakespeare, Claudio asks his commanding officer to woo Hero for him and then is crushed when he believes Don Pedro wants Hero for himself. It's Whedon's decision to have him mope in the lake, snorkeling, with a martini. The scene is completely bizarre and adds a strange tinge to Hero and Claudio's courtship. The constant imbibing makes it seem like all the characters are intoxicated, and this supposed intoxication could account for all weird behavior in the play, snorkeling scene and all. The ever-present alcohol gives the movie a tipsy feel. In a way, Whedon creates a dream world like Branagh's. His dream world isn't a fairy tale, though. It's an alcohol-induced nonsensical hallucination that hovers on the edge of a nightmare. It truly takes a turn for the nightmarish when Claudio hurls Hero to the ground, denouncing her as a "rotten orange" and rejecting her because of her ruined virginity.¹

Claudio's accusations are completely false and unexpected, for several reasons. Whedon departs from the original Shakespeare and opens his version of *Much Ado* with a one-night stand between Benedict and Beatrice, the other lovers in the play, modernizing the play for the audience. Whedon has Benedict walk out on Beatrice, and Benedict's desertion could account for her bitter hate when she sees Benedict next. It does make Claudio's infuriated tirade about sexual purity seem a bit out of place, however. Whedon never gives the viewer any indication that premarital sex is considered wrong until that point. Of course, Claudio could be mad about Hero's supposed disloyalty, but most of his lines are focused instead on her purity. His furious emphasis

specifically on the loss of her virginity seems like an overreaction.

He also gives her no warning and treats her awfully. His angry accusatory tone, his rough manhandling of Hero, and his complete disregard for all propriety when he publicly accuses her of cheating, leave the audience with a dirty taste in their mouth. But, in a strange way, Whedon has also made Claudio's behavior make logical sense. He has set Claudio and Hero's 'love story' in a peculiar, intoxicated world of clashing tropes where absolutely nothing makes sense. The audience has no expectation that Hero and Claudio's story will either. So, when Hero and Claudio get back together and Claudio makes his apology, declaring that he "sinned not [...] but in mistaking"² and he will marry this mystery girl "even if she were an Ethiopie", the audience isn't even surprised.³ It appears that Claudio is a bigot who can't even apologize properly. His and Hero's love story is another bizarre part of a movie that has shown time and time again that it is not afraid to be bizarre. The ending doesn't

feel happy, but a 'happy ending' isn't an expectation that Whedon sets up for the audience.

Both Whedon and Branagh make Claudio and Hero's love story make sense in their own way. Branagh serves up Claudio and Hero's relationship expertly, cleverly manipulating the audience into forgetting that Claudio is despicable and that Hero should have thanked her lucky stars when their first wedding goes south. The audience can sit back and laugh and feel happy inside when the marriage turns out well. Meanwhile, Whedon acknowledges that *Much Ado* is a strange play. He makes no attempt to apologize and exhibits *Much Ado's* oddity unashamedly. He challenges the audience to make sense of the bizarre story he's given to them and to manage their discomfort with the ending. They differ in audience engagement but still account for Claudio and Hero's absurd behavior. As to which is better? It's really a question of liking a whimsical romantic comedy or a bizarre fiasco that somehow ends at the altar.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 4.1.31.

2. Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.1.258–59.

3. Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.4.38.

A Different Lens

A Meditation on After Life

Khoa Nguyen

I had been searching for a film to watch then. I had not been asking for much; I had just wanted a contemplative Japanese film. So I ran a search for Japanese films on the Criterion Collection's database — which turned up more film options than I cared to sort through.

I revised my search then. I searched for films made by Hirokazu Kore-eda, because it had been his work — particularly *Still Walking* — that had led me to love Japanese films in the first place. I had loved the gentle motion with which his stories moved. When the results came up, there were only two films —and one of them was *Still Walking*. The other was *After Life*.

In his essay "*After Life*: In Memoriam," writer Viet Thanh Nguyen considers how *After Life* delightfully defies Hollywood film conventions in being "understated in tone and design." As Nguyen goes on to explain: "The Hollywood version would probably involve a soaring orchestral score, exaggerated emotions, and an explanation of the mechanics of the premise" — not to mention a speed that rushes from plot point to plot point.¹ But *After Life* denies us all this. It leaves questions unanswered, slows down, comes to rest. It is content with what is quiet.

At the beginning of the film, we find ourselves at a run-down facility. Its staff are informed that they will handle twenty-two people this week. Soon, we have a shot of the facility's entrance: a curtain of fog, through which people emerge, check in with a receptionist, then wait in a lobby where they merrily chat with others. A young

staff member appears to announce the conference rooms to which each person is assigned.

A knock at the door of a conference room. "Yes, please come in," says a staff member, and the door opens to reveal a charming old woman. She hangs up her hat and coat on a rack next to the door, then bows and takes a seat at the table in the middle of the room. Sunlight gently illuminates her smiling face.

After confirming the woman's name, birthdate, and age, the staff member in front of her falls silent. "I think you understand the situation," he finally says, "but I need to inform you officially. Kimiko Tataru..." Another pause. "You died yesterday."²

The camera flicks through the faces of the twenty-two dead as they calmly receive the news. A wide span of ages are present (from a young schoolgirl to an elderly woman) as are personalities (from a rebellious, wild-haired young man to a prim businessman). There is a prostitute, and a man who indulges in prostitutes; a pilot, a World War II Veteran.

They are told that, over the next three days, they must choose their happiest memory from their past life. After they have chosen, the staff will recreate that memory on film using actors, props, a set. The dead will take nothing but that film with them into eternity.

We begin to sense that the facility is too arbitrary. Why just three days? we might ask.

Why only past memories? Why only one memory? Kore-eda offers no answers, only emphasizing the facility's arbitrariness: at the end of the film, the rules are bent and a memory made after death, experienced in the facility's walls, is chosen.

But if we speak of how the facility arbitrarily sets rules, we should also speak of how the dead arbitrarily, individually choose their memories when the staff could do so for them. (They have the lives of the dead recorded on tape.) Eternity becomes centered around the individual's judgment, which departs from the Christian view that God decides our eternities.

After Life departs even further from the Christian view in its implicit theological framework. "So everyone ends up here?" the rebellious young man exclaims. "Everyone? You mean, whether they were good or bad or whatever, all that stuff about going to hell if you're bad — not true?"³ To which a staff member says yes.

But there are still a couple points of alignment between *After Life* and Christianity. If we consider the rule that only a memory from one's past life can be chosen, this is similar to the Christian belief that we are eternally judged based on our earthly conduct — and nothing else.⁴ In turn, we have the implicit rule in *After Life* that the quality of one's life determines the quality of one's eternity — even if it is not laid out in terms of Heaven and Hell.

Take the prim businessman at the beginning of the film. When asked to reflect on his life in search of a memory, he interrupts: "I really don't want to think about all the things I've done. I have only bad memories."⁵

He looks away from the staff member assigned to him as he says this, gazing absently, resignedly at the table.

If we discuss Heaven and Hell we should, of course, discuss Purgatory. The Catholic conception is that Purgatory is the state in which — though one is definitively assigned to Heaven — one must be purified first of one's sinful desires.⁶ It is an inherently temporary state. Now, Purgatory is comparable to the facility in *After Life* in its temporariness. Somewhat.

The facility is temporary to those who choose to choose a memory. The option to not choose a memory (which almost no one considers, and which is equal in effect to being unable to choose a memory) makes one a staff member, eternally interviewing the dead. Yet this is not a true eternity; should a staff member choose to do so, long after the three-day deadline, they could still ask to leave the facility to spend eternity with their finest memory. Purgatory is inherently temporary; the facility is potentially temporary.

When the three-day deadline has passed and the staff are ready to begin shooting film, two of the dead have not chosen a memory. The rebellious young man has chosen not to choose; an old man in his seventies is unable to choose. The old man slumps against a bench as the young man circles him restlessly.

As the old man does his best to ignore him, the young man chuckles about how the dead have taken pains to look good for the shoot — combing hair, putting on makeup. At the same time, however, he criticizes it. "As you get older," he says, "your looks start to fade. They're trying to compensate for the confidence they don't have."

He thwacks a bamboo branch around.

"They're working so hard to fake it. Which is why the younger generation, like me, makes fun of them."⁷

The old man smiles slightly.

Recreating memories for film in *After Life* makes use of rather crude methods. Clouds are simulated by a painted set and tufts of cotton; the rocking of a tram, by staff shaking a tram model back and forth; falling cherry blossom petals, by silk petals falling out from overhead baskets. Film is just faking it, Kore-eda seems to say.

But is it just filming that is faking? Perhaps not. Life, too, seems to consist in faking — something Kore-eda suggests in other scenes. The prostitute admits to lying about her age by four years when prodded by a staff member. A staff member, losing to another at a game of *shōgi*, pretends to go to the bathroom and conveniently knocks over the *shōgi* pieces. At night, two staff members gaze upwards, captivated by the shining moon. Which is later revealed to be an illusion: it is just light shining through lenses that simulate the moon in its phases.

Even the vision of eternity that Kore-eda presents consists of a kind of pretending. As one of the dead realizes, spending eternity with a happy memory also means that all other memories are forgotten; that one is only aware of happiness. Which departs again from the Christian perspective. Yes, Heaven consists in joy beyond comprehension, but Christ's heavenly body still bears the wounds of His Passion.

Pretending and arbitrariness come together in Kore-eda's eternity as they do in the Venetian Carnival, where Venetians indulge before Lent by partying in masks that delight them. The dead in Kore-eda's eternity could be said to don masks of their own making that are frozen in one memory's smile. This prospect is attractive

for some of the dead, and for good reason — the same reason, I think, that makes the Venetian Carnival so attractive. As Nantas Salvalaggio puts it, one of the great attractions of Carnival consists in how it grants one to escape the limitations, the predicaments of one's identity. In how one can be whomever one desires to be.⁸ One elderly woman in *After Life* barely speaks (if at all) in the film. She scarcely complies with the staff who interview her. She is lost in her own head. Staff members later inform us that she has already been living in her memories since she was nine. At the same time, however, she is not completely detached from reality; instead, she sees reality through the lens of her childhood memories. So we see her wandering on the grounds of the facility, collecting acorns and leaves that please her.

For this old woman, reality is present, just incomplete — like a moon in its crescent phase. This may be what Kore-eda hints towards when the facility's manager remarks: "The moon is fascinating, isn't it? Its shape never changes, yet it looks different depending on the angle of the light."⁹ And yet Kore-eda positively portrays this old woman. He makes her incompleteness beautiful: in one scene, she looks away from a staff member towards the window — entranced by the song of a bird.

This old woman seems to anticipate what it looks like to experience Kore-eda's eternity. She is living in incomplete memories as the dead will. So the question becomes: for the dead, could an incomplete memory also serve as a lens? Could a sliver, a shard of a lens work in a beautiful way?

I think so. Even if the dead spend eternity with an incomplete memory, it is nevertheless their finest, brightest memory. That sliver of a lens that such a memory offers would lead the

dead to contemplate reality's goodness. And perhaps that is what is beautiful: seeing reality's goodness when, in the past, one's eyes could only see the miserable, the humdrum.

I think this concept of incomplete beauty offers an insight into the nature of film. Films are inherently incomplete; making them involves cutting and splicing glimpse after glimpse after glimpse. Yet by this cutting and splicing life is experienced sharper, deeper. Moments that are ordinarily passed over are magnified to make us think again.

This principle, I posit, is central to *After Life*. The dead speak of the finest moments of

their past lives in glimpses: waiting for a lover at a bridge, being bathed in sunlight, soaring between the clouds in a plane. They speak of dancing as a child, of eating rice balls in a bamboo grove. But these memories took place, most of them, on ordinary days; if we had experienced them ourselves, we might have passed over them without a glance, consumed by whatever headache or lack of sleep or looming deadline we had. Yet when the dead cut and splice to such fine moments, we are forced to think again. We come to realize just how wonderful ordinary life can be.

RECLAIMING FILM

Notes

1. Viet Thanh Nguyen, “*After Life*: In Memoriam,” The Criterion Collection, August 10, 2021, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7492-after-life-in-memoriam>.

2. *After Life*, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda (1998; The Criterion Collection, 2021), <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DR3WKXVY/>, 00:04:36.

3. *After Life*, Kore-eda, 00:08:37.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 1021-1022.

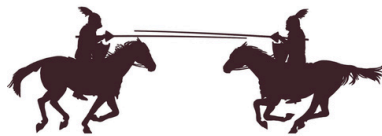
5. *After Life*, Kore-eda, 00:06:35.

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1030, 1472.

7. *After Life*, Kore-eda, 01:14:19.

8. Nantas Salvalaggio, “Nostalgia of Lost Carnivals,” in *The Carnival of Venice*, ed. Gigi Bevilacqua (Milan: Amilcare Pizzi Editore, 1984), 30.

9. *After Life*, Kore-eda, 01:11:34.



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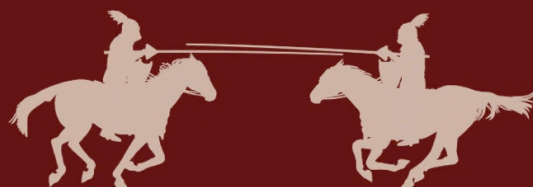
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