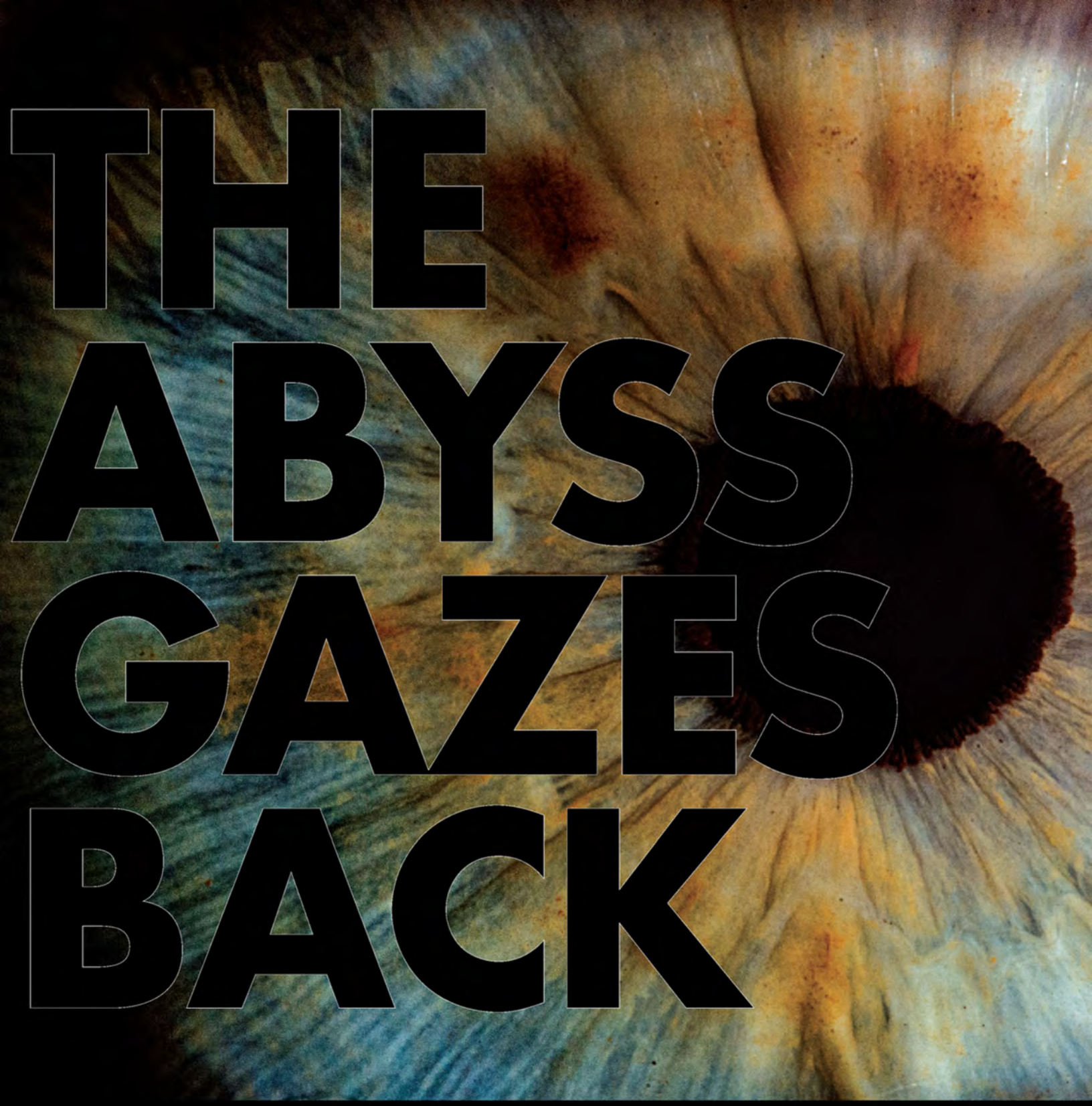

Twenty-Eighth Annual
Thematic Option Research Conference

April 23 and 24, 2025

www.usc.edu/thematicoption

USC Dornsife
Dana and David Dornsife
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster.
And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

One mustn't look at the abyss, because there is at the bottom an inexpressible charm which attracts us.
—Gustave Flaubert

When you look into the abyss, it's not supposed to wave back.
—Terry Pratchett, *Thief of Time*

Who watches the watchmen?
—Juvenal

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power;
he makes them play spontaneously upon himself;
he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles;
he becomes the principle of his own subjection.
—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

The only thing I feel to be really mine is a huge incapacity, a vast emptiness, an incompetence for everything that is life.
I don't know the gestures for any real act… I never learned how to exist.
—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.
—Joseph Campbell

A monster is a person who has stopped pretending.
—Colson Whitehead

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos.
—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Beyond the edge of the world there's a space where emptiness and substance neatly overlap,
where past and future form a continuous, endless loop.
And, hovering about, there are signs no one has ever read, chords no one has ever heard.
—Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change.
—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.
—Maya Angelou, *Letter to My Daughter*

It's quite an undertaking to start loving somebody. You have to have energy, generosity, blindness.
There is even a moment right at the start where you have to jump across an abyss: if you think about it you don't do it.
—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

I knew what love was supposed to be: obsession with undertones of nausea.
—Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*

We have no reason to harbor any mistrust against our world, for it is not against us. If it has terrors, they are our terrors;
if it has abysses, these abysses belong to us; if there are dangers, we must try to love them…
How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races,
the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses?
Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage.
Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.
—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

The Thematic Option Honors Program, part of the USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, is the University of Southern California's honors general education alternative: an interdisciplinary program marked by academic rigor that encourages exciting and vibrant discussion within its community. Each year, approximately 200 outstanding freshmen from a wide variety of majors participate in its unique combination of core courses, writing classes, tutorials, and events.

The Thematic Option conference provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to enrich their academic experience by publicly presenting their ideas and research. In response to a general call for papers, Thematic Option students developed topics under this year's theme, The Abyss Gazes Back, to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of up to five students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question-and-answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include watching and being watched; the panopticon; the observer effect; nakedness; dreams and nightmares; the mind and mindfulness; self-reflection; mirroring; mortality; fascination and obsession; existence and essence; nothingness, emptiness, and nonbeing; depth, limitlessness, and the unfathomable; strangers; monsters; demons, personal or otherwise; corruption; awakening; evolution and revolution; transformation and transcendence; obscurity, weirdness, and the uncanny; interdependence and mutual shaping; righteousness and the greater good; ends and means; infinite regress; folly; despair; provocation; war and crisis; bravery; voyaging and exploration; or the student's own unique interpretation.

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keynote speaker
Professor Roberto Díaz

Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures & Comparative Literature

Professor Díaz researches Latin American literary and cultural history with a focus on transatlantic relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He has previously published on the topic of multilingualism in Spanish American literature and on the work of Jorge Luis Borges. His most recent book, *Latin America and the Transports of Opera: Fragments of a Transatlantic Discourse,* examines a series of episodes in the historical and textual convergence of a hallowed art form and a part of the world often regarded as peripheral. Perhaps unexpectedly, Díaz discovers how the archives of opera generate new arguments about several issues at the heart of the established discussion about Latin America: the allure of European cultural models; the ambivalence of exoticism; the claims of nationalism and cosmopolitanism; and, ultimately, the place of the region in the global circulation of the arts.

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Many thanks to the faculty and staff who have played an integral role in the success of the Thematic Option Research Conference.

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Professor Roberto Díaz

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Building Character

Moderated by Professor Béatrice Mousli
Department of French and Italian

Wednesday, April 23
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Carnegie

Reese Oberkfell

The Homme Fatal:
Empowering Feminization and Subordination in *Gilda*

Can a man be a femme fatale? Charles Vidor's *Gilda* has long existed as a classic film noir. While Rita Hayworth's portrayal of Gilda exemplifies what many view as an iconic femme fatale, I argue that the film presents a second femme fatale: the witty—and bitchy—Johnny Farrell. By analyzing Johnny's parallels to the character of Gilda and looking at his feminized traits, I argue that Johnny utilizes his feminization and subordination under Ballin to create his own luck through a paradoxical self-empowerment that manipulates the patriarchy to empower himself as a feminine man. I analyze Johnny's effeminate nature through a lens of bitchiness inspired by Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud and Simon Reader's theories about the importance of bitchiness to queer culture. In doing so, I contribute to the scholarly conversation around the importance of Johnny's femininity and his ambiguous sexuality. Additionally, I explore how Johnny's and Gilda's shared strategy of gaining power as femmes fatales differs from the typical reinforcement of masculine agency presented by noir films, showing how *Gilda* presents feminized traits like passivity and emotion as paradoxically powerful. The boundaries of the femme fatale label are notoriously exclusive, but I believe Johnny Farrell checks all the boxes.

Anastasia Papadopoulos

Everybody's Talkin':
Joe Buck as the Embodiment of New York City

If your city had a heartbeat, would it match the rhythm of your own? John Schlesinger's film *Midnight Cowboy* follows small-town Texan Joe Buck as he prostitutes himself to the immense populace of 1960s New York City. Although common interpretation claims that Joe is a victim of New York City's false ideals of success, power, and a prosperous American Dream, Joe is not reflective of his rural, naive origin. Instead, Joe Buck embodies New York City. He transcends his role as a sexual object, and instead occupies the role of an urban icon. In analyzing New York City's depiction of commercialism and self-commodification through the iconography of its architecture, advertisements, and hustlers, this paper will explore how Joe's unconscious desires for power and success betray his roots and make him synonymous with the city. Through his costume, his hustling endeavors, and his struggles with sexual power as a fetishistic fantasy made to be sold, Joe Buck *is* New York City.

Danica Pham

***Soul Food*:**
"Food is never just something to eat"

Scholar Michael Jones wrote, "The very act of eating conveys meanings." This quote is pertinent to understanding the use of character development in the 1997 film *Soul Food*, specifically that of Teri. Scholarship surrounding *Soul Food* emphasizes how the film showcases food as a tool for familial bonding, but it doesn't consider the role Teri plays in instigating conflict in the film. In the beginning of *Soul Food*, Teri, a high-achieving yet emotionally isolated member of the Joseph family, frequently instigates conflict between other characters, which portrays her as the film's villain. But, by examining key scenes involving her limited engagement with food—ranging from her aggressive food preparation to her refusal to eat during moments of familial conflict—my essay explores how Teri's obsession with career success and financial control limits her capacity for emotional intimacy. As a result, *Soul Food* subverts audience's expectations by presenting Teri as a complex character whose flaws are rooted in her flawed perception of self-worth instead of a mere antagonist. Ultimately, Teri's interactions with food serve as a metaphor for her internal struggles and estrangement from the communal values embodied by her family.

Shristuti Srirapu

Ship Happens:
The Kantian and Hindu Sublime in the film *Ship of Theseus*

If you were to get an organ transplant, would you still be the same person? Physically, this is a difficult question to answer, but emotionally, more so. This is what the three characters in *Ship of Theseus* must contend with after their transplants, all set in the context of some greater moral dilemma. The film explores each character's sublime journey, emotional upheaval, and subsequent transformation. The sublime has been defined by many, but most famously by Kant as an experience in which one confronts some great power or vastness from a distance. By only using this definition, however, the sublime may not be easily discernible within the film. I argue that the characters are also experiencing the Hindu sublime, where the soul becomes one with the infinite, losing all worldly attachments to gain an indescribable acceptance of reality. Through my analysis of the film's artistic and character decisions, I will evaluate the presence of the Hindu sublime alongside the Kantian, showcasing the indefiniteness of human experience and the importance of integration. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that the most subliminal part of the sublime lies in its definition: it simply cannot be defined.

Kaitlyn Sulivan-Pascual

Love or Duty:
A Feminist Examination of Sexuality and Career in the Tragedy of *Mata Hari*

Should a woman choose her career or marriage and a nuclear family? This is the contentious question of feminism today, and it calls for the reflection that true feminism lies not in what choice women make, but rather that they are given a fair choice in the first place. The film *Mata Hari* follows a woman torn between love and duty, ultimately paying the price for her double life. Mata Hari is a spy for the Germans during World War I. She is cold and detached, using her sexuality to seduce military officials for information. However, she falls for a lieutenant, and only after she chooses love over her spy work is Mata doomed to a tragic fate—an unfair ultimatum to say the least. *Mata Hari* is overlooked by scholars and written off as stereotypical due to its sexualization of Mata. This work goes further and considers the nuance of feminist theory including psychosexual constructs and female autonomy in career. The duality of Mata's redemption when she chooses to "settle down" with a good man and the female masochism she endures because of her choice reflects society's patriarchal schemas for women and misogynistic fears and desires. The choice is love or duty: Must she give up one for the other, and will she be punished either way?

Changing Perspectives

Wednesday, April 23
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Gutenberg

Moderated by Professor Julie Van Dam
Departments of French and Italian & Gender and Sexuality Studies

Chris Apy

The Art of Living in a Van:
What to Do When Things Go South in *Nomadland*

When living in a van, you are on your own. You pee in buckets, park in a new spot every night, and the worst part: no WiFi. If your van breaks down, your entire life grinds to a halt. *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao, captures the raw experience of the modern nomad, a lifestyle predominantly chosen by individuals often in financial distress, living out of vans or other vehicles. Given this context, many scholars analyze the film through the lens of economic precarity and social displacement. However, I argue that *Nomadland* is much more than a story of survival. It is a film that presents a philosophy of intentional, self-sufficient living that we can all learn from. Modern nomads reject conventional stability in favor of a deeper truth: Fulfillment is not found in material success but in the adaptability and wisdom one gets out of the ability to be as free as possible. By defining happiness through Aristotle's Theory of Eudaimonia, examining nomadism as a philosophical outlet, and analyzing *Nomadland*, I will explain why van life can be an intentional path to true happiness, and how it challenges us to reevaluate what it really means to live well.

Isaac W. Chan

Mephistopheles and the Rabbit:
Postwar Japanese Westernization in Kurosawa's *Ikiru*

Today, Japan is known for its clean, cutting-edge modernity, illustrious traditions, and a flavor of pop culture that has taken the world by storm. All this, however, arose from a very different world: one left in ruins by the fall of the Empire of the Rising Sun. Director Akira Kurosawa—an ambassador of Japan's global, artistic influence—was among many left to sort out this world. His film *Ikiru* is not just the story of Mr. Watanabe, a man forced by his terminal illness to confront his past, but the story of a nation obligated to face its history before moving forward. This paper examines Kurosawa's juxtaposition of Western images and narratives with those of pre-Meiji Japan. For instance, by inverting Christian narratives and reappropriating Buddhist imagery, Kurosawa criticizes the complacency of his era, whether it be to imperialism or democratization. Through Watanabe's journey in *Ikiru*, Kurosawa posits guilt, grief, introspection, and recognition of humanity in oneself and others as constituting the only honorable future for his people.

Zachary Gray

Inescapable Violence Through the Lens of Predetermined Fate in *The Shining*

Can cycles of violence ever truly end? How much blame lies within the individuals who suffer from generational trauma and fail to break these cycles? Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* largely revolves around the abusive relationship between Jack, his wife Wendy, and their son, Danny. Jack's treatment of his family and eventual descent into madness serves as a chilling allegory for domestic violence and generational trauma. The Overlook Hotel's haunted past and ghostly occupants symbolize the inescapability of unresolved pain across generations. While Wendy represents the resilience needed to escape, Danny's use of his "shining" represents the keen sense of awareness and intelligence of the past and present necessary to break free from destructive cycles. Literary critics debate Jack's culpability: Richard T. Jameson characterizes Jack as the typical abuser, while Frank Manchel comes to his defense as an innocent man. Kubrick critiques both individual failings and the societal and historical systems in place that enable repeated violence to continue. In this research project, I will argue that escaping cycles of violence is immensely challenging, but not impossible.

Rigel Gruberg

Death Is Life:
How *The Fountain* Establishes the Immanent Sublime

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposes an alternative conceptualization of reality called immanence where everything that exists is part of one greater unity or oneness, constantly flowing and in the process of becoming. Unfortunately, there has been exceedingly little literature connecting this idea to the sublime and its overarching philosophical discourse. In this paper, I present the concept of an "immanent sublime" through thematic analysis of Darren Aronofsky's 2006 film *The Fountain*. *The Fountain* tells three interlacing narratives set in three separate time periods with the protagonists of each being played by the same actors, Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz. It becomes clear that all three timelines are spiritual manifestations of the present day protagonist, Thomas. Each timeline's final objective and resolution ultimately represent Thomas's acceptance of life's true nature as an immanent, ever-flowing field of potentialities. He accepts death and transformation as an integral aspect of this cycle instead of trying to cure death and lock reality within stasis. Perhaps by unlocking the core truth behind this film's climactic sublime moment, we too can find out how to live forever.

Zara Khan

A Golden Glow:
The Erasure of Suburban Critique in Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*

Golden streets, golden hair, golden sun: the 1970 Detroit suburbs are lit aglow in Sofia Coppola's 2000 film adaptation of Jeffery Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*. The story centers around five teenage sisters who all turn to suicide. Both book and movie are told from the perspective of a group of neighborhood boys as they come together in their adulthood to reflect on their adolescence and unpack the mystery of the girls' decisions to end their lives. While *The Virgin Suicides* is a novel focused on the experiences of the white Lisbon family and the surrounding, predominantly white, Detroit suburbs, Eugenides still examines the exclusionary racial issues that lie on the periphery of suburban environments, such as segregation and racialized labor. However, Coppola's film adaptation departs from this idea. Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* is often analyzed by scholars for its employment of hazy and ethereal aesthetics to romanticize the Lisbon sisters through the gaze of desire. However, critics fail to discuss how these aesthetics also serve to romanticize the suburban landscape in a way that not only alters Jeffery Eugenides' critical perspective but also engages in a cultural whitewashing of suburbia, erasing the racial critiques that Eugenides subtly weaves into the novel.

If Memory Serves

Wednesday, April 23
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
North

Moderated by Professor Alexandre Roberts
Department of Classics & Van Hunnick Department of History

Lauren Chen

A Tale of Desire:
The Imprisoned Past in Nabokov's *Lolita*

I think this man is suffering from memories.
—Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*

Memory is a fickle thing. It is real, but not tangible. That person, that place, that feeling existed once in the past; now, only in your mind. But what if you could relive your memories? Picture this: A young, rich boy vacationing on the French Riviera for the summer meets a young girl. He is easily bewitched by her innocent and youthful beauty. On the precipice of realizing his desires, her sudden death leaves him wallowing in unfulfillment. He spends the next twenty-four years in mental hospitals until he stumbles upon her twelve-year old incarnation, a picture perfect replica, the physical manifestation of his memory. As you may infer, he dramatically falls in love once more, this time never to let go. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* explores the bewitching power of memory in Humbert Humbert's quest to fulfill his strange, pedophilic desires, born from his lost childhood love. In my paper, I examine Humbert's twisted definition of love as heavily reliant on self-serving ideals, which leads him to imprisonment in a personally crafted utopia until he emerges from his daze and realizes his tragic fate.

Serena Luo

The Subjectively Objective:
Exploring Time and Memory in *Waiting for Godot*

They give birth astride of the grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.
—Pozzo, *Waiting for Godot*

How do we comprehend the world in a vacuum without order or meaning? Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* stages this question through Vladimir and Estragon's endless and uncertain wait for Godot, resisting resolution or progression. Embodying Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett's play rejects traditional dramatic structure and defies the linearity of time and memory. My paper first explores how time and memory are expressed in more nuanced forms through shifting textures of temporality and a fragmented forgetfulness that erodes the characters' sense of being. In addition, I will investigate the collapsed boundary between the subjective and the objective: time is shaped by perception, while subjectivity relies on interaction with the external world, as seen when Estragon obtains meaning through the physicality of a carrot. While scholars like D.E. Morse and B. Casey have addressed geometric time and memory loss, this paper extends the conversation by shedding light on how *Waiting for Godot* destabilizes reality itself, dismantling the dichotomy between inner experience and outer structure.

Kylie Monterosso

Comfort Food:
Nostalgia and Progressivism in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

This book is so much fun it makes me sick I missed the Depression.
—Erma Bombeck on *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

Can progressive literature be nostalgic for the past? Is it appropriate for a story highlighting the injustices of Great Depression-era Alabama to make the time period sound to readers like "so much fun?" Fannie Flagg's 1986 novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* was largely received as charmingly heartwarming despite its depiction of racial segregation, sexual violence, and severe poverty. Flagg achieves this paradoxical dichotomy by assigning these atrocities not to the prevailing culture of the setting, but to a single, uncomplex villain. Although scholarship surrounding the novel largely regards it as progressive because its protagonists subvert the social norms of their time

regarding race and sexuality, I argue that the compartmentalization of systemic injustice into individual characters ultimately limits its potential as a radical text. By framing history as a reassuringly binarized battle between good and evil, Flagg can generate nostalgia while avoiding any indictment of the past. As a result, the novel serves as little more than comfort food, not asking readers to question or challenge but instead inviting them to indulge.

Eleanor Jane Smith

Beyond the Invasion Narrative:
Memory, Time, and the Alien Other in *Arrival*

Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* is a subversion of the traditional alien invasion narrative in science fiction cinema. Rather than framing extraterrestrial contact as an existential threat, *Arrival* reimagines the encounter as an opportunity for cognitive and emotional transformation. The film shifts the focus from fear of the other—a non-human, isolated entity—to using the alien arrival to dissolve cultural and ideological divisions. Engaging with Duncan Norris's Lovecraftian interpretation and Stephen Scobie's trauma-centered analysis, this paper contends that *Arrival* ultimately decenters the alien presence, positioning non-linear memory as both a narrative and thematic device. In doing so, the film reframes memory not as a source of trauma but as a tool for reconciliation and empathy. By privileging communication over conflict, *Arrival* offers a reimagining of the alien genre—one that uses science fiction to promote understanding and connection.

Shrinidhi Sriram

Speaking into the Silence:
Machado's Genre Hybridity and Narratives of Queer Abuse

You think you know how stories work. They begin, they build, they end. But what if they don't? What if they splinter, fold in on themselves, shift genres like slipping between rooms in a haunted house? *In the Dream House* does just that. Carmen Maria Machado doesn't just recount her experience of queer domestic abuse, she warps the form itself and forces readers to navigate the same disorientation, fear, and entrapment that she endured. I argue that she embeds her deeply personal story within established literary traditions, such as Gothic fairytales, to bridge the gap between the familiar and the silenced and challenge the limits of belief. Drawing on Chloe R. Green's ideas of literary fragmentation, I also explore how Machado's structural choices act as both testimony and cultural intervention, demanding recognition of overlooked realities. Welcome to the *Dream House*. You might not leave unchanged.

Me, Myself, and You

Wednesday, April 23
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Scriptorium

Moderated by Professor Roberto Díaz
Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures & Comparative Literature

Garrett Hartfelder

No Love Except Big Brother:
Family Under the Boot in *1984*

What would you do if your children begged you to see a hanging? For all of the attention paid by scholars like Blu Tirhol and Thomas Horan to the power of sexuality to threaten rebellion in the hyper-totalitarian landscape of *1984*, scholars neglect another key relationship to the human experience: the parent-child relationship. Indeed, in the Party's quest for there to be "No love, except for the love of Big Brother," scholars observe that love or desire for a partner threatens that goal, which is why the party strictly controls sexuality. But love for a parent or child threatens that goal the same way, which is why the party controls the family as well. My paper explores this through the Parsons family. After all, why is the father of this family proud of his daughter for turning him into the Thought Police? Why are his children so eager to see public executions and rat out suspected traitors? By consulting literature on sexual politics and surveillance in *1984*, my paper answers these questions. By conditioning parents into loving their children in state-sanctioned terms and indoctrinating children into becoming militant spies, the party turns the parent-child relationship into its own surveillance network.

Alexandra King

Food as the Key *out of* Someone's Heart:
Food's Symbolism in *Soul Food*

"Soul food [is]...all about..express[ing] our love for one another." It's not just Ahmad from George Tillman, Jr.'s *Soul Food* who believes this. For a long time, it's been understood that food unites family, friends, and people from all walks of life. Food can heal wounds, create bonds, and warm the heart and soul. Despite this general consensus, *Soul Food* flips the script and explores how food can divide a family rather than bring it together. According to scholars of African-American history, food itself, and the film *Soul Food*, can divide people in different economic brackets and make for domineering women who thrive on conflict. Even loss, when associated with food, can push a family further apart rather than unite them in their grief. By using family meals and cultural food to frame arguments and disputes within the Joseph family, Tillman Jr. shows that food divides the family in *Soul Food* and pushes them further and further apart.

Molly Nugent

"Two throats and one eye":
Nel's Fragmented Self in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

What happens when your deepest human bond is not romantic, but a psychic mirror—one that both reflects your secret desires and shatters your sense of self? Toni Morrison's *Sula* captures the haunting intensity of such a bond through the relationship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace. Their connection goes beyond friendship, entering the territory of identity formation and emotional dependency. While much of the existing scholarship interprets their relationship through symbolic or psychoanalytic models, this essay takes a different approach: using Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage theory and concept of the "other" to argue that Sula functions as both a reflection and a rupture in Nel's identity. Drawing on close reading and Lacanian theory, I explore how Morrison constructs Sula as the external image through which Nel first recognizes herself. Throughout the novel, Morrison invites us to rethink not only the nature of female friendship, but the very foundation of selfhood. What happens when the mirror disappears? What kind of self is left behind?

Anyi Tan

To Speak or Not to Speak:
Rethinking Responses to Trauma in Machado's *In the Dream House*

Silence is the means by which the weak remain weak and the strong remain strong.
—Naomi Alderman, *Disobedience*

Traditionally associated with feelings of shame and submission, silence is often viewed as a symbol representing a lack of empowerment. This perception of silence gave rise to the mainstream understanding of speech as a critical step in healing from trauma. But what happens when the costs of speech outweigh the benefits? Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House,* provides the perfect opportunity to explore this question. Most scholars have interpreted Machado's work as a testimonial illustrating the importance of speaking up, framing silence as oppressive and speech as the ultimate form of empowerment. This paper challenges the conventional speech-over-silence narrative by exploring how Machado's experience as a queer woman of color influences the way she navigates abuse. By applying an intersectional lens to trauma theory, I demonstrate how her silence actually functions as a strategy for survival as well as a subtle protest against her abuser. Through reconsideration of silence not as surrender but as strength, this paper pushes for a deeper understanding of how trauma survivors, especially those from marginalized communities, cope in hostile environments.

Tim (Han) Zhou

Beyond Good and Bad:
The Fluidity and Performativity of Identity in *Infernal Affairs*

A policeman or a gangster? A hero or a villain? Crime action thrillers traditionally draw lines between good and bad. *Infernal Affairs*, directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, shatters the traditional crime thriller binary of morality by presenting the two protagonists, Lau Kin-ming (Lau) and Chan Wing-yan (Yan), who live double lives on both sides. While many scholars believe Yan represents justice and Lau embodies villainy, I contend that their identities transcend good and bad. Instead, identities are fluid and contingent on the situations; one, in reality, could embody virtue and vice simultaneously. To show this, I will analyze the functioning of policemen and gangsters in Hong Kong's cultural context and rectify the pre-existing moral ideology of what makes one good or bad. Sometimes, a cop hides in a police uniform. Sometimes, a cop lurks in the shadows. And sometimes, one man is both. Drawing from ethical individualism, Buddhist thought, and Hong Kong's cultural landscape, I will dismantle conventional moral binaries and reveal both characters' complex identities as fluid and performative while sharing the common interest of individual flourishing.

Power Trip

Wednesday, April 23
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
South

Moderated by Professor Lydie Moudileno
Departments of French and Italian, American Studies and Ethnicity, & Comparative Literature

Choo En Ting

The Death of God and the Horror of Self-Apotheosis in *Heart of Darkness*

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n
—John Milton, "Paradise Lost"

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead." What constituted the cornerstone of European morality had been demolished, leaving a gaping hole to be filled. While Nietzsche suggested self-apotheosis to be the answer for this existential predicament, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* actualizes this suggestion through the character of Kurtz, a civilized "prodigy" turned abysmal demon. Many scholars such as Chinua Achebe and Edward Said have predominantly analyzed the racist and imperialist aspects of *Heart of Darkness,* citing it as representative of the deeply prejudicial sentiments of Conrad's time. However, insufficient attention has been given to perhaps this most monumental declaration of the nineteenth century and how the novella responds to it. To give voice to this scholarly gap, I argue that Kurtz's degeneration into a maniacal, violent savage is a result of his unimpeded desire to become a god, and once all restraints and encumbrances are removed, so emerges his heart of darkness. In an increasingly secular age where the self is elevated to the status of the divine, *Heart of Darkness* illuminates the devastating consequences of this view when taken too far and begs the question: Are human beings capable of becoming their own gods?

Margaret Honoria Danenhauer

Slaying the Queer Villain:
A Lesbian Feminist Approach to *Fun Home*

It is often said that hurt people hurt people. One might equally say that queer people queer people. Which is to say, queerness is forged through the process of naming and identifying. One queer person naming themselves as such therefore facilitates the queerness of others. But what about when hurt people…queer people? The queer community has long struggled with questions of how to interrogate both the real and perceived crimes of its community members. Historically, this has been enacted and co-opted problematically through attempting to "reclaim" negative or villainous connotations of queerness, or via defending queer abusers under the lens of shielding civil rights. Using a lesbian feminist and anti-rape lens, I will analyze how *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel uses questions of "queer villainy" to deconstruct topics of abuse, gender, gender presentation, and heteronormativity. Bechdel illustrates practices of naming and reclaiming queerness that reject monolithic positive or negative ideas of the community, and presents how queer people can participate in dominant discourse without reaffirming harmful behaviors.

Wren Dudney

The Hungriest Caterpillar:
How American Appetite for Conquest Defines Sublimity in Annie Dillard's "Total Eclipse"

From the time of this nation's conception, Americans have confused a desire to appreciate nature with a desire to consume it. They define nature in material terms in order to conquer it. But occasionally, one is forced to rethink this approach by experiencing nature's sublimity, which Kant describes as its formless quality. In the 1982 essay "Total Eclipse," Annie Dillard undergoes an out-of-body experience that forces her to recognize the sublimity of an eclipse. Her sense of time and place is momentarily shattered. Scholars like Maxcy argue that this experience is transformational, allowing Dillard to reenter reality with a newfound sense of perspective. But I believe the opposite is true. When the eclipse is over, Dillard is disenchanted until someone compares the phenomenon's appearance to a Life Saver candy. This simple comparison reaffirms her belief that inexplicable phenomena can be reduced to material items. Dillard doesn't develop any appreciation for the sublime, instead only becoming more convinced of the notion that nature is meant to be consumed. Fundamentally, Dillard's experience illustrates that the nation's relationship with nature will never escape its deep connection to consumption.

Dayton Goslin

Romantic Fantasies and the Tragedy of "Love" in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*

If you have read any number of historical romance novels, or more specifically, novels that fall under the Modern Gothic sub-genre as defined by Joanna Russ, you have probably read Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. At the very least, the structure will be uncannily familiar. A naive, innocent Heroine is swept off her feet by the wealthy, stoic, and mysterious Super-Male, but their love is impeded by the presence (living or otherwise) of the heroine's enviable double, a similar yet more promiscuous and sinister Other Woman. This formula's similarities to *Rebecca* are no coincidence, as *Rebecca* is often credited as the progenitor of this sub-genre alongside Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Yet *Rebecca* feels dissonant compared with many of the stories that arose in its wake, which are largely romance stories intent on fulfilling a fantasy where the heroines and heroes get their reward of love and a happily ever after. Can the ending of *Rebecca* truly be considered a happily ever after? Certainly, its narrator wants us to believe so, but can we trust the rose-tinted lens through which she depicts her past? Or did we get swept up in the fantasy she so desperately wants to believe, despite her and her husband's crimes?

Raphael Espiritu Rivera

***Akira*'s Primordial God:**
Japan's Agonized Response to The West

How would you construct the image of a god? Widely regarded as a seminal work of cyberpunk, *Akira* is often praised for its iconic metropolitan visuals and imagined technologies. But *Akira* distinguishes itself from other works of cyberpunk through its unique use of psychokinetic powers. Instead of relying on advanced technology, these psychokinetics manipulate minds, communicate telepathically, and cause things to explode. While much of the surrounding scholarship addresses the meanings of Tetsuo and the city of Neo-Tokyo, little attention is paid to the god in the movie: Akira. By analyzing the film and Japanese history I will investigate the duality of Akira: an atomic threat and a messiah housed in the body of a Japanese boy. I will argue that this primordial god gives us a unique insight into Japanese identity: how Japan's transition toward modernity—through a series of violent conflicts with the West—complicated the formation of a national identity, and how Akira's duality as both destroyer and messiah attempts to resolve this anxiety by obliterating Tokyo.

Brace for Impact

Wednesday, April 23
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Carnegie

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp
Department of English

Charlotte Dixon

Plagues, Power, and Penetration:
Fear of the Foreign in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

I am all in a sea of wonders.
I doubt; I fear; I think strange things, which I dare not confess to my own soul.
—Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

What does it mean to let the foreign in? Bram Stoker's *Dracula* invites us to confront this unsettling question as he weaves the fears of infection and cultural invasion throughout his novel. I will focus on Count Dracula, a Transylvanian vampire whose bite serves as a metaphor for the spread of foreign influence: diseases, customs, and ideologies that threaten to infiltrate and destabilize British society. I will explore how the seemingly separate fears of contagion and cultural infiltration are deeply intertwined, as Dracula reflects Victorian anxieties about exposure to the "other" and the nuanced boundaries of "acceptable" foreignness. While Dracula represents the ultimate foreign threat, Dutchman Van Helsing—through sharing his knowledge of science and superstition to fight the Count—is embraced as an ally. Ultimately, *Dracula* is more than a horror story; it's an exploration of how Victorian society grappled with the intrusion of the unfamiliar, and a question of how much we are willing to accept before the foreign becomes a threat.

Jiwoo Kim

The Sixth Day:
The End of Human Dominion in *The Turin Horse*

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The biblical creation narrative describes a six-day formation of the universe, culminating in humanity's divine mandate to "subdue" the Earth. But what weight does this command hold in the wake of God's death? Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* reverses the Genesis narrative in the context of Nietzsche's Death of God to portray an "antigenesis": a slow decay of the world in the absence of divine order. Set over six days, Tarr's film follows a man, his daughter, and their horse as they perform their monotonous routine on a desolate plain. With each day, there is a new sign of ecological refusal: the horse resists work, the well runs dry, and darkness consumes their world. The narrative denies the humans of *The Turin Horse* the fruits of their supposed dominion, positioning nature in passive resistance—death rather than submission. Through its nihilating cinematography and subversive anthropocentric narrative, Tarr's film warns against humanity's arrogant assumed authority over nature. In this sense, *The Turin Horse* becomes a meditation on the Anthropocene, depicting humanity's slow death in a world that, worn down by exploitation, refuses to sustain it.

Calder Randolph

Illuminating the Divine:
Light and Transcendence in *Stalker*

There is always light at the end of the tunnel. Even in Andrei Tarkovsky's sorrowful, enigmatic *Stalker*—with a nearly apocalyptic setting, broken characters, and unnerving cinematography—suffering ultimately loses to hope. The 1979 Russian film follows a "stalker" who leads two deliriously discontent men seeking fulfillment, a writer and a professor, through a wonderful and dangerous wasteland. True to Tarkovsky's belief that art must be steeped in spiritual truth, the film navigates the relation of hope and suffering, incorporating religious (mainly Christian) apocalyptic allegory. Though overlooked, the film's lighting design defines the cinematography and creates a visual metaphor that mediates the character's physical journey with moral and spiritual matters. In *Stalker*, as in life, light is an

essential element, but needs a dialogue with darkness. Frequent strong shadows, with only occasional bright lighting, illuminate a primary sentiment of the film: even in a strange world, hope transcends suffering, but one cannot exist without the other. Not only does the film's lighting enable an image to be created; by being manipulated as a medium for communication, it conjoins the visual and spiritual. *Stalker* is proof that light is not just what meets the eye.

Clay Shaughnessy

"The Transgender Apocalypse Was Upon Us" (Queer Revelation, 6:9)

In recent years, the conversation of gender roles and gender rules has entered the mainstream. The discussion has become so heated that conservatives look at us transgender people as if we're the four horsemen of the apocalypse, daring to break the sacred seven seals of their "basic biology." Transgender historian and theorist Susan Stryker has decided to embrace the accusation with her short story, "Apocalypse: Fragment of a Work in Progress to Be Completed by the Reader." Stryker's transgender apocalypse has everything: cyborgian shapechangers, autocastrated testicles, and the destruction of the gender binary. Stryker parodies the biblical apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, embracing the genre's cryptic symbolism and disturbing imagery while contorting its events to create a liberating gender-queer mythology. My presentation will dissect moments of Stryker's work by placing it in conversation with the ideas of gender theorist Donna Haraway and philosopher Paul B. Preciado. We will explore how the queer revelation challenges not only our notion of apocalypse but also our definition of human identity.

Julia Sommerfield

Is the World without Internet Better?
Exploring *The Private Eye*'s Post-Internet Society

Imagine every single text you've sent, every question you've typed into Google (even the things you thought you'd deleted) leaking out and becoming visible to the world. What would you do? In *The Private Eye*, Brian K. Vaughan, Marcos Martín, and Munsta Vicente build a world which poses this question. In it, the internet no longer exists, and to keep themselves hidden, everyone wears disguises. Today, in a world where people rely on the internet for everyday life, the idea of freedom from it may sound utopian, but the cost of hiding behind a mask gives it a distinctly dystopian feel. Although *The Private Eye* presents an extreme, its world is actually far closer to our own than a casual reader might realize. Corruption in our world maintains itself in the same way as corruption does in *The Private Eye*. I argue that corruption will adapt to the environment based on the situation presented. This is exactly what we see in *The Private Eye* and in our own society. Even though characters in *The Private Eye* hide their identities, the main power forms still find ways to utilize this to their advantage so they can maintain control, leaving us to wonder, is their world better?

Designing Women

Wednesday, April 23
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Gutenberg

Moderated by Professor Chris Finley
Department of American Studies and Ethnicity

Francesca Garijo

Overshadowing the Narrative:
Linda Fairstein and Consequences of White Feminism in *When They See Us*

Has one character ever infuriated you so much that you miss the point of the show? Ava DuVernay's mini series *When They See Us* provides a deeper lens into the Central Park Jogger Case of 1989, where five boys—Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, and Korey Wise—were accused, tried, and convicted for the rape and brutal assault of Trisha Meili, although they were innocent. DuVernay's depiction definitely makes us empathic to the boys, as we see firsthand the injustices they face. However, the depiction of Linda Fairstein, the lead prosecutor on the case, villainizes her character by tying every decision made by the police department back to her and emphasizing that she insisted they were guilty as the police took the boys' testimony. I argue that this villainization takes attention away from the systemic issues in the criminal justice system that enabled her behavior. Simultaneously, I argue that it highlights the issues of white feminism, which fails to address the systemic issues minorities face, and the lack of justice given to Trisha Meili.

Jada Leung

You'd Think that People Would've Had Enough of Silly Love Songs:
A Futile Search for Romance in *In the Dream House*

For you, there's never been a worse time to be in love. Doubly so for a young queer woman, a recent victim of abuse, independently assembling the literature and community for her story. It is difficult, indeed, to carve a spot in the literary canon for Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House*—it's too gay, too feminine, too tragic. Within it, Machado documents a queer testimony of her abuse while resenting the defamatory stereotypes it enforces. She "tries on" various genres throughout the memoir in pursuit of a proper archive for her literature. I endeavor to fit this story into one last chapter: romance. I trace the generous, affectionate pronoun "you" across the text, thereby refocusing its critical discourse from abuser to audience-recipient. While scholars assume that *In the Dream House* is an education on lesbian abuse for a straight audience, I present a romantic reading that reevaluates Machado's audience as a strictly queer one. This radically strips both the heteronormative literary market and the abuser of narrative agency, allowing Machado to testify specifically to her community, beyond extraneous opinion. The resulting expansiveness redefines the romance genre as holistically emancipatory, ultimately returning the literature to its sole intended lover. XOXO.

Jackson Mills

The Unsettling of the White Bourgeois:
Intersectional Feminism in *Wuthering Heights*

What makes a literary project feminist? From the first wave to the present, books such as *Jane Eyre* have been consistently seen as hallmarks of feminist culture, whereas others like *Wuthering Heights* never seem to gain the same credence. This project argues that *Wuthering Heights*' presentation of Blackness has caused feminism to distance itself from the work, despite its challenging of traditional gender roles. I argue that through a combination of unreliable narration and enmeshed romance, the book exposes flaws in the race-neutral approach of first-wave feminism. Through *Wuthering Heights*' dual locating of the primary female character as both a victim of oppression and oppressor, it interrogates the relationship between the white femme and racial otherness, creating more nuanced approaches to feminist liberation than similar works of the time. Today, it serves as an important signifier for why feminist movements must engage with questions of race rather than obfuscate them.

Priscilla Vargas

Illusions as Survival:
***Mata Hari* and the Instinct of Espionage**

Espionage, like performance, relies on the warping of reality. While it is traditionally linked to military or political operations, it is not confined to the work of spies in darkened rooms. I will be examining George Fitzmaurice's movie adaptation of the life of the infamous spy Mata Hari, which argues that espionage is revealed to be rooted in human instinct and is often times driven by fear, ambition, or self-preservation. Mata Hari's actions of collecting key information by using dissimulation proposes a new view on what is innate to us. At its core, dissimulation suggests that people balance honesty with self-interest, even more so when they are in dangerous or high-risk situations. This presents a cynical view of human nature that is guided by a deep distrust, which entails that a person must lie or deceive. Thus, deception, adaptability, and identity act as markers of an innate need to navigate a world in which trust is an illusion and knowledge is power. Ultimately, this suggests that "espionage" acts as a necessity for survival rather than pure performance.

Jiayun Zhang

"Femininity conquered me":
Male Authorship and (Trans)Feminine Girlhood in HBO's *Euphoria*

Sex, drugs, and the normalization of girls doing girly things. HBO's *Euphoria* occupies a complex space between provocation and empowerment, particularly in its depiction of its deuteragonist Jules, a character widely regarded as a cultural symbol for transgender youth. *Euphoria* has been widely praised for its rejection of reductive Hollywood norms, yet existing scholarship on *Euphoria* neglects to explore the nuances in Jules' representation. This paper seeks to fill that gap, demonstrating how the show's shock politics, voyeuristic cinematography, and third-person narration bar our access to Jules' inner world. Drawing on the work of media theorists Jack Halberstam, Antonia Ivanov, Maria-Jose Masanet, Sophie Mayer, and Alia Al-Saji, this paper extends beyond the breadth of the main show to explore a special episode co-written by transgender actress Hunter Schafer. Through a comparative analysis of Schafer's authorship and that of showrunner Sam Levinson, the paper demonstrates how a shift from visual pleasure toward sensory, affective storytelling reorients the viewer toward Jules' interiority and resists the male gaze. In addressing how Jules' girlhood is transformed under female authorship, this paper argues that authorship decentered from dominant masculine visual regimes is essential to fostering more nuanced and authentic representations of transgender characters in modern media.

Fog of War

Wednesday, April 23
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
North

Moderated by Professor Peter Westwick
Thematic Option Honors Program & Van Hunnick Department of History

Yulian Amador-Lopez

Doom! in *The Manchurian Candidate*

Taking place at the outset of the Cold War, Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate* portrays a highly globalized and modern society that threatens the United States' sense of self as it faces communist ideological threats. This unveils a domestic struggle for power between the characters Eleanor and Johnny Iselin and Ben Marco, driven by the strength of national narratives, symbols, and identity as weapons of influence, the most important of which is Raymond Shaw: a Medal of Honor recipient and brainwashed communist assassin. This paper will focus on the political impacts of the modernist period as a driver of state ontological insecurity and how domestic actors respond to such instability. Whether this is to protect a nation in the face of existential threats, or to manipulate the masses into submitting to authoritarian regimes, per the novel's ending, Condon suggests that power distribution is arbitrary because all factions ultimately guide society to the same outcome: global doom.

A. Angeline Caceres

Living while Dying:
Watanabe's Defiance of Family and the Pursuit of Purpose

Only theme I can think of is really a question: Why can't people be happier together?
—Akira Kurosawa

"...I did it all for my son's sake. But as it turned out, my son couldn't care in the least." These are protagonist Kanji Watanabe's words as he realizes that he can't confide in his son, Mitsuo, for emotional support. Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* depicts the existential awakening Watanabe experiences after he's diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. However, his journey isn't only about finding life's true purpose, but also a rebellion against Japan's post-World War II family dynamic shift away from the traditional *Ie* Japanese family system. While scholars such as Francis G. Lu highlight existentialism as the catalyst for Watanabe's journey, I further suggest how his transformation is fueled by his broken relationship with Mitsuo. Once a passive bureaucrat, Watanabe encounters rejection from his materialistic and selfish son, redirecting his despair into leaving a positive societal footprint by building a playground, thus confronting Japan's shifting cultural priorities. Mitsuo's behavior provokes Watanabe's realization that he has contributed nothing to society and with a short time left, he feels empowered to leave a legacy. It isn't too late. My paper examines how Watanabe's perseverance against familial breakage post-World War II exemplifies the power of individualism within a rapidly changing society.

Rishima Mittal

"Semper Fi, shut up, and die":
How *A Few Good Men* Exposes the Myth of Honor

"You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!" Jack Nicholson's character, Colonel Nathan Jessup, shows us how the concept of honor has been long tied to ideals like duty, loyalty, and integrity. And you believe this, right? That is what honor demands of you: ignorance. *A Few Good Men* strips down the façade of the culture of honor, exposing the raw vulnerability and trauma it hides beneath its shiny surface. "Semper Fi," short for Semper Fidelis, the United States Marine Corps' motto, meaning "Always Faithful," becomes, in this world, an oppressive mandate—even unto silence and death. In Colonel Jessup's defense of the "Code Red," an unethical hazing ritual that accidentally kills Private William "Willy" Santiago, we see how honor culture becomes a destructive force—a mechanism of control—that thrives on ignorance and fear. While critics like Chaim F. Shatan stand up to violence in the name of honor via their scholarship, scholars like A. McKay lean heavily towards the legitimization of honor. This paper will argue that honor isn't the reward; it's the distraction. The question is, can you handle the truth?

Shruthi Nadathur

Internal Battles in an Exterior War:
Extrinsic Pressures' Influence on Chelsea Manning's Whistleblowing in *README.txt*

While it's true that I felt overwhelmed by keeping my gender secret,
there simply was not a casual relationship between that issue and my decision.
—Chelsea Manning, *README.txt*

Human beings exhibit an intrinsic inclination to belong in a community, a natural disposition driven to secure a feeling of purpose. In her memoir *README.txt*, Chelsea Manning conveys this same yearning by reframing a narrative that for years omitted her perspective. Known as a military intelligence analyst stationed in Iraq, Manning disclosed approximately 750,000 classified United States documents on WikiLeaks, prompting a thirty-five-year court-martial conviction. Concurrently, the day after her verdict, she began hormone therapy to transition into a woman. In her trial, the prosecution undermined Manning's credibility by rooting her actions to the ambiguity surrounding her identity and her desire for gender conformity. This paper will argue how condemning Manning's motives to identity uncertainty, which was imposed by the courts and public discourse, neglects other critical factors fueling her actions. Moreover, extrinsic pressures—including moral righteousness, military institutional constraints, and balancing personal integrity with civic responsibility—held more potency in her decision. Ultimately, this paper will urge readers to reassess their judgment of acts of resistance, particularly when ingrained in a necessity to survive in systems not framed for inclusivity.

Penelope Yado

A Revolutionary Archive:
Turning the Lens Back in *Citizenfour*

What if something not necessarily human, yet simultaneously alive and viscerally real, could be "revolutionary" and exhibit resistance to power structures that control, define, and erase? In an ever-expanding world of mass surveillance, intellectual freedom often remains limited by the fear of being watched. Laura Poitras' *Citizenfour* operates as an act of sousveillance; her documentary turns the lens back onto the watcher and inverts the surveillant power dynamic. Encompassing Edward Snowden's whistleblowing on a government-orchestrated global invasion of privacy, *Citizenfour* becomes a visual counter-archive in which its existence is revolutionary. By first examining precedent scholarship about *Citizenfour* and opening the conversation for its potential impact, we can step into the archive and explore components of shots that directly look back at National Security Agency data sites perfectly preserved in time. Unlike traditional revolutionary media or political documentaries, *Citizenfour* is able to challenge power structures not through a direct, immediate call to action but by its ability to secure a permanent place in history as a visual archive, where it can continue to inform and inspire resistance in the individual viewer over time.

Gender Trouble

Wednesday, April 23
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Scriptorium

Moderated by Professor Jenny Chio
Departments of East Asian Languages and Cultures & Anthropology

Andrew Berman

The Sublime Frontier:
Alejandro González Iñárritu's New Masculine Sublime in *The Revenant*

The sublime is most succinctly understood as a sense of awe inspired by nature's beauty. But just as ecosystems are riddled with complexity and interconnectedness, so too is the sublime. Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2015 film *The Revenant*, which tells the story of the frontiersman Hugh Glass as he journeys through the American West to avenge his son's murder, is often analyzed through only one perspective: Barbara Claire Freeman's feminine sublime, in which a feminine desire for nature to exist unrestrained contends with a masculine sublime drive for humanity to dominate and conquer the elements. This framework, however, fails to account for the nuances of Iñárritu's portrayal of the sublime. It results in the neglect of other sublime aspects, such as the arctic sublime, which arises from Glass's perseverance in the hostile winter. It also draws misguided criticism, such as the accusation that Iñárritu depicts the Native Americans in his story with stereotypical tropes like that of the "Noble Savage" which paint them as wild and uncivilized. Using critical texts like "After the Arctic Sublime" and *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, this paper will refute the approach of Freeman's dynamic and the criticisms levied against Iñárritu. Rather than adhering to Freeman's dynamic, this paper will argue that Iñárritu subverts these tropes and blends other sublime aspects to reveal a new masculine sublime that posits humanity as neither fully part of nor opposed to nature.

Raina Rose Ginsburg

Gay-for-Pay:
Joe Buck's Contested Sexuality in *Midnight Cowboy*

When you think of a male rape victim, what comes to mind? Are you assuming he's gay? Do you also assume male sex workers are gay? Whether we like it or not, society often carries strong associations with certain words, especially when they cross gender lines. In the film *Midnight Cowboy*, we see a man stripped of his macho façade. Joe Buck's traumatic past of rape and abuse is exposed as he struggles to make a living through sex work. The film aimed to tackle difficult topics such as rape, sexuality, and male relationships. Due to its portrayal of homosexuality, many allies and members of the LGBTQ community were quick to accept Joe Buck as one of their own, with scholar Isabell Johansen calling him the protagonist of a "Gay Western." I argue that this is a result of the persistence of male rape myths and homophobic assumptions toward sex workers, forcing Joe Buck into rigid categories of sexual identity. By revealing that Joe Buck is not gay, this essay reveals how this misidentification perpetuates the very societal issues the film sought to unravel.

Mckinley Huffman

Monstrous Maternity:
James Whale's *Frankenstein* and Genderbent Motherhood

Where should we be if nobody tried to find out what lies beyond?
—James Whale, *Frankenstein*

When does creation become transgression? James Whale's *Frankenstein* is a classic piece of horror cinema depicting Frankenstein's "insane ambition to create life" which ultimately leads to the formation of a destructive creature. But what I will argue is of central significance is not the monster itself, but its genesis. In Whale's film, the creation of another being that Frankenstein desires presents him as a "male mother," as this aspiration is something that is typically only possible to achieve for biological women. Many academic conversations exist regarding such male mothers as well as Frankenstein's genderbent maternal identity in particular. Despite this wealth of work, however, little attention has been paid to the connection between Frankenstein's identity as a male mother and the fact that both he and the "child" that is created are portrayed as monstrous. I intend to fill this gap in scholarly conversation

by examining the relationship between male motherhood and monsters. I will look at how both Frankenstein's and his creation's monstrous identities result from a defiance of gender standards as a whole. Ultimately, I will question: Why is motherhood frightening when it is not a woman craving it?

Emily Molina

"She's actually super sweet":
Cassie's Sexuality through Rue's Narration in *Euphoria*

It is widely debated whether the teen drama *Euphoria* oversexualizes its female characters, especially Cassie, who is deemed the ultimate female erotic spectacle. With the introduction of Rue, a teenage drug addict and peer of the other major characters who also narrates the entire series, other scholars have deemed her as unreliable and disregard her as a narrator. However, I argue alongside scholars that define voiceover in film that it does not matter if Rue is reliable, because her humanity is what makes the audience view Cassie as a serious character—one who possesses deeper desires and is worthy of serious romantic relationships. With the help of scholars within the field of cinema and literary analysis, I prove with four words that Rue uses to describe Cassie that she is taken out of being an erotic spectacle because of Rue's narration, which is juxtaposed to the way she is portrayed without the help of Rue. We, as the spectators, then see her as Rue does: as "actually super sweet" and someone with more depth to her character than the show lets on.

Jade Justina Pablo

Liberation as Spectacle:
Gendered Violence and the Limits of Feminist Agency in *Poor Things*

Poor Things directed by Yorgos Lanthimos struts onto the screen draped in feminist promise: a *Frankenstein* reimagined through the lenses of sexual freedom, curiosity, and rebellion. But behind Bella Baxter's journey of her persona lies something more unsettling than revolutionary. While the film parades her liberation, it stages her body as the spectacle, her intellect as an afterthought, and her freedom as a loop back into patriarchal control. This paper interrogates *Poor Things* as a visual performance of feminist fantasy—one that ultimately undercuts its own message by eroticizing Bella's growth and flattening her agency into revenge. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performative femininity, Linda Williams' critique of the "sensational" female body, and Carol Clover's "Final Girl" dynamic, I argue that Bella's journey mimics the very systems it claims to dismantle. Rather than a tale of empowerment, *Poor Things* becomes a cautionary narrative about how easily feminist iconography can be absorbed into the very structures it hopes to resist. This is not a story of freedom; it's a beautifully packaged warning about the illusions of it.

Racial Tensions

Wednesday, April 23
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
South

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes
Department of Art History

Carolina Ayala Frausto

Postcolonialists, Assemble!
***Wakanda Forever*'s Imagining of Interracial Solidarity and Division**

I need to know if Wakanda is an ally or an enemy. There is no in-between.
—Namor, King of Talokan

The Avengers might have different powers, backstories, and villains, but one thing assembles them all: whiteness. The Marvel Cinematic Universe initially centered on white superheroes, leaving BIPOC audiences unrepresented. Yet, the release of *Black Panther* and, more so, *Wakanda Forever,* disrupted this norm through the Euro-centric and colonialist narrative of Latin American Futurism and Afrofuturism, blending sci-fi and cultural traditions to imagine nations untouched by colonization. Yet, beneath the liberatory surface, the colonial trauma lingers. Through Jessica FitzPatrick's theory of third contact—the encounters between alienated communities—we can recognize the painful reminder of oppressors striving to ensure that solidarity is difficult to achieve. This mirrors real-world struggles for Black and Brown unity. In the 1970s, leaders of the Black Panther Party and Young Lords Organization, Fred Hampton and José Jiménez, recognized their shared oppression and responded by forming the Rainbow Coalition, a multiracial alliance for justice. With this, Queen Romanda's line "the dangerous potential of you" critiques imperial exploitation but also the tension between Namor and Shuri. Their experiences are shaped by colonial legacies, viewing each other as enemies. Yet, their striving for freedom is a threat to the Western world. To what extent is it radical to demand your rights?

Julien Ishigahara Charupakorn

Reverse Passing with *Mata Hari*:
Unpacking Fitzmaurice's Orientalist Illusion

In a sense the limitations of Orientalism are, as I said earlier, the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region.
—Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*

To the government, she is a spy; to the public and her lover, she is Indian; and to herself, she is Dutch. Or is she? Mata Hari has fascinated many critics with her trans-racial identity, living between the lives of an Indian woman and a Dutch widow. Mata Hari was hired by the German government to spy on the French while posing as an Indian exotic dancer. George Fitzmaurice's 1931 film *Mata Hari* reveals this secret life and how Mata Hari hides in plain sight. While scholars have analyzed *Mata Hari*'s Orientalist exotification, many have not considered its relation to racial passing. I argue that she uses appropriation to racially pass in World War I Paris, not through her similarity to other Europeans, but by her hypervisible difference—in essence, performing reverse racial passing. George Fitzmaurice creates an immersive oriental experience through music, costuming, and other cinematic devices to manufacture the illusion of Mata Hari. My presentation will reveal how Mata Hari creates her hidden identity, and what that tells us about the broader world of espionage and racial passing. Have you ever hidden in a crowd just by looking different?

Olufumilayo Isokariari

The [REDACTED] Is Now Rewriting the System

What if joy—not pain—was the starting point of resistance? In this paper, I argue that Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, a pop album and "emotion picture," builds a radical archive where Black queer womanhood isn't just visible, it's essential. Drawing on Jordan Victorian's concept of the "Black Queer OS" and Kate Ott's critique of purity culture, I analyze how Monáe transforms joy, voice, and intimacy into survival strategies in a system designed to erase her. Through close readings of lyrics and visuals, I show how Monáe rewrites dominant narratives that frame

Black queer life as tragic, deviant, or disposable. Here, I push beyond frameworks that treat her work as speculative escape or Afrofuturist fantasy; instead, I position *Dirty Computer* as a present-tense refusal to be cleaned, corrected, or made legible. Monáe doesn't ask for inclusion—she makes new terms. This paper challenges us to rethink what resistance looks like when it's built on pleasure, memory, and refusal—and why that kind of resistance is so threatening to systems that only know how to punish joy.

Lauren Mascarenhas

Passing Privilege:
The Biracial Experience in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"

How would you feel if you were born one of the only double agents in early 20th century America? Those who experience passing privilege, such as the unnamed protagonist in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," are the true double agents of racially hierarchical societies such as this one. As Lovecraft's protagonist attempts to navigate his mixed identity (part white and part Deep Ones), he struggles with the fact that his appearance fails to represent his full identity, prompting a larger discussion about the nature of passing privilege as it existed before it was a commonly used term. In this paper, I will delve into Lovecraft's discussion of the feasibility of bridging the gap between the oppressed and the oppressors by analyzing it through various scholarly lenses surrounding passing privilege in tandem with Lovecraft's own background. Because early American society so often forces an individual to conform to a single identity, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" can be seen as a work that is more than an expression of Lovecraft's racist beliefs. This work ultimately highlights the confusion and self-questioning that can stem from the difficulty of balancing multiple identities in a society that believes you should only have one.

Abby Weiland

The Politics of Performance in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Where there's a will, there's (not always) a way. In *Passing*, Nella Larsen challenges readers to confront the complicated realities of overcoming societal barriers through her analysis of race relations in the United States. Clare, Larsen's protagonist, is a white passing, mixed race woman living in a world where the socially constructed conceptions of racial identity create preconditions for one's day-to-day existence. This paper examines the politics of Clare's racial performance and identity using Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" to analyze Clare's desires. As Berlant argues, sites of attachment can be just as destructive as the systems they seek to escape. Clare's pursuit of autonomy over her racial identity is her attempt to exercise her own agency, yet her efforts to do so are ultimately thwarted by the very structures she hopes to overcome. And in attempting to escape these oppressive social structures, Clare alienates herself from both the community she seeks to resist and the community she seeks to embrace. This suggests that racial identity remains deeply constrained by the social and political frameworks that define and govern its recognition. Moreover, Clare's tragic ending underscores the dangers in believing that one can transcend the constraints of such systems.

Human/Nature

Moderated by Dr. Oriah Amit
Thematic Option Honors Program

Thursday, April 24
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Carnegie

Alex Gross

The Reincarnation of Harmony:
How Eastern Philosophy is Reflected in Godspeed You! Black Emperor's "Storm"

Screwdrivered guitars and experimental black-and-white French cinema have become the calling cards of post-rock legends Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Their 20-minute long epics create giant soundscapes for the band's themes of anarchy and anti-war to marinate in, communicating their ideas purely through instrumentation. This pattern of long-form progression mirrors the Eastern understanding of time as a cyclical force, not having a distinct inception and conclusion but rather a point of transformation into another revolution. However, research into the genre of post-rock, much less into the specific catalog of Godspeed, is nearly devoid of studies on religious influence, especially that of Eastern religions. Godspeed's music requires this lens though, as their work is aligned with the Daoist phenomenon of The Great Harmony. Scholar David Rogacz outlines *yin-yang* and instrumentalism as hallmarks of Daoist music that happen to define Godspeed's catalog as well. Regardless of whether or not Godspeed sees their work as secular, to their listeners, symphonic post-rock epics such as "Storm" are more than just divine—they are harmonious.

Luke Kim

Misperception:
The Community's Response to *The Virgin Suicides*

How might you respond if your neighbor was to jump from a window and impale themself on a fence? In Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, Cecilia Lisbon—the first of five sisters to commit suicide—does exactly that. In response, the local community removes the fence in an attempt to prevent future deaths. Many readers often see this response as superficial, serving merely to satisfy the community's own discomfort at Cecilia's death rather than to truly help prevent future ones. This paper argues that such an interpretation can lead the reader to blame the community's performative actions for the Lisbon sisters' deaths, despite its limited agency in altering the girls' fates. It does this by comparing the community's response to Cecilia's death with their handling of another issue, the infestation of fish flies. Fish flies are harmless insects which blanket the entire neighborhood and are a consequence of pollution in a nearby lake. Understanding the community's response to Cecilia's death versus its response to the fish flies ultimately allows the reader to recognize tensions between plausible causes for the suicides rather than accepting any single one.

Avery Lu

Beautiful Monsters:
Patricia Piccinini and the Rise of Posthumanism

What does it mean to be human and what does it mean to be animal? These questions have been widely debated throughout society, particularly within Western culture, where animals are often regarded as other or inferior. But what happens when the line between human and animal begins to blur? In my presentation, I will explore how Patricia Piccinini, an Australian artist known for her uncanny and unusual human-animal hybrid sculptures, challenges this divide. While her works may initially shock with their strange, monstrous forms, a closer look reveals complex layers of meaning within their symbolism, materials, textures, and the reactions they provoke. This discussion will illuminate how Piccinini's abstract art doesn't just create discomfort, but advances posthumanist theory by blurring species boundaries, confronting human exceptionalism, and envisioning a world built on empathy and interconnection. Her art asks us to reconsider what it means to coexist and points out that the boundaries we make to feel human may be the very ones that make us less so.

Jessica Maduabuchuku

Fluid Resistance:
The Nile's Postcolonial Ambivalence and Ecological Disruption in *Season of Migration to the North*

In Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, the Nile River acts as both an instrument of colonial violence and a site of resistant identity. While critics such as Elad-Bouskila and Alkhawaldeh emphasize cultural continuity, I contend that Salih uses the Nile to exhibit postcolonial disorientation through ecological disruption that mirrors psychological fragmentation. The narrator's declaration, "I am not a stone cast into water but seed sown in a field," reveals Indigenous persistence against imperial hydrology. Through an ecocritical postcolonial framework, this analysis shows how technological impositions—electric pumps replacing waterwheels—parallel the colonizer's attempts to discipline both land and consciousness. Salih refigures how we consider these changes. Mustafa Sa'eed's disappearance into the Nile surpasses Vivian's "fragmented identity," and instead illustrates Bhabha's concept of hybridity since the river cannot be confined. The phrase "gives nothing, takes all" encapsulates this duality, where ecological damage coexists with cultural resilience. The Nile's water physically defies imperialism's rigid conception; even as colonizers erase history, its currents enable defiance. Salih frames decolonization as ecological, with the river's constant flow representing resistance that transcends human narrative. Ultimately, environmental consciousness emerges as central to liberation, positioning the Nile as a significant aspect of history.

Landen Scott

Scales or Skin?:
Anthropomorphism and Human Understanding in *Mr. Palomar*

The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves.
—Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*

From Dogecoin to iconic fifth-grade trips to the zoo, animals touch the lives of humans around the world. In Italo Calvino's novel *Mr. Palomar*, the ambiguous titular protagonist consistently interacts with the animals around him, from the small reptiles that sneak through his window to the birds that scatter the sky. However, rather than bring him comfort, these interactions send him into nihilistic and epistemological spirals that make him question his place in the universe. Mr. Palomar makes numerous comments about the biological differences between animals and humans, from the ability to fly to translucent bellies that humans lack. In my presentation, I explore his incidental interactions with animals within his home and around his hometown, Rome. Here, Calvino is able to peel back his preconceived notions of anthropocentrism, or the idea that humans are superior to all other animals. The animals' embodiment of human characterization, also known as anthropomorphism, makes the animals feel like characters within the plot of the novel. By exploring and breaking down the intrinsic hubris of humans, Palomar begins to develop a fuller understanding of the world.

Identity Crisis

Thursday, April 24
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Gutenberg

Moderated by Professor David Albertson
School of Religion

Elena Huh

***Season of Migration to the North*'s Freedom:**
Escaping the World or the Mind?

Society often stereotypes war as a physical act defined by collision and force, but it can go beyond this typical battlefield. Within the mind, a psychological war is waged. Entering the conversation on this internal battle, Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* explores such inner conflict through the main character, Mustafa Sa'eed, who encounters contrasting cultural experiences between his Western education in England and his roots in Sudan. Apala Das and other scholars examine the tension between his thoughts and past experiences, concluding that it creates a disintegration within his mind and soul. I argue that Mustafa's fragmented identity leads to a lack of personal control and mental decline which forever entraps him in a cycle of Westernized subordination. This paper will analyze Mustafa's actions, words, and mindset shifts to come to such a conclusion and explore whether it's possible to overcome such psychological conflict from a colonial upbringing and attain personal freedom.

Jacqueline Morales

"Circles and circles of sorrow":
Twin Flames, Death, and Identity in *Sula*

Twin flames: a cosmic relationship between two souls split apart that yearn to be reunited with each other. The realm beyond a physical world is one that is cosmic and complex, yet so fundamental in shaping identities. This essay explores the metaphysical bond between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, arguing that their relationship transcends conventional friendship. Using Aristophanes' speech in *The Banquet of Plato*, this paper reveals Nel's grief as a soul-level rupture that triggers a realization in herself. While critics such as Cassandra Fetters frame this connection as psychologically damaging, this essay asserts that Morrison actually portrays their bond as a necessary spiritual connection for Nel's identity formation. Through the integration of psychological theories of mirroring and metaphysical understandings of love and loss, analysis reveals how Sula's tragic death becomes a pivotal moment in Nel's transformation. It pushes Nel to confront her own repressed desires and the societal roles that have shaped her identity. Thus, *Sula* presents the pain of separation not just as a tragic moment gone through in life but as a catalyst for self recognition, demonstrating that love and grief are powerful forces in shaping someone's identity.

Shreya Nair

Becoming Bella:
Power, Liberation, and Autonomy in *Poor Things*

If you happen to be the first to find the body of a pregnant woman who has just committed suicide, what would you do? In *Poor Things*, renowned scientist and visionary Godwin Baxter makes a radical decision: to revive the woman using the brain of her unborn child. Driven by his belief in second chances, he grants the new soul an opportunity to experience the world, while giving the body that her mother abandoned a new purpose. Through the eyes of his new creation, Bella Baxter, we learn that breaking free from the constraints of society, or even your own body, is not about rebellion or defiance, but rather about learning to pursue your passions over what is expected of you. Ultimately, this surrealist fairytale asks its audience: What does true freedom mean? In what ways does society hinder or define autonomy and liberation? And to what extent do we choose who we become? In my paper, I break down the phases of Bella's development and examine whether her pursuit of autonomy truly grants her the freedom she seeks—or if her path is shaped by forces outside of her control.

Gabi Probst

When Art Imitates Life:
Lolita as Therapeutic Fictional Autobiography

I have not reread Lolita since I went through the proofs in the spring of 1955
but I find it to be a delightful presence now that it quietly hangs about the house
like a summer day which one knows to be bright behind the haze.
—Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*

That delightful presence which comforted Vladimir Nabokov is a book critics once denounced as filthy pornography. His controversial novel *Lolita* is a fictional confession from the point of view of a pedophile who kidnaps, abuses, and rapes his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter. While the book has received great critical acclaim, little work has been done on the connection between the fictional traumas in *Lolita* and the real-life traumas of the author they abstractly mirror. Nabokov himself even discouraged the connection. Now, though, 47 years after his death, I say it is finally time to break that Nabokovian seal. This paper will discuss thematic, archetypal, and event-specific similarities between the novel and Nabokov's life, as told in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. In doing so, it will apply Celia Hunt's theory of therapeutic fictional autobiography to illustrate how art can be created and enjoyed to heal wounded parts of ourselves.

Lizeth Sanchez

"Her and I":
How the Self Is Seen in *The House on Mango Street*

As a girl, she dreamed about having a silent home, just to herself…
—Sandra Cisneros, *A House on Mango Street*

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem.
—Esperanza, *"A House of My Own"*

Self-continuity: feeling connected to your past, present, and future self. *The House on Mango Street* gives us insight into how one dream—a home—is seen differently through two forms of self-continuity: one through our adult author, Sandra Cisneros, and the other, through our young protagonist, Esperanza. Both young Chicana women growing up in a working-class Chicago neighborhood experience "othering" due to their gender, race, and class. How does otherness, or being excluded from a group, affect this sense of self? According to literary scholar Matava Vichiensing, it makes one feel inferior, lonely, and as though they have to stick to one particular group. I argue this is not the case for Cisneros and Esperanza. Instead, this sense of otherness propels them to break free from the group they are a part of to prevent themselves from becoming like other women who have become trapped by this sense of otherness. Home, to them, is the epitome of escape and finally having a space where they can be themselves.

Making History

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner
Van Hunnick Department of History

Thursday, April 24
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
North

Nia Blumenfield

Back to the Slaughterhouse:
Repetition and Symbolism in *Killer of Sheep*

The Watts Riots took place in 1965 after the police used force to arrest Marquette Frye, a Black driver, during a traffic stop, sparking outrage over racial injustice and police brutality. After six days of community protests and clashes with law enforcement, there were many deaths, injuries, and arrests, but also the exposure of deep racial and economic inequalities, influencing future civil rights movements and urban uprisings. In the wake of the injustices the Watts community faced and still faces, one must ask: How can one establish their humanity when they are treated as less than human? *Killer of Sheep* was released almost 10 years after the Watts Riots and addresses this question, shedding light on the Black experience laid bare by the events. The film follows Stan, who works in a slaughterhouse, and the daily lives of his family and community. During the film, there are recurring themes of a broken car, childhood, and imagery of the slaughterhouse. I will analyze how these symbols serve to explore forces that both fueled the unrest of the Watts Riots and continue contributing to its lingering aftermath.

Dillon Bonner

Shhh! The Children Are Watching:
Child Indoctrination in *1984*

George Orwell's *1984* is often criticized for depicting an overly exaggerated image of totalitarian regimes, yet one aspect remains all too real: child indoctrination. I argue that Orwell's portrayal of the radicalization of the youth in *1984*, particularly through Winston's interactions with characters like the violent Parsons children, is grounded in real historical examples, most notably the Hitler Youth. The brainwashed children of Oceania, trained by the state to serve as loyal agents of the Party, reflect a powerful tool of totalitarian regimes: the radicalization of future generations. Through a comparison of historical child indoctrination practices, including those by Nazi Germany and other authoritarian regimes, I examine why such regimes target children to secure their future survival. The basis for the state-wide manipulation of the youth is the utilization of indoctrination, which manipulates the truth and suppresses dissent, in place of education, which encourages critical thinking. This essential truth underscores the Party's use of child indoctrination to dismantle familial bonds, normalize violence, and ensure the perpetuation of state control. Ultimately, Orwell's depiction of child indoctrination is not an overstatement but a cautionary reminder of the lengths to which regimes will go to maintain control.

Asha Mody

Archives in Motion:
Akram Khan's *XENOS* as Embodied Historiography

When archival texts silence essential stories of life and resistance, dance has the ability to speak those narratives back to life. My presentation examines how Akram Khan's *XENOS*—an exploration of the experience of 1.5 million colonial Indian soldiers in World War I that textual documentation has conveniently and routinely left out—transforms dance from artistic expression into embodied historiography, challenging traditional historical documentation. Khan's choreography confronts what Hilary Buxton coins "Imperial Amnesia" through three elements: the deliberate "confusion" of *Kathak* and contemporary dance that resists easy categorization; Khan's body as a living version of Diana Taylor's "repertoire," carrying forward embodied cultural memory; and his extension of Jessica FitzPatrick's "third contact" to the performer and audience relationship, urging the audience to participate in historical reclamation. Through visceral movement, an intense soundscape, and powerful imagery, *XENOS* creates a site where previously forgotten colonial subjects regain agency and visibility. Engaging with Royona Mitra's concept that "historically denied bodies…are themselves archival subjects," Khan demonstrates how dance challenges colonialism and makes space for the reclamation of stories, making the invisible visible and the silenced audible again.

Aarón J. Morales

The States of Cannibalism in "Under the Jaguar Sun"

[T]his flesh—in order to eat it… The way it was cooked, the sacred cuisine, the seasoning—
is anything known about that?
—Italo Calvino, "Under the Jaguar Sun"

"Something's got to give"—a phrase so often used to describe the breaking point of some kind of status quo—perfectly encapsulates Italo Calvino's short story "Under the Jaguar Sun." The short story, with its focus on foreign perspectives into Mexico, highlights what I argue is the breaking point between the two main characters as an observation into Mexican politics. This breaking point consists of the coming crisis facing the autocratic Institutional Revolutionary Party following the failures of Mexican President José López Portillo, and the party's internal collapse. Using his Marxist background as perspective, Calvino concludes that human beings and political states operate in nearly the exact same way when faced with radical change. That is to say, when faced with the prospect of radical change and the possible destruction of the status quo, human beings and political states will do whatever it takes to ensure their survival, therefore engaging in what I refer to as "a state of cannibalism."

Julio Vasquez De Leon

Haunted by History:
The Overlook Hotel as a Site of Historical Trauma in *The Shining*

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* transcends the boundaries of psychological horror to interrogate the specter of America's unresolved historical traumas. Far from being merely a haunted house, the Overlook Hotel emerges as a symbolic repository of collective guilt, particularly of the legacy of Indigenous genocide and colonial violence. Built atop a Native American burial ground and adorned with appropriated iconography, the Overlook is a metaphor for national amnesia and erasure. This paper explores how Kubrick's film visualizes historical trauma through architectural distortion, cyclical violence, and the absence of Indigenous presence amid aestheticized cultural symbols. Unlike other stories, the Overlook's supernatural manifestations reflect collective, generational trauma rather than individual suffering. Drawing on theories of historical trauma and intergenerational violence, this presentation argues that the film's repetition of caretaker violence and its inescapable atmosphere of dread portray a nation haunted by its past. Through its cinematography, sound design, and symbolic motifs, *The Shining* becomes an allegory for America's refusal to confront its violent origins where history is not buried but bleeds through the walls.

Mommy Issues

Moderated by Professor Beatrice Sanford Russell
Department of English

Thursday, April 24
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Scriptorium

Patrick Cardenas-Hirsig

Drunken Motherhood:
Perceptions of Black Motherhood in *Sula*

And they're exactly the same, but they're different now.
—Charli xcx, "I think about it all the time," *BRAT*

At what point can we truly uphold the idea that motherhood is a natural trait stemming from nothing but love and compassion? This paper explores the question of motherhood in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* from the perspective of a minor character: Teapot's Mamma. While Black mothers in Morrison's novels are portrayed as resilient, nurturing, and even violent, I question the authenticity of such characteristics by examining how societal expectations, scrutiny, and cultural constructs dictate maternal behavior. Drawing on Black feminist theory, critical race scholarship, and literary analyses from scholars Lounsberry and Hovet, Amanda Putnam, Matty Hemming, and Geneva Cobb Moore, I argue that Morrison uses Teapot's Mamma to critique motherhood as a socially constructed role rather than to portray motherhood as a natural trait. Her abrupt shift from neglectful to devoted is shown to be less about an emotional realization and more so a need to conform to the moral expectations of her community. Though her abrupt shift may suggest an inherent instinct to protect her son, I will demonstrate how Black motherhood is driven by fear and judgment, highlighting Morrison's call for reimagining identity beyond the borders of socially imposed norms.

Rubina Davila

The Final Girl versus The Monstrous Feminine

Alien, released in 1979, is an iconic horror film revered for its groundbreaking visual effects and profound impact on the science fiction genre. Although it does not explicitly address gender, the film is riddled with feminist motifs and metaphors that symbolically reshape our cultural definitions of femininity. Woven in all aspects of the film, ranging from the backdrop of the mothership itself, to the final girl protagonist, Ripley, the story highlights motherhood, childbirth, and a monstrous depiction of alternate gender dynamics. In my essay, I unpack the juxtaposition of such familiar and universal concepts as motherhood and femininity beside our profound fear of the unknown, primal violence, and body horror through a close examination of *Alien*'s parallels to our cultural notions of gender. I seek to answer the following questions: What potential does science fiction horror hold when it comes to authentically representing female agency or lack thereof? How can we redefine the final girl, a trope that historically exists to perpetuate the male gaze? How does a 70s horror movie like *Alien* manage to unpack the nuances of gender roles and female sexuality? And finally, why is science fiction horror such a powerful tool for expanding our conceptual understanding of gender?

Teresa Jones

Murderous Mothers:
Maternal Abjection and the Uncanny in *The Babadook*

No genre understands the disconnection between the expectations of motherhood and women's realities better than horror. Suffocating societal norms that don't allow mothers to seem anything but happy cause and then further maternal abjection. Maternal abjection, simply put, is both the attraction and repulsion that a person feels to motherhood that can teeter on indifference. Scholarship about Jennifer Kent's film *The Babadook* typically focuses on grief, but the way motherhood is explored through Amelia is much more compelling. The indifference and sometimes repulsion she feels at her maternal role, and the resulting alienation she faces is a mirror to how many women are judged for not fitting into the narrow norms of motherhood. The depiction of Amelia's motherhood carries a sense of uncanniness for the viewer, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar and, in turn, terrifying. We can often think that motherhood should be positive, sometimes tricky, but always rewarding. When maternal enjoyment

isn't felt, and it shows through mothers' actions, they are constantly pushed into the "bad mother" category. Using Freud's definition of the uncanny and extensive scholarly research on maternal abjection, I explore how Amelia is portrayed and, by extension, the perceived role of mothers.

Hanna Liang

Maternal Instincts and Maturation:
The Role of the Mother in *Like Water for Chocolate*

Comfort; control. Tradition; transgression. Such dilemmas drive the actions of maternal figures in Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, precisely those of her heroine, Tita, and her mother, Mama Elena. While Tita longs to indulge in her romantic passions, her mother adamantly thwarts her daughter's wishes. As such, many critics condemn Mama Elena as an archetypal villain, neglecting aspects of her past which reveal that her apathy is merely superficial. Hence, I intend to advocate for this misunderstood mother. Tita's intense emotions mirror the passions Mama Elena pursued during her youth, which led to the tragic deaths of people she was intimate with. In response to the pain caused by this trauma, Mama Elena attempts to neglect her emotions and subdue Tita's passions to avoid any opportunities her daughter may take to replicate her mistakes. However, this only molds Tita's circumstances to echo hers, solidifying their positions as parallel characters. As both women are confronted with the deaths of their loved ones, they react in ways which align with the nurturing they received during childhood. Ergo, I explore the extent to which maternal protection becomes prejudicial within Esquivel's novel, inspiring empathy for the mother whose emotional wounds remain unacknowledged.

Anahita Saxena

Skin, Milk, and Blood:
Fear and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

She took the life of her own daughter, and it was an expression of overflowing motherly love. In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, Sethe—an escaped formerly enslaved woman—is haunted by the ghost of Beloved, her infant daughter she killed when men in charge of the plantation arrived at her home to seize her and her children. Most leading feminist scholarship on mother-daughter relationships is from a Euro-American perspective. It makes assumptions of privilege, allowing feminist critics to reduce these relationships simply to gender when, for women of color, they are never simply just women. But women of color deserve nuanced analysis. Our mother-daughter relationships are founded on a love compromised by grueling fear. They are founded on the terrors and traumas the mother has faced and her anxiety for her daughter, the product of her own body, milk, blood, and mind, facing the same. Sethe's story is a poignant example of this fear being visualized into a heartbreaking relationship with ownership. I argue that her story deserves empathy and validation. I argue that Sethe's infanticide was an act of overwhelming love.

That's a Choice

Thursday, April 24
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
South

Moderated by Professor Suzanne Hudson
Department of Art History & Roski School of Art and Design

Jude Bronner

Concisely Sublime:
***Gods' Man* and the Affective Noir**

[T]he artist is, in effect, drawing with light.
—Society of Wood Engravers

What is necessary to communicate a great idea? Infinite choices, or limited distractions? Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man*, a wordless novel made up of black-and-white woodcut engravings, challenges the notion that dialogue or color is necessary for emotional depth and meaning in art. While scholars have looked at Ward's work through the lens of film aesthetics, radical political messaging, and technical engraving techniques, a gap exists when considering how Ward's techniques and choices contribute to communicating the essence of an idea and, in effect, the sublime. This paper argues that Ward's use of black-and-white wood engraving in *Gods' Man* intensifies the affect of the sublime by stripping away sensory distractions and drawing closer to limitlessness, allowing contrast and form alone to create a visceral, universal experience that exists beyond personal interpretation, through a connection I call the "affective noir." I draw on theories of the sublime from Kant, Burke, Lyotard, and Vijay Mishra to analyze how Ward's images evoke a timeless sense of fear and wonder. The affective noir certainly exists outside of *Gods' Man*, but Ward's work is unique in the broader context of black-and-white art, conveying the infinite and ineffable through a truly special art form.

Kaylee Eiber

Breaking the Cycle in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

A las Mujeres
To the Women
—Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

Generational trauma cycles through lineages with no end in sight. In Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, generations go beyond blood, extending to an entire community of women trapped by their husbands, fathers, gender, and societal expectations. The only thing that can break this cycle? A little girl. This little girl, Esperanza, tells the stories of both herself and the women she promises to free when she herself grows into a woman. In a mere 110-page book, Cisneros textually writes the readers into these generational cycles with her dedication to the power of storytelling. Her storytelling covers themes such as identity, language barriers, family, belonging, and gender. As these stories continue and trauma continues cycling, Esperanza—literally "hope" in Spanish—shares her own story about how she will extend hope to all these women. For a book titled *The House on Mango Street*, I found these stories to be a lot more about women than houses. Esperanza, at the end of the day, is doing it for *las mujeres*.

Lehar Goenka

Who Gets to Tell?:
The Use of Narration in *Soul Food*

A diabetes diagnosis wrecks a family; an unauthorized gun leads to imprisonment; a husband cheats on his wife with her cousin. This is the story of characters in the film *Soul Food* as they fall apart after the death of the family matriarch. However, the 11-year old narrator Ahmad intervenes, pulling the family together in their crises. But why has director George Tillman, Jr. chosen such a young narrator to delve into such adult topics? More importantly, why does Tillman choose the one person excluded from the intense, adult family discussions due to his innocence? In my presentation, I'll argue that the character of Ahmad in *Soul Food* allows the audience to build empathy for the family as a whole. Through Tillman's use of constant medium shots on Ahmad, the director shows the impact of the family's fights on him, which highlights the petty nature of these fights for viewers. Therefore, although Ahmad might blend

into the background of *Soul Food*, his role as the film's narrator is essential for creating and imparting the film's message about the importance of family.

Taylor Hay

A Façade of Freedom:
Merricat's Obsessive Control in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

"Life is hard." That's a fact. "Life is hard, but I can make it better by controlling every aspect of my reality." That's a fallacy—but it's one that Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood desperately clings to. In Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat, the novel's unreliable narrator, safeguards her own reconstructed reality through control, delusions, and obsessions. From envisioning herself living on the moon to defending the Blackwood home from the perceived threat of change, Merricat finds purpose in her ability to escape the harsher realities of her world. Her rigid rituals and obsessive behaviors may exercise control over her external environment, but they certainly do not remedy her psychological chaos. Merricat's compulsive need for control, fueled by fear and a desire for stability, ultimately detaches her from objective reality. Even as Merricat's manipulations succeed in restoring her version of order, her story is far from liberating. Her story does not resolve her isolation, her delusions, nor her self-destruction in the face of perceived persecution. Horrifying because it's real, Merricat's narrative encapsulates oppressive realities of domesticity, patriarchy, persecution, and psychological distress. Perhaps Merricat's reality seems more bearable, more secure—but its promises of freedom are only fallacies.

Ojas Nimase

Performative Fiction:
Performative Identity and Culture in *American Fiction*

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.
—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Monk Ellison pens a lie the world swallows as truth. The market demands a fiction it calls "authenticity"—and pays in applause. But in doing so, Monk exposes the truth: identity is a performance without a script, and culture is the audience applauding an empty stage. Cord Jefferson's 2024 film *American Fiction* explores the performative nature of identity and culture through the journey of a Black novelist and professor, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, and his struggle with the public portrayal of Black tropes. While many critics have investigated this cultural commodification, this paper will highlight their oversight of identity's inherent performativity, which empowers Monk to subvert imposed narratives. To address this existing gap, I will draw upon the theoretical framework of social constructivism, a view that identity and reality are socially constructed. Near the end of the film, when Monk unveils himself as the Black gangster he was pretending to be, the audience's shock crystallizes the film's significance: If culture is driven by performative identity, what happens when the curtain falls and all that remains is the echo of our own applause?

A Woman's Place

Thursday, April 24
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Carnegie

Moderated by Professor Karin Huebner
Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study & Van Hunnick Department of History

Kelly Cao

Wife, Killer, Madwoman:
Gilda Dent and the Gothic Evolution of *Batman: The Long Halloween*

As the archetypal innocuous housewife, no one would suspect Gilda Dent to be the vicious Holiday Killer—not even Batman. Tim Sale and Jeph Loeb's iconic comic *Batman: The Long Halloween* covers the caped crusader, police captain Jim Gordon, and DA Harvey Dent's noir-esque investigation of murders committed against the Falcone crime family. However, it diverges from classic noir and superhero tropes through its shocking twist ending: Batman fails in finding the real killer, who is unveiled to be the DA's unassuming wife, Gilda. Despite its popularity and influence on Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, there has been little scholarly discussion about *The Long Halloween*. Drawing upon comparisons between the noir and the Gothic, as well as feminist analyses of women's representation in Gothic literature, I argue that Gilda acts as the Gothic "madwoman in the attic" by complicating the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house." She dislodges the rule of the androcentric noir in the form of traditionally patriarchal organized crime, installing in its stead the supernatural and ungendered Gothic.

Ava DeArment

A Cycle of Erasure:
Uncanny Doubling and the Feminine Script in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*

In *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier tells the story of a young, unnamed narrator who marries the wealthy Maxim de Winter, only to find herself living in the shadow of his dead first wife, Rebecca. Manderley, the great estate at the novel's center, serves as a microcosm for the collapsing social order of interwar Britain, and within its walls, modern anxieties about identity and belonging take narrative shape, none more fraught than the instability of simply existing as a woman. Framed through Freud's theory of the uncanny, this reading examines how the narrator's identity is destabilized by her doubling of Rebecca. It focuses on the social pressures that define women through their relationships to men and property, culminating in an idealized, pre-scripted version of femininity that the narrator ultimately accepts—one that renders her submissive, unthreatening, and well-mannered enough to be kept by her wife-murdering husband.

Genesis Gonzalez

Silence in Strangulation:
The Male Fanaticist Lens in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*

It's a very curious feeling, a feeling as if something had happened to me, not to him.
You see I don't have to hate him anymore—or myself.
—Alicia Huberman, *Notorious*

It's a man's world, and the noose around a woman's voice is his fingertips. In Alfred Hitchcock's 1946 film *Notorious*, Alicia Huberman, daughter of a convicted Nazi war criminal, is recruited as a spy for a United States government agency to work alongside agent T.R. Devlin, assigned to infiltrate a group of suspected Nazis in Rio de Janeiro. Given her reputation as a loose woman, she is assigned to seduce the Nazi ringleader. From her debut to her demise on screen, power structures and gender roles encompass Alicia's life as she attempts to navigate emotions of love, anger, passion, and vulnerability. While many scholars deem Alicia to be "the perfect masochist" because of her submission and endurance under mistreatment, I argue that she is rather only the manifestation of the time period's societal norms and narratives as constructed by the male gaze. These contrasting perspectives now form the question: Is Alicia Huberman the villain or the victim of her own story?

Jenna Peterson

Lipstick and Lies:
The Superficial Empowerment of Women in *Midnight Cowboy*

When asked how she landed her role in *Midnight Cowboy*, Brenda Vaccaro (Shirley) recalled that director John Schlesinger "just decided that I could be bitchy enough." Shirley is heralded as a "bitch" by her own director—yet the film has been praised for its so-called feminist sub-themes. On the surface, Shirley embodies the Second Wave of feminism: she's confident, sexually autonomous, and holds both financial and social power, defying the era's expectations of the submissive housewife. If she weren't fictional, Second-Wave leader Betty Friedan might be rolling in her grave, applauding the depiction of such a strong woman. But Shirley's autonomy is quickly undercut by moral ambiguity: she's cheating on her husband, suggesting that when women exercise independence, it must come at an ethical cost. By examining similar portrayals in films like *Working Girl*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *The Stepford Wives*, I argue that Shirley is not a feminist icon but a cautionary tale—one that reveals Hollywood's long-standing mistaken portrayal of female power. Cinema continues to create fearless women only to objectify, villainize, or weaken them. But can *Midnight Cowboy* help us rewrite that script? I argue, *Shirley*, it can.

Rena Shang

The Home without a House:
The False Utopia of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

In a traditional family structure, women belong in the home where they can do laundry, clean the family estate, and cook for their geriatric, crazed uncles and evil, incestuous cousins. For breakfast: bread and homemade jam stored in the underground cellar, preserving both home-grown fruit and the long-standing patriarchal oppression of familial tradition. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Shirley Jackson explores the role of the homemaker through the literal deconstruction of the home, delving into the paradox of self-sufficiency and the oppressive familial obligation of the homemaker in the absence of a home. In the unsettled ending of the novel, she offers a path to freedom, a female utopia achieved through a mentally ill child and a home structure completely separated from men. This essay, however, aims to question that utopia, exploring whether this destruction truly liberates its inhabitants, or if they remain unable to escape the patriarchal legacy of a home and society steeped (literally) in the ghosts of its past. To truly rid yourself of your misogynistic family, must you become a homicidal maniac, poisoning all members of a patriarchal system, and setting fire to the metaphorical bastion of your oppression?

Body Politics

Moderated by Mitchell Jacobs
Department of English

Thursday, April 24
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Gutenberg

Cielo Barroso Espidio

Mental Illness in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*:
Yeong-hye's Freedom

Who is mentally ill in the family? Yeong-hye? Her husband? Her father? Her brother-in-law?
—Daniel Marchalik and Ann Jurecic, "Mental Illness in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*"

Have your feelings ever been invalidated by others? This is Yeong-hye's reality in *The Vegetarian*, as "her" story unfolds from the perspectives of her husband, brother-in-law, and sister—but never her own. Although Yeong-hye makes the bold choice to become vegetarian in Kang's novel, it's considered unreasonable through the filter of others. Specifically, Yeong-hye's husband and brother-in-law use her unreadable decision as an excuse to sexually assault her while her sister uses it to place her in a mental institution. In other words, throughout *The Vegetarian,* each projects their sick desires onto Yeong-hye. Nevertheless, during her stay in the mental institution, Yeong-hye expresses happiness in believing she is a tree capable of photosynthesis. As Yeong-hye's happy reality is hidden from readers who can only glimpse it from her perspective—seen in brief dreams and occasional dialogue—I will argue that Yeong-hye's mental illness is truly her fulfillment and saving grace. Ultimately, Kang's novel uses Yeong-hye's mental illness to bring her freedom from the expectations of those around her.

Charlotte Flukey

"**Alas, young lass! You are now a table holding up a glass!**":
Objectification of the Female Body in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*

People often miss what they're not looking for. It's understandable. But when you find yourself unwittingly used as a table, it's hard not to hope someone would notice. This exact scene befalls Ethel, a minor character in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*, and has evaded scholars' attention since the film's 1946 release. How can so many viewers overlook the overt dehumanization of a woman being turned into a table? I propose that we are seeing the effects of the male gaze—a projection of male sexual fantasies onto the female figure—on our perception of reality. The male gaze has birthed what some scholars call "male law," and under male law, this gaze is implemented with objectification being a top enforcer. If we remain ignorant of our internalized male gaze and its henchmen, life will lose its lustrous animation, and then, in a way, we too shall become inanimate tables.

Ada Li

"A fine cry":
Death and Eroticism in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

In French, the sensation of orgasm is known as "la petite mort"—the little death. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison stretches the metaphor of the little death into something stranger, fuller, and more transgressive: a vision in which eroticism and death become colluding forces in the unmaking of the self. While critics often emphasize Sula's defiance of conventional womanhood, far fewer attend to how Nel's bodily sovereignty is awakened by loss. This essay enters that critical gap, drawing on Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism as "assenting to life up to the point of death" to examine how Morrison reimagines death and sensuality as agents of collapse and resurgence. Through an analysis of Nel's evolving gaze, I unpack moments such as Jude's abandonment, Chicken Little's drowning, and Sula's passing to reveal how Morrison reframes self-possession by depicting surrender, where dissolution becomes the very ground of renewal. What begins as a severance ends in release: a cry with "no bottom and no top," spiraling through pleasure, mourning, and liberation. Nel is not merely a witness; her way of seeing is absorbed into Morrison's radical vision of female autonomy.

Gabriel Sakoda

Non-Binary Cyber-Anarchists and the Trans-Exclusionary Role-Playing Game

In the 2020 video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, you can pick the kind of genitals your character has. Character creators allow players to build their own protagonists by crafting bodies and fashions that suit them best. But this sensationalist attempt at trans inclusivity degrades representations of gender non-conformity in gaming. *Cyberpunk 2077*'s character creator is full of sexual rule-breaking, but why can't I make my cyber-anarchist non-binary? In my presentation, I critique the character creator's design, how the character templates exclude non-cisgender players, and how this game fails to rationalize its radical imagery as "punk." Character creators are a promising feature, promoting immersion and self projection, but also risk misrepresenting swathes of players. By understanding the state of character creators through *Cyberpunk 2077*, the role of the body in cyberpunk media and in gaming, as well as engaging with the writings of Teresa de Lauretis, Allucquére Rosanne Stone, and Donna Haraway, I expose the deep-seated transphobia and otherization within role-playing games.

Maggie Soennichsen

Radical Chaos:
The Selfish Woman and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*

I have a horrible feeling I am a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.
—Fleabag, *Fleabag*

Why is a selfish woman a catalyst for chaos when a man's selfishness is a minor infraction? In Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television show *Fleabag*, the titular character exists in a cycle of self-centering that, while radical, interferes with her relationships that are romantic, familial, and introspective. Fleabag's selfishness manifests in a conventionally masculine manner. She is competitive, unceremoniously direct, and motivated by sex, in which she prioritizes her own satisfaction. Scholars have derived their own claims about the controversy of female selfishness, such as Lisa Downing, who, in her book *Selfish Women,* deems it "a strategic, political, and personal achievement." Fleabag's selfishness, however, fails as an act of socio-political resistance because, while she riots against expected patriarchal complacency, the profound desire she harbors to be romantically and erotically yearned for by a man prevents her from completely severing ties with conformity. Chaos erupts from the tension that builds between the push and pull of these two forces. Fleabag's state of radical chaos reflects the qualms of the modern woman—she who feels obligated to decenter patriarchal ideals but is exhausted by the effort such a feat requires.

It's All in Your Head

Thursday, April 24
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
North

Moderated by Professor Edwin McCann
School of Philosophy & Department of English

Julia Bluestein

The Absent Watcher:
Surveillance, Self-Regulation, and the Illusion of Privacy in *The Private Eye*

The blinking red light of a security camera does not confirm the presence of a watcher, but the possibility of observation is often enough to alter one's behavior. In Brian K. Vaughan and Marcos Martín's comic *The Private Eye*, the mere possibility of being watched, rather than actual surveillance, becomes the organizing force of a society reshaped by a catastrophic data leak known as "the cloud burst." Set in a future Los Angeles, the narrative imagines a world where the internet doesn't exist and individuals conceal their identities behind physical masks and fabricated aliases. In this paper I argue that *The Private Eye* demonstrates how behavior is shaped not by active surveillance, but by the potential of being seen. Through the frameworks of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, the observer effect, the Hawthorne effect, and psychological research on anonymity and self-regulation, I explore how characters internalize the threat of observation and discipline themselves accordingly. Additionally, I contend that the comic redefines surveillance as a deeply internalized psychological mechanism rather than an external system of control. Ultimately, *The Private Eye* suggests that the most enduring form of surveillance lies not in who is watching, but in the fear that someone might be.

Aime Radilla Solano

"She wasn't any more frightened than I was.":
Infectious Fear in Gothic Fiction

It is said that we fear what we don't know, but can we fear what we don't see? It is entirely possible to contract someone else's fear despite not being a witness to what has occurred. In his 1999 introduction to Henry James' *Stories of the Supernatural,* Leon Edel says that "the frightened can prove frightening," which got me thinking: What if fear were contagious? Fear is almost like a sickness: inescapable, unwavering, and spreading like wildfire. To explore this idea, I use Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* as a primary source, mainly focusing on Eleanor and Theodora's fear development throughout the novel. Moreover, using Edel's idea as a lens, I analyze how their perceptions of one another can arouse or dismiss fright. Other scholarly works, such as Amanda Solomon's "The Haunted House as a Figure of Dark Space in American Culture," argue that the house and its hauntedness directly prompt fear while I argue that those elements don't even have to be directly perceived for us to be frightened. Thus, the fear must come from somewhere or someone else. Could you escape fear if it permeated the very air around you, or would you give in?

Luke Stellar

Scotomization of Self in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*

And those […] who have attained full purity through philosophy live for evermore without any bodies at all.
—Plato

A stay in a mental hospital compels a man to begin a project of composing notes both connected and utterly disconnected to a lengthy walk undertaken a year prior. The result, W.G. Sebald's book *The Rings of Saturn*, reads almost as if someone mixed together various fragments of encyclopedias along with a personal anecdote to create an ostensibly haphazard whole. Indeed, in its prose, a surprising stylistic distinction emerges between the narrator's talk of his personal life and his discussion of the more impersonal and intellectual matters referenced throughout the book. Curiously, the narrator devotes substantially greater attention towards these impersonal facts, comparatively neglecting his own life. This paper seeks to discover a textual reason for this scotomization of self, locating it within the narrator's own unhappiness found within the few references made to his personal life.

Nicole Tejeda

The Power of Normal: Exploitation and Repression of Neurodivergence in *The Manchurian Candidate*

The mind, as frail as it is powerful, is humankind's most valuable asset and weapon. Exemplified in Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, a Cold War thriller novel about brainwashed United States soldiers turned Soviet human weapons, the notion of brainwashing instills the fear of a covert, gradual invasion of one's mind for sociopolitical power. Yet, compulsory conditioning is an omnipresent reality for neurodivergent individuals inhabiting a neuronormative society. Given the absence of analysis of the novel's connection between psychology and politics and the growth of academic writing on neurodiversity in fiction literature, I propose a neurodivergent reading of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s mental and psychological characterization, functioning, and conditioning of its main characters, Raymond Shaw and Bennett Marco. Employing neurodivergent scholar Robert Chapman's historical framework of neuronormativity in capitalism, I delineate how their character arcs reflect the two possibilities for atypical cognitive profiles within the "empire of normality": dehumanizing labor exploitation or social excommunication. Finally, I suggest that the portrayal of conflicting political interests illustrates the pervasiveness and cruelty of neuronormativity across political contexts. This neurodivergent interpretation provides further insight into Richard Condon's commentary of political, military, economic, and social institutions' disposition toward exploitation and repression in their search for supremacy.

Caden Wylie

Death's Dance: How Morrison's Lyrics and The Doors' Music Two-Step Between the Forces of Life and Death

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
—William Blake

Among the deep and storied annals of the psychedelic rock movement of the 60s, there is one song that is not quite like the others. While The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, and Cream were preaching for peace and love, The Doors had a different agenda, one that sought to explore the depths of the human experience regardless of the horrors or the triumphs that they might find. There is not a more shining example of this than the nearly twelve minute conclusion to their self-titled debut album, "The End." "The End" is one of the most impressive and awe-inspiring cuts in the band's discography and its themes of life, death, and procreation have come to be considered among the most gripping in the history of rock music. I will be dissecting these themes using Freud's theory of the life and death drives. I argue that the depravity and lust with which the band members, Jim Morrison, Ray Manzarek, John Densmore, and Robby Krieger, approach the music of "The End" is an embodiment of the life drive while Morrison's brooding lyrics confront death, not with fear, but with acceptance, excitement even, at the ultimate release, epitomizing the death drive.

Just Say No

Thursday, April 24
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Scriptorium

Moderated by Professor Lucas Herchenroeder
Department of Classics

Madison Henderson

Posthumanism as Liberation:
An Analysis of *Dirty Computer* and "The Memory Librarian"

Oftentimes, people think of rebellion as large-scale protests or magnificent demonstrations. While all movements need these sorts of action, there is validity and, moreover, necessity in community organization, as there is power in thriving within an identity that society deems unconventional. This concept is explored in artist and actress Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist works "The Memory Librarian," a short story, and *Dirty Computer*, an album with accompanying "emotion picture." New Dawn, the dystopian regime that these works take place within, collects and surveys its citizens' memories in the name of bettering the individual, which is inherently transhumanist, as the movement's goal is human enhancement through technology. Drawing upon transhumanist and posthumanist theory and critique, my analysis seeks to deconstruct why *Dirty Computer*'s transhumanism is especially harmful to Black and queer communities. I argue that Monáe uses posthuman and cyborg theory through her central characters Seshet and Jane, though ideologically opposed in their respective portrayals, to demonstrate how marginalized people can move beyond their technological oppression and create identity in a world intended to strip them thereof. This rebellion is subtle, but equally as powerful as large-scale demonstrations.

Joshua Marucci

The End Is Never the End:
Nihilism and the Existential Retort in *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*

We all make choices. But in the end, our choices make us.
—Andrew Ryan

Why does interactive media enrapture us the way it does? Why do we grow so attached to characters and settings we know are ephemeral? *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* seeks to provide answers. Galactic Cafe's 2022 video game puts players in the shoes of Stanley, an office worker thrust into a series of bizarre hijinks after his coworkers suddenly disappear. Guided by the Narrator, a disembodied voice that offers directions, Stanley must explore the empty halls of his office and challenge the Narrator's authority. A simple game, *The Stanley Parable* opts to draw its replayability from its plethora of possible endings, accessible through flowchart-esque decision trees and a myriad of choices. Players are free to investigate, explore, and die to their hearts' content, with the promise of a clean slate awaiting them upon each reset. In this presentation, I will explore the unique philosophical ramifications this cyclical structure creates, and delve into how *The Stanley Parable* evokes nihilistic themes akin to those that Nietzsche develops in *The Gay Science* and *The Will to Power*. But *The Stanley Parable*'s message isn't all doom and gloom. As details emerge, the apathetic façade begins to crumble, and something different—opportunity—rises from the rubble.

Naima Ramakrishnan

The Laundry, the Well, the House:
Domestic Rituals and Human Innovation in *The Turin Horse*

In Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse*, a father and daughter attempt to survive as an apocalyptic dust storm ravages the landscape surrounding them. Every day, the things they rely on for survival disappear: their horse stops moving, their well dries up. And still the father and daughter go about their monotonous daily rituals, cooking potatoes, drawing water from a well, dressing, and undressing. The question for viewers becomes: Why do they choose to continue living their diminished lives? The answer lies in these very rituals. Scholars of *The Turin Horse* tend to agree that the repetitive chores create "utter existential despondency" and demonstrate the "entrapment" of the father's and daughter's lives. However, I will argue that these rituals in *The Turin Horse* enable and empower the survival of the father and daughter. Specifically, the rituals oppose the chaos of the storm and demonstrate the characters' reliance

on human innovation and technology to survive. Ultimately, Tarr's cycle of innovation, survival, and destruction in *The Turin Horse* raises questions on the future of innovation in humankind's continued survival.

Kaitlyn Smith

"Unremarkable in every way":
Objectification and Autonomy in *The Vegetarian*

There's nothing wrong with keeping quiet;
after all, hadn't women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?
—Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*

Narrow-minded and patriarchal control is what Han Kang, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist of *The Vegetarian*, challenges as she writes about Yeong-hye, a young woman in modern-day South Korea who decides to become vegetarian after a disturbing dream. This decision stems from her present and past subjugation, with instances like ideological dismissal and forced rape leading her to rebel against her family and the norms for women in Korean society. Kang reflects on the stigma that women like Yeong-hye are still subject to, pressuring them to deindividualize and conform their appearance and personalities to a male standard. As such, I will explore *The Vegetarian* as a catalyst to critique the rigid gender norms, patriarchal expectations, and repulsive imagery found throughout Kang's novel. Ultimately, my paper will argue that *The Vegetarian* critiques the Korean patriarchy that consumes women metaphorically and literally, dismissing their autonomy and reducing them to objects of male desire and control.

Jasmine Ying

Maybe Homicide Doesn't Sound so Bad:
How to Resist the American Capitalist System in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Picture this: you murder your family, and to top it off, you help burn down your house. Sounds terrible, right? But what if I told you that by doing this, you would be freeing yourself from societal oppression, economic pressure, and the people you hate the most, and still get to live with one loved one of your choice—would you consider it then? This is the journey Shirley Jackson's protagonist in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat, pursues without a second thought. By the end of the novel, she is living her ideal life because of the extreme actions she takes. But let's get real here—how many people would really be willing to commit a felony to achieve personal utopia? In my paper, I explore this phenomenon of socioeconomic resistance, including Merricat's motivations, how they are ingrained in the society she lives in, and most importantly, how Jackson's fictional society is very similar to that of our present day American one. There often exists a dynamic between the individual and the societal system they exist in. Merricat is willing to risk everything to escape hers, and I want to illuminate not only why, but also the significance behind the outcome such willingness yields for her.

Working Class

Thursday, April 24
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
South

Moderated by Dr. Kiel Shaub
Department of Physical Education and Mind Body Health

Chelsea B. Garcia Rivas

Crumbling and Working during *The Walk*

In Robert Walser's *The Walk*, the narrator—assumed to be a projection of Walser himself—suffers from the societal expectation of what productivity is. The narrator traverses through a time where he is constantly plagued by a capitalistic society that undermines the value of art and writing. His walks are an escape, a volatile release of his emotions. His emotions are not yet perfectly understood by a society that is transitioning to modernity and grappling with industrialization. The narrator walks away from his work in order to complete it, his walks bringing him moments of peace and optimism before he inevitably dives into a pessimistic and ballistic state of irritation and discontentment with the state of the world and his own life. The narrator needs his walks as a cathartic release in response to being overlooked and misunderstood for so long, but he hides this need due to shame under the cover of productivity for his career in writing.

Chelsea Han

Racist Cars:
Racial Capitalism and Disenfranchisement in *Cars 2*

When someone mentions the second film of the *Cars* trilogy, *Cars 2*, we normally think of Lightning McQueen and the bad guys getting what they deserve. But what if those bad guys were actually just fighting for their basic rights? In a deeper examination of the global *Cars* society, it is clear that they tolerate discrimination against a specific minority, the Lemons. The Lemons are socially ostracized by the rest of so-called normal society for being of an old make and model and for, quite literally, always breaking down. Mater, the rusty tow truck protagonist, somehow or another ends up assisting British government spies with taking down a conspiracy of Lemons whose main goal, as revealed later in the climax of the film, is to gain respect from their oppressive society by attaining capitalist domination. The leaders of the conspiracy are both Lemons and rich oil tycoons. The conspiracy forms due to the Lemons' resentment at their state of disenfranchisement and racialization. This presentation will examine how racial capitalism is a major form of oppression for the Lemons in *Cars* society, using Ayodeji Ogunrotifa's three requirements for racialization and a Marxist take on capitalism. It will also look at the Lemon conspiracy itself, a surprising microcosm of racial capitalism in the larger *Cars* society, and the unique character of Mater in this entire scheme of disenfranchisement. One question to keep in mind: How does choice affect the state of disenfranchisement?

Evan Reese Lyas

Legally Undead:
Divulging the Realities and Vulnerabilities of the Law in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

I have been so long master that I would be master still—or at least that none other should be master of me.
—Count Dracula, *Dracula*

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the Count's ability to sign contracts, acquire property, and navigate foreign legal systems is not just a narrative detail—it is a mechanism of critique. This paper argues that *Dracula* reveals the inherent vulnerabilities of legal institutions by demonstrating how they can be manipulated by those who understand their structures. Drawing on Daniela Carpi's perspective and Diana Shahinyan's analysis of legal professionalism, I aim to explore how Dracula infiltrates, rather than opposes, Victorian legal systems, challenging assumptions about who can wield legal power. Some scholars view law as a constructor of social reality while others define law as a cultural artifact that reinforces dominant ideologies. Thus, by situating *Dracula* within both historical and contemporary frameworks, this paper reveals the disturbing continuity between Victorian fears of the foreign legal intruder and today's concerns about systemic inequality and bureaucratic exploitation. In exposing the law's fragility—then and now—*Dracula* invites us to reconsider whom the law truly serves, and at what cost.

Anya Motwani

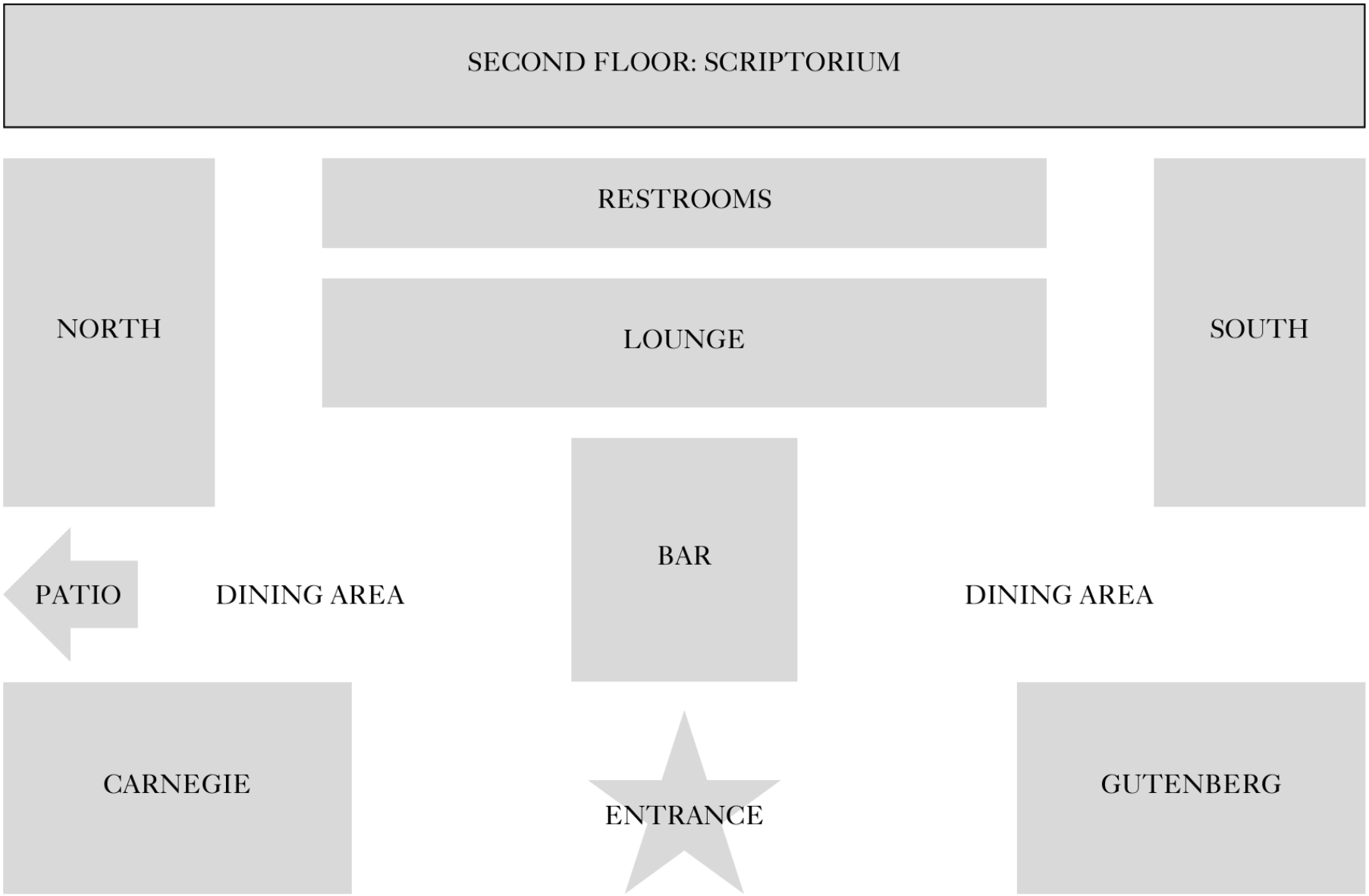
Der Rave and *das Kapital*: The Illusion of Working toward Freedom in Capitalist Societies as Seen in *Morvern Callar*

Morvern Callar by Lynne Ramsay teaches party girls everywhere what it means to be truly free. As the titular character relies on a historically subversive means of leisure, the rave, *Morvern* illustrates the way empowerment of the working class has the possibility to disrupt accepted economic systems. The film is not just a commentary on class struggles but, more specifically, exemplifies Jonathan Flatley's conception of "modern melancholia." Flatley argues that melancholia is not simply depressive (as hypothesized by Freud); rather, it is a productive affective state that is brought about by the imagined orders of modern living—wage labor and urbanization. Morvern's melancholia and her boyfriend's suicide catalyze her rejection of capitalism's confines through rave as a counterculture. However, I ultimately argue that to escape such insidious socio-economic systems is almost entirely impossible without the movie magic that enables Morvern.

Darena Nguyen

To Live Is to Die: Bureaucracy, Mortality, and Transformation in *Ikiru*

In a world ruled by calendars, checklists, and alarm clocks, have you ever questioned if you're experiencing life to the fullest? Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* confronts this inquiry through the journey of Kanji Watanabe, a bureaucrat whose terminal cancer diagnosis jolts him from a life of monotonous paperwork into a journey to leave a legacy. This analysis will first delve into how *Ikiru* critiques the bureaucratic system's stifling nature that numbs individuals to their own mortality and fosters a cycle of passive existence. By applying psychologist Jeff Greenberg's Terror Management Theory, we then explore how Watanabe's situation reflects the human mind's search for meaning at death's door. This existential urgency propels him to break free from institutional inertia and create a children's park as a lasting act of purpose. Yet, his metamorphosis is met with resistance that underscores the formidable grip of bureaucratic complacency. Ultimately, *Ikiru* presents mortality not as a mere end, but as a profound impetus for intentional and courageous living. We are urged to reflect on our own lives, consider the legacies we will leave behind, and act meaningfully before it is too late.



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