

THE SCENT

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Abstract

The Scent is a short fiction film following Sarah, who is in a relationship with Jake, a PhD student in art history, and works as an intern for a business firm. It unfolds as a flashback. Jake fetishizes Sarah's back and dislikes her idea of having a tattoo on it. John, Sarah's boss, evades the subject of a permanent contract despite calling her a perfect employee-to-be. Julia, a new employee and a freelance photographer, offers to draw a temporary tattoo on Sarah's back after they spend a day together, shooting photographs. Tension concealed behind a quiet façade emerges in successive events: Sarah breaks up with Jake following an argument over the tattoo, Julia disappears without notice, and Sarah gets fired (or quits as she puts it). Nevertheless, in the end, she finds peace by herself.

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Introduction

The Scent is a short fiction film set in contemporary Toronto which explores concepts of the gaze, objectification, authenticity, and transience. The core of the film is the interplay of the gazes. As long as Sarah, the main character, is living up to others' preferences and is objectified by their gaze, she is in a vulnerable, inauthentic state. For Jake, Sarah is perfect as long as she fits in with his desired image, centering on Sarah's body. For John, Sarah is perfect as long as she is efficient for his business. Sarah has invested in being a perfect partner and employee, and therefore her true self, concealed under these personas, has been compromised. With her back tattoo, she acknowledges her freedom of choice and reclaims her body.

My filmmaking practice is informed by my interest in architecture. In fact, the initial idea of *The Scent* was conceived while I was looking at residential towers and reflecting on the universes within each of those boxes in the sky. Employing my background reading in philosophy, I developed the story in the context of existential notions of choice and possibility. Sarah is imprisoned in her inauthentic self. She is hesitant to make a choice, but in the course of events, she is confronted with moments that she has to decide. I also drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist theory to write this story.

In the chapter "Whose Gaze and Voice," I will explore the main character's agency and the cinematic devices I used to illustrate it. In "Panopticon," I will argue how opposing residential towers, like the one Sarah lives in, function as the mirrored Panopticon. In "Being Her Self," I will provide a brief existential reading of the film. In "Transience," I will introduce the opposition of transience versus permanence presented in the film. In "Scent-free," I will look into the theme of discrimination. In "Specular World," I will discuss the doubling structure of the

film and how the tattoo functions as an object of exchange. In “Excursion into Philosophy,” I will describe how Edward Hopper’s paintings inspired the visuals of the film. In “Ellipsis,” I will point out how I used elliptical editing in the film. I will also briefly write about the relation of my thesis to my other films, the influences, and the process of developing and producing *The Scent*.

Background on Topics

Whose Gaze and Voice?

The questions of “whose gaze” and “whose voice,” especially influenced by recent feminist theory, were crucial to the construction of *The Scent*. In the first scenes, Sarah has little or no agency. As the story progresses, she gradually gains agency, and I have supported this narrative through cinematic devices. We begin on Sarah's face, looking somewhere off-screen. This introduces her as the protagonist but gives no other information. In the scenes immediately following, the narrative defers to other perspectives, not Sarah's. In the first two scenes in chronological order, we do not see Sarah's face clearly. The shots of the opposing buildings are intended to be Jake's point of view because these shots represent his perspective. I chose to cut from a wide shot of the opposing buildings to a shot of one specific condo according to what he says in an attempt to bind the POV shots to Jake's character. Although we cannot see where Sarah is looking, I tried to evoke a sense that she might be looking into the void. Jake, John, and Julia have agency in terms of both their actions and their gaze. Jake is obsessed with and fetishizes Sarah's back, and by objectifying her back, he confirms his own subjectivity. John has power over Sarah in her professional life, and Julia makes her the subject of her photographs. In the scene where Nick and Jake examine Sarah's back, I wanted to echo a sense of colonial exploration in their “othering” of Sarah (Image 18). Nick confirms this sense when he asks John, “Where have you been hiding her?” Sarah's first optical point of view in the film is delayed until she and Julia are in Graffiti Alley, and it recurs when she engages with Cinema, the street artist. Cinema is the only character who has no objectifying gaze as such. In fact, he barely even looks at Sarah on the sidewalk and does not look at her at all at the beach. This freedom from scrutiny makes Sarah comfortable in his presence.

Through the first scenes of the film, Sarah never returns Jake's gaze, reinforcing his dominant position. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, bell hooks writes, "That all attempts to repress our/black people's right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality.'" ¹ The first time Sarah returns Jake's gaze is in the rooftop scene. Sarah stops rubbing sunscreen on her skin after she hears Jake's voice say, "I can always get lost in watching you. I can never let you go." She reacts to Jake's comments and gazes back (Image 1). It turns out that Jake is not physically there, and the voice she hears is an imagined response which represents all the times and ways that he has fetishized her. This is a moment in which Sarah returns the gaze, a turning point in the story. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler writes, "For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female "object" who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position."² Sarah's determination to "gaze back" increases over the next couple of scenes, culminating in Sarah standing up to both Jake and John. Her "gazing back" is especially justified when John says, "We pay for business advisers not fragrance machines!" (Images 2 and 3).

¹ Bell Hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 94.

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), xxvii.

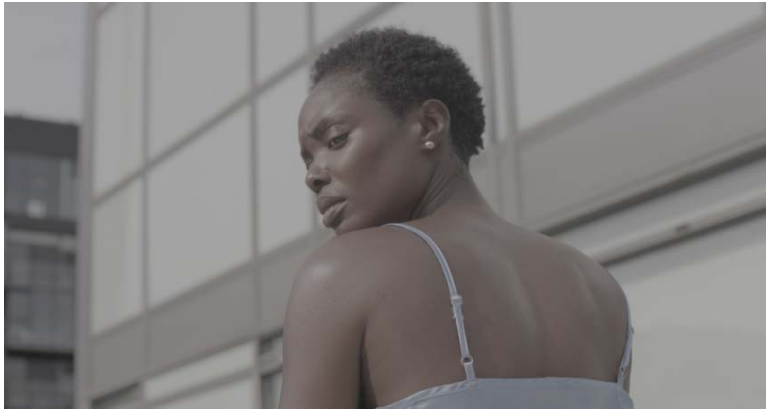


Image 1. Still from *The Scent*



Image 2. Still from *The Scent*



Image 3. Still from *The Scent*

Detaching voice from image (off-screen sound) allowed me to show the shifting agency of the characters. To highlight Sarah’s character arc towards self-confidence and agency, Sarah has no “voice” as such until the middle of the film. Earlier in the film, we hear Jake’s voice over the shots of the opposing buildings and over a shot of Sarah in the rooftop scene, and Julia’s voice over a shot of Sarah in the phone call scene. We hear Sarah’s voice detached from her image for the first time over her POV of Cinema painting *The Creation of Adam* on the sidewalk. I used this approach again in the tilt-up shot of the office building, after she gets the tattoo she wanted, breaks up with Jake, and knows that Julia has left. Here, this technique is meant to expand Sarah’s agency in the narrative beyond her optical point of view. In *Dis-Embodying the Female Voice*, Kaja Silverman recognizes this technique as “the freeing-up of the female voice from its obsessive and indeed exclusive reference to the female body, a reference which turns

woman – in representation and in fact – back upon herself, in a negative and finally self-consuming narcissism.”³ This “dis-embodiment” the voice positions the character as the speaking subject and not a spectacle-object/body.

Sarah wants a tattoo as a specific reaction to Jake’s fetishization of her back – a part of her body that Jake enjoys visual access to. This tattoo represents the reclamation of her body and her agency. In *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Susan Hayward notes, “Within the film, agency is often applied to a character in relation to desire. If that character has agency over desire, it means that s/he (though predominantly in classical narrative cinema it is he) is able to act upon that desire and fulfill it.”⁴ If we compare the opening and the closing scenes of *The Scent* in chronological order, Sarah’s character arc is revealed through the fulfillment of her desire as the film proceeds. In the beginning, she is by a window and Jake is touching and gazing at her tattoo-less back (Image 4). The film ends at the beach where Sarah stands up, and we see her body and agency reclaimed as represented by the tattoo (Image 5). Thus, *The Scent* tracks Sarah’s journey as she takes steps towards reclaiming her own gaze and voice hence agency, and this journey is reflected in the narrative through particular cinematic devices.



Image 4. Still from *The Scent*



Image 5. Still from *The Scent*

³ Kaja Silverman, “Dis-Embodying the Female Voice,” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 137.

⁴ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 14-15.

Panopticon

When Bentham proposed architectural solutions to the challenges of effective prison surveillance, he created a potent metaphor for state control that has had wide-ranging implications for society and cinema. *The Scent* echoes some of these ideas in relation to the male gaze and also modernist architecture.

Jake proves to be a Peeping Tom when he looks at the opposing buildings and says, “You didn’t have to set up your TV. You have enough entertainment over there!” His remark suggests that not only does he take pleasure in gazing at Sarah’s back but at the inside of neighbors’ condos. Looking out the window at those condos, we see how a residential tower functions as Bentham’s Panopticon. The residents are backlit therefore visible, and their private lives are screened for others’ spectatorship. The modernist apartment complex imprisons each resident in a cube and puts them on view. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault writes, “By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.”⁵ In a similar sense, Jake compares those condos, those boxes, to TV channels. The architecture positions the residents as characters in a live reality TV show. Jake also implies the idea of the watchtower when he refers to Sarah’s condo as a glass tower. The fact that one can look into those condos tells her/him that she/he is visible too. Not only I look at but I can be looked at. Thus, what the shots present is both voyeurism and exhibitionism. Opposing residential towers are in fact the mirrored Panopticon.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 200.

Surveillance is internalized for the person under the panoptic gaze. There is no need for the disciplinary eye to be there all the time. The fact that the person feels that she/he is being surveilled makes them regulate themselves in accordance with the rules and desire of the imagined gaze. Foucault adds, “Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”⁶ In the rooftop scene, this internalized sense of being observed is presented. After Jake says, “I can never let you go,” Sarah gazes back at him, and she realizes that Jake is not really there. As a result of Jake’s fetishistic scopophilia, Sarah feels that she is being watched even without Jake being physically present. Thus, similar to the idea of Bentham’s Panopticon, there is an imagined observer. Sarah is on the rooftop of her so-called glass tower in the middle of a number of residential towers (Image 6), surrounding her like Bentham’s Panopticon. This is again the inverted Panopticon. It is the person at the center who is being observed, and therefore the dyad has been reversed. In Bentham’s Panopticon, the subject is one, and the objects are many. In the dislocated Panopticon, this arrangement is reversed, and many eyes gaze at one object. They are unverifiable; she is exposed. In “A Father Who Is Not Quite Dead” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, Mladen Dolar describes the implied Panopticon in *The Rear Window* as being reversed where “the inhabitants live their quiet ordinary lives (eating, sleeping, dancing, partying, making love and killing each other); Stewart, on the contrary, lives in constant fear in his watchtower – the fear that something will escape

⁶ Ibid, 201.

him.”⁷ The rooftop scene also mirrors the scene where everyone looks at Sarah when she stands up against John, and all of a sudden, she is at the center of the Panopticon again. (Image 7).



Image 6. Still from *The Scent*



Image 7. Still from *The Scent*

The Panopticon is not limited to an architectural structure. As the editors of *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* note, “the sense of permanent visibility seems perfectly to describe the condition not only of the inmate in Bentham’s prison but of the woman as well. For, defined in terms of visibility, she carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes, her

⁷ Mladen Dolar, “A Father Who Is Not Quite Dead,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London – New York: Verso, 2010), 144.

self-image a function of her being for another.”⁸ In this sense, observation and consequent power relations are activated automatically. The panoptic gaze objectifies the person under surveillance and makes her/him an image constructed by another’s preferences and desire. In *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, Joan Copjec writes, “The panoptic gaze defines perfectly the situation of the woman under patriarchy: that is, it is the very image of the structure that obliges the woman to monitor herself with a patriarchal eye. This structure thereby guarantees that even her innermost desire will always be not a transgression but rather an implantation of the law.”⁹ Therefore, the moment in the film that Sarah announces, “I want a tattoo on my back,” is a crack in the Panopticon since it is a transgression of Jake’s patriarch law and an expression of her defiance.

Being Her Self

The Scent is Sarah’s inner journey from an inauthentic mode to self-discovery and authenticity. The inauthentic self denies possibilities and establishes conservatism. It is the denial of freedom. Sarah starts off as a submissive character but has a change in knowledge and stands up for herself so as to create her own values and give meaning to her life.

An undercurrent emerges in Sarah’s life despite a quiet façade. In her first conversation in the office, John tells her, “You’re a perfect employee,” and in the next scene in response to her desire of having a tattoo, Jake retorts, “Are you crazy?! Your body is perfect!” Thus, Sarah is perfect in their eyes as long as she acts according to the image of perfection for them. There is an image of her back without a tattoo, and an image of an efficient, low-paid (or no-paid)

⁸ Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, “Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction,” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds., Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 14.

⁹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 17.

employee at the service of John's business. As soon as she reclaims her body and makes an error at work, she distorts their desired image of her. In the first scenes, Sarah is concerned, but she does not realize the urgency of making a decision. Acknowledging this urgency comes with angst because one knows that she/he has to make a choice, and that it will not be easy. The classic existential example is the person standing on the edge of a cliff fearing not only the fall but more importantly the fact that nothing is holding her/him back from jumping. Therefore, it makes sense that Sarah's character arc begins with her standing by a window in her so-called glass tower, a metaphor for Sarah's anxious situation.

Transience

Among the dualities of the film, one is transience versus permanence. Sarah starts off in a transitory state, but she looks forward to stability and permanence. The first scene of Sarah and Jake suggests an unsteady relationship. Nonetheless, she stays in the relationship until the second plot point of the film where she has an argument with Jake over the tattoo. She has moved into a stylish condo, and at work, she is a temporary employee, an intern. Her drive is to be employed permanently. She tells her boss early in the film, "So, can we talk about a permanent contract? I only have two weeks left and I'm starting to get a little bit worried!" Later in the film, she expresses this concern to Jake and Julia too. In the course of events, she chooses to break up with Jake, and she quits her job (or gets fired). Nevertheless, in the end, we see her sitting on the beach in peace. She takes off her work suit, walks towards the water, and retreats into the soft-focus background. She embraces transience.

Julia is the character representing transience. Soon after she starts working for the firm, she tells Sarah during the photo shoot, "That's temporary. I can never do 9 to 5." Her remark is the opposite of what Sarah wants, which is permanent employment. Later in the film, John

breaks the news about Julia, “She quit after only two days!” Julia is the one who suggests drawing a temporary tattoo on Sarah’s back. Sarah and Julia become unlikely friends until Julia disappears without notice and proves that their friendship was temporary too.

Jake and Cinema represent another transience/permanence dyad. Early in the film, Jake proves to be advocating permanence. In his first scene, he says, “We can work this out as long as we don’t make any rash decisions.” Later in the film, in response to Sarah’s desire of having a tattoo, he says, “Why would you want to change anything?” He is a PhD student in art history, focusing on architecture. His primal scene of fantasy is Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, a preserved cultural heritage on the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling. On the other hand, Cinema paints on the sidewalk and works with stones and sand at the beach, and interestingly, his works depict the same scene: *The Creation of Adam*. He appropriates it, brings it down from the ceiling to earth, and renders it into a temporary work of art (Images 8 and 9). *The Scent* ends with Cinema recreating *The Creation of Adam* out of stones and sand, vulnerable to the wind and waves. Graffiti is another temporary artistic presence in the film. Sarah and Julia walk through Graffiti Alley, look at graffiti on the walls, and end up seeing *The Creation of Adam* being painted by Cinema on the sidewalk. Their tour parallels with Jake’s visit to the Sistine Chapel when he was lost and swept away by the frescos and ended up seeing *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling. This parallel is hinted at when Sarah looks at graffiti and says, “Jake will like this place.”



Image 8. Still from *The Scent*



Image 9. Still from *The Scent*

Julia is a photographer. She says, “I shoot anything, portraits... events.” What a photograph registers is a moment frozen in time, a moment non-existent when the photograph is taken, and in so doing, it signifies temporality. When we look at the subject before taking a photograph, we imagine a photograph in the future depicting the past. Temporality is the essence of a photograph. Looking at a photograph is looking at death, at an unattainable moment. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes calls photographers the “agents of death.”¹⁰

Sarah’s perfume, her scent, is inevitably fleeting as any scent is. Therefore, the title of the film also suggests transience. In the end, Sarah goes in the water, and both the scent and the temporary tattoo will be washed away as they are both evanescent.

Scent-free

The scent and the tattoo are means by which Sarah differentiates herself, but they are rejected by John and Jake respectively. The scent refers to Sarah. It is part of her identity. She applies her perfume every morning after she has dressed for work (Image 10) and carries the bottle in her purse. In the bathroom scene, Julia smells it and says, “perfume?!” Sarah sprays the perfume to obscure Julia’s cigarette smoke. John smells it during his first conversation with Sarah and says, “Damn, Sarah, that perfume!” He mentions it two more times: in the boardroom conversation and during their final confrontation. For Sarah, her use of scent is a means of individualization, but it is mocked by John as a way of diminishing her.

Sarah expresses concern about her employment first to John and then to Jake and Julia in her condo and Graffiti Alley respectively. John encourages her to do her best job for the firm and avoids giving a direct answer about her employment: “All in good time, Sarah!” In the

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 92.

boardroom conversation, he breaks the news, “You may have to take a short leave following your internship.” Sarah is denied a permanent contract in spite of her perseverance. At the same time, Julia is hired. She wears casual clothes at work, smokes in the bathroom, thinks nothing of taking time off and involving Sarah and says, “Who gives a damn what he (John) likes.” It is clear that Julia does not take her job seriously.

In the first conversation between Sarah and John, his way of deflecting her concern about permanent employment is to say, “We have a new employee!” In the boardroom conversation, John says, “There’s been a request to vote on implementing a scent-free work place!” Now, her identity, her differentiated self is rejected. By proposing a vote on implementing a scent-free work place, an act of discrimination is democratized. When Sarah asks, “Am I being targeted,” John does not deny it. It remains ambiguous who complained about the scent. It could be the colleague who sits across from her, John himself, or even Julia, who is mysterious and hard to read. In Sarah’s world, other people’s agendas dominate. In the first conversation between Sarah and John, he seems to enjoy her scent. In the boardroom conversation, he makes a joke of it. After their final confrontation, he shows his true colors and shouts, “For the record, I hate your perfume! I hated it this whole time!” In light of what John says, Sarah’s use of perfume is also an act of resistance in order to maintain her individuality.



Image 10. Still from *The Scent*

Background on Form

Specular World

The Scent's formal structure is based on doubling. *The Creation of Adam* is a recurrent image in the film. It is first introduced in Jake's dialogue on the rooftop, then we see it on the sidewalk near Graffiti Alley, then at the beach, and finally on Sarah's back. In this iconic fresco painting, God creates Adam in his own image, hence a doubling (Image 11). Cinema recreates *The Creation of Adam*. In other words, he himself mirrors the image he is creating. In this respect, the scenes in which Cinema creates his artwork are examples of mise-en-abyme. Throughout the film, Jake cherishes his desired image of Sarah and enforces it until Sarah stands up against his fantasy. To visualize this, there is another scene mirroring *The Creation of Adam* in which, ironically, Jake is losing patriarch (god's) control over Sarah (Adam without a phallus) (Image 12). In *The Creation of Adam*, the fingers of God and Adam are near-touching. In the mentioned scene, Sarah has her arms folded, and therefore she denies Jake's interpretation of the painting as "the absolute admiration between the creator and the created!"



Image 11. *The Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo



Image 12. Still from *The Scent*

Characters in *The Scent* present several axes of duality. They all have their own double or doubles in the film. The main axis of duality is Sarah and Julia. Sarah is a temporary employee, and Julia says that she considers the job temporary. Sarah is conservative, and Julia is a rule-

breaker. In fact, Julia is Sarah's opposite specular image. By drawing the tattoo, she triggers Sarah's breakup with Jake. Around Sarah and Julia, there is the duplication of Jake and John: they echo each other in calling Sarah perfect, and they both end up in a similar confrontation with her, resulting in her breakup/quitting (Images 12 and 3). Sarah ruins their fetish: her tattoo-less back and Dickson's agreement. There is also the duplication of Jake and Cinema: they are both linked to *The Creation of Adam*, each in their own way. Julia mirrors Jake and John in relation to Sarah. In the end of the night scene by the window, Jake looks at Sarah's blurred reflection (Image 14) and asks, "Why would you want to change anything?" In the end of the bathroom scene, Julia stands in a similar position and looks at Sarah's reflection in the mirror (Image 13) and asks, "Perfume?" Jake and Julia each refer to an object by which Sarah differentiates herself: the tattoo and the perfume. Julia also visually mirrors John when she meets Sarah for the first time (Images 15 and 16).



Image 13. Still from *The Scent*



Image 14. Still from *The Scent*



Image 15. Still from *The Scent*



Image 16. Still from *The Scent*

Slavoj Zizek in the introduction of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* writes about “an object of exchange circulating among subjects,”¹¹ which is a non-specular object in a specular structure. Mladen Dolar in “Hitchcock’s Objects” in the above-mentioned book writes, “There is a thesis implied on the structural level – not simply an obsession with duplication, but quite the contrary: *every duality is based on a third*. The third element is both excluded and introduced as a stain in this mirror-relationship, the object around which it turns and which fills the gap of the exclusion, makes the absence present.”¹² In *The Scent*, the tattoo is the object of exchange between the mirror counterparts of Sarah and Julia. The tattoo is first mentioned when Sarah tells Jake that she wants a tattoo on her back. This is the cause of their conflict. There is a moment of recognition on the fire stairs (Image 17) when Sarah sees Julia’s tattoo and restates her desire to have one. It is the significant object which Julia has on the other side of the mirror-image and she does not. This object does not have a double and is not mirrored in the axis of Sarah and Julia. Julia disappears right after she draws it on Sarah, thus it remains undoubled. It is Sarah’s object of desire both binding and destructive. It brings Sarah and Julia closer (Julia draws the tattoo on Sarah’s back), but as soon as it is exchanged, Julia is gone, Sarah and Jake break up, and Sarah quits her job (or gets fired). The tattoo, the object of exchange, is a hidden object precious to the owner. Sarah’s tattoo is first discovered by Nick (Image 18) and finally revealed to the viewer when Sarah stands up in front of the camera at the beach. It is the object that the gaze looks for: Sarah on the fire stairs, Nick, and the camera (viewer) in the final scene. Sarah has been forbidden to desire it by Jake’s patriarch law, but Julia marks it, and in the end, Sarah has it.

¹¹ Slavoj Zizek, “Alfred Hitchcock, or, The Form and its Historical Mediation,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London – New York: Verso, 2010), 6.

¹² Mladen Dolar, “Hitchcock’s Objects,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London – New York: Verso, 2010), 33.



Image 17. Still from *The Scent*



Image 18. Still from *The Scent*

Excursion into Philosophy

Edward Hopper is a painter of alienation and solitude. *The Scent* is influenced by his visual style. In Hopper's paintings, urban architecture is presented as void boxes with a sense of melancholy, accommodating solo figures or estranged couples. In *Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe*, Vivien Green Fryd writes, "The multitude of windows indicate that these apartments contain many people who can look out their windows at the trees and water, but who seem shut off from the outside, caged in their individual cubes."¹³ As in Hopper's paintings, in *The Scent*, living and working spaces are meant to give the impression of bleak emptiness, and the apartment is meant to function as an exposed ego.

In reference to Hopper's *Night Windows* (Image 19), in "The Sacredness of Everyday Fact: Hopper's Pictures of the City," Carol Troyen writes about the "entertainment in the inadvertent and unauthorized exposure to the private lives of others."¹⁴ This voyeuristic entertainment is what Jake refers to when he says, "You have enough entertainment over there!"

¹³ Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 59.

¹⁴ Carol Troyen, "The Sacredness of Everyday Fact': Hopper's Pictures of the City," in *Edward Hopper*, Carol Troyen et al (Boston: MFA Publications, 2007), 129.

The architectural style of residential towers and office buildings positions a person as a voyeur/exhibitionist. Carol Troyen continues, “*Night windows* similarly captured an aspect of the modern urban experience that resulted from living in such close proximity to strangers.”¹⁵ In *The Scent*, Jake’s point of view of the opposing buildings presents similar scenes as in *Night Windows*.



Image 19. *Night Windows*, Edward Hopper

Many of Hopper’s figures are solitary women in rooms looking out the windows. *Room in Brooklyn* (Image 20) is an example. In *The Scent*, there are two important scenes where Sarah looks out the window. In both scenes, Jake is at her back, yet she is emotionally isolated from him (Image 21). In “Woman’s Film: Possession and Address” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Mary Ann Doane notes that the images of women looking out the window is recurrent in woman’s films. She writes, “The window has special import in terms of the social and symbolic positioning of the woman – the window is the interface between inside and outside, the feminine space of the family and reproduction and the masculine space of production.”¹⁶ In

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Mary Ann Doane, “The “Woman’s Film”: Possession and Address,” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds., Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 72.

The Scent, the scenes by the window are also the space of the Imaginary (in Lacanian terms) where Sarah identifies with her image, an image desired by Jake (Other).



Image 20. *Room in Brooklyn*,
Edward Hopper



Image 21. Still from *The Scent*

In *The Scent*, the bedroom scene (Image 23) is the recreation of Hopper's *Excursion into Philosophy* (Image 22). Vivien Green Fryd indicates that Hopper's wife, Jo's comment that "She felt uncomfortable with her husband's 'attacks from the rear' may indicate one of the reasons for this couple's lack of contact."¹⁷ In *The Scent*, in four out of six scenes in which Jake and Sarah are together, Jake is at her back. The attack is not physical but psychological. In the bedroom scene, Sarah and Jake are separately positioned in order to underline their psychological distance despite their physical proximity. They occupy the same space yet fail to connect emotionally, similar to the scene in which they are separated by the colored glass (Image 12). The bed and the wall provide two different background surfaces for their figures. Multiple visual elements highlight their separation, including their different poses (horizontal versus vertical) and divergent mise-en-scène in which their figures defy each other. The vanishing point at the left side of the frame is stressed by three parallel lamps and their reflection in the window and the

¹⁷ Green Fryd, 197.

use of wide angle lens. Again, Sarah is facing the window, looking towards the vanishing point. This post-coital moment exposes their psyches. Sarah's inert body conveys discontent. The weight of the composition falls on the book. It is the key signifier, positioned between the two characters. After Jake reads a verse from the book and says "I didn't know you liked poetry," it is revealed how little Jake knows about Sarah.



Image 22. *Excursion into Philosophy*,
Edward Hopper



Image 23. Still from *The Scent*

Ellipsis

In six scenes in *The Scent*, we have seen the result/effect of a prior action or event that is often inferred – a cinematic equivalent of the grammatical ellipsis.

In the first scene of Sarah and Jake, Jake asks her not to make any rash decisions. Here, a previous argument has been inferred. The moment Jake touches Sarah's back, I cut the scene to them on the bed in a post-coital moment. Therefore, their compromise and subsequent intimacy are implied rather than shown in the plot. Later in the film, during a phone call conversation, Julia asks Sarah to cover her back in the office while she is doing a photo shoot in the morning. We do not hear Sarah agreeing, but in the next scenes, we see them together in Graffiti Alley in the afternoon, indicating that not only has Sarah covered for her but has joined her in a photo shoot. During the photo shoot, Julia offers to draw a temporary tattoo on Sarah's back. We never

see Julia drawing it, but we later see that Sarah has it on her back. In the day of Jake's dissertation, after Nick notices the tattoo on Sarah's back, I cut the scene the moment Jake glances at it. Through elliptical editing, Jake's first reaction is omitted. Instead, we understand in the next scene that the tattoo embarrassed him in front of his colleague. Finally, after John asks Sarah to work on Dickson's agreement, we only hear her voice as she leaves a message for Julia, and we do not see her working on the agreement. In the next scene, we see John talking to Dickson on the phone. In the subsequent scene, it is revealed that Sarah, intentionally or not, has put John's long-awaited agreement in jeopardy.

I employed this cinematic technique to cut parts of the story out of the plot so that I engage the viewer more actively in creating the diegesis.

Relation to My Other Films

During my studies at York University, I directed three other films: *Night Scenes* (2018), *Things That Might Have Been* (2019), and *Frames* (2019). The first two were the final projects for Production and Hybrid Fiction courses respectively, and the third one was not related to my course work. All these three films address the concept of death. In *Night Scenes*, the protagonist experiences angst due to the simultaneity of her father's death and her pregnancy. In *Things That Might Have Been*, the main character is haunted by the memory of her dead partner in their home. In *Frames*, the protagonist lives in a dystopic smart city and eventually commits suicide. My new screenplay, *Grief and Nothingness*, is about technological resurrection. In these films and the script, I have explored the concept of death as an end for an individual and its impact on others. Experiencing others' death shifts one's attention to her/his own death. Thematically, the question that I have posed is what an individual is going to do with her/his life in the face of that reality. In this sense, these films are also about freedom and choice. In *Night Scenes*, for example, it is the protagonist's choice to either hate this life in which her father is suffering to death or love it because of her child. *The Scent* is about freedom and choice that Sarah has to either conform or live her life passionately. *The Scent* is my first English-speaking film. In *Night Scenes* and *Things That Might Have Been*, dialogues are in Russian and French respectively and there is no dialogue in *Frames*. My earlier films were in Persian language.

Places and spatial relationships are of great import in my films. *Written in Stone* (2014) is a documentary set in a number of Iranian heritage sites. In *With the Wind* (2015), ancient monuments in a rural area are explored in a fictional context. In this film, the wheat field is a place of anxiety for the protagonist since he knows that his sister will be gone after the harvest. In *Frames*, Montreal is portrayed as a futuristic landscape. In *The Scent*, I pursued my interest in

space and architecture by dividing the places into three categories: private, work, and leisure. Each of these categories is associated with one of the characters in the triad of Jake, John, and Julia. In each of these places, Sarah sees her image in relation to one of these characters. In her condo, Sarah's reflection in the window is an image of her in an entrapping embrace. In the office, she looks at her reflection in the mirror (after she reminds Julia about John's rules) and sees John's perfect employee. In Graffiti Alley, she looks at her photographs taken by Julia. Their dialogue implies the relation of the place to the character. Sarah says, "I thought you were shooting photos of the place!" Julia answers, "I am. I am shooting photos of the place with you in it." In other words, there are three different images in three different places in connection to one of the three counterparts. The implication of the lake is different. Sarah sees no objectifying gaze at the beach. She takes off her clothes and goes into the water: it is a place of liberation.

Similar to *The Scent*, three of my other films address objectification. In my experimental film *Girl, Man, Window* (2002), which is one of my first films, I investigated the male gaze and power relations through an uncanny cohabitation between a girl and a man in a claustrophobic room. In *Farewell My Murderer* (2015), I scrutinized the stereotypical portrayal of women in films and stressed the role of the camera as a means of objectification and fetishization. In *Frames*, the protagonist is objectified and assigned a number by surveillance cameras throughout the film.

Influences

The Scent is informed by Antonioni and Bergman's modernist mise-en-scène and their depiction of an alienated world. A recurrent composition in their films is of two characters positioned the way in which they do not look into each other's eyes. Antonioni's *The Night* and Bergman's *Persona* are notable examples that influenced my visual style. In *The Scent*, Sarah and Jake are positioned as such in all their scenes together except for their final confrontation.

I was also inspired by French New Wave films, especially those of Eric Rohmer. His films are frequently centered on a character longing for a passionate life. Many of the themes that I addressed in *The Scent* have been masterfully dealt with in Rohmer's films: relationship, breakup, loneliness, and humanism. Interestingly, there are many beach scenes in his films. Moreover, Chantal Akerman's films in their meditation on female subjectivity significantly influenced *The Scent*.

Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and the large number of its analyses helped me explore the theoretical basis of my thesis. In *The Scent*, Jake disapproves of the tattoo idea because he wants to maintain his ideal image of Sarah regardless of her own preference. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes, "He (Scottie) reconstructs Judy as Madeline, forces her to conform in every detail to the actual physical appearance of his fetish."¹⁸ A Lacanian reading of Hitchcock films in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* provided me with deeper understanding of formal structure and the layers of meaning in *The Scent*.

¹⁸ Mulvey, 24.

Among many contemporary directors who influenced my thesis film, Michael Haneke stands out. The internalized Panopticon and imagined observer in *Caché* and the protagonist's fetishistic and voyeuristic tendencies in *The Piano Teacher* helped me investigate some of *The Scent's* main themes in different contexts. Jane Campion's *The Piano* in which the protagonist expresses herself through a transitional object (the piano) was another influence. Joanna Hogg's *Exhibition* in its use of static shots and implication of a modernist house as an exhibition(ism) space also inspired *The Scent* thematically and stylistically.

Production

The Scent is the thesis proposal I wrote for my MFA application. In my first term, I wrote the first draft of *The Scent* in Professor Howard Wiseman's Screenwriting class. The storyline was close to what it is today, except that it had a subplot of Sarah having an obsession: looking into a particular condo across the street. It was not a narrative necessity but rather a projection of Sarah's desire. In the winter term, I had the chance to workshop and develop my screenplay in Professor Amnon Buchbinder's Selected Topics in Screenwriting class. During that time, the narrative changed in some ways. I decided to place more emphasis on the condo across the street, and therefore I cut down the scenes in the office and introduced Julia as the tenant of a condo across the street. At that time, I started working with my supervisor, Professor Marie Rickard, towards the final draft, and in so doing, I greatly benefited from her guidance. She drew my attention to potential similarities between my narrative and some French New Wave films and encouraged me to adopt a less conventional style.

As I was approaching the filming date, I needed to adjust the screenplay according to the actualities of the production. One of the biggest challenges was to find two opposing condos in two residential towers as the main locations. Everything considered, I decided to return to the initial storyline of Julia as the colleague and not as the character in another glass tower since finding ideal locations for my purpose seemed beyond the limit of my budget and production scale. Nonetheless, in the shooting script and therefore the film, the opposing buildings are still part of the narrative.

After a number of audition sessions and recruiting the cast and crew, the shoot took place in the course of six days in August 2018. Due to the number of locations, the work was intense.

As with any other film shoot, some unpredictable difficulties had to be managed: from summer rain in the afternoon scheduled for the beach scene to damage to the roof of a rental truck! For the latter, York Risk Management Services stepped in to help cover the damage. The University's support showed the privilege of being a member of the York community. I should thank Steve Matterson, the director of Risk Management Services at York University, and Professor John Greyson for their support in this matter.

The editing started soon after the shoot and went through many revisions from then on. I had the chance to watch different cuts of the film with my supervisor in the screening room. Her insightful feedback deeply refined the film structure and opened new possibilities to the film. She suggested that I start the film with a glimpse of the closing scene so that I establish Sarah as the protagonist and the narrative as her self-discovery right in the opening scene. As a result, in the final cut, *The Scent* unfolds as a flashback. Professor Rickard also suggested a scene order different from the script that helped me achieve more consistency in performances and a better flow of shots. Thanks to the notes and feedback that I received, *The Scent* reached to its full potential.

Conclusion

My thesis, and my time in MFA at York University, provided me with an exceptional opportunity to combine research and creation. In this support paper, which accompanies the film, I tried to briefly explain both intellectual and physical trajectory of *The Scent* from idea to screen. I also tried to illustrate and argue for my artistic decisions and share with my readers how I approached different aspects of the story and chose my cinematic style. Needless to say that author's intention and therefore my explanations do not suggest a sole interpretation of the film. It is only an invitation to the reader to contemplate the ideas I reflected on and wished to convey. Each text, including my *The Scent*, will be born again through each reading/viewing.

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