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Dr John Hillman is an academic leader, researcher, educator, practitioner and writer. He currently works at the University of West London as Associate Professor and Head of Film, Media and English. In all his activities he strives to bridge the perceived gap between questions around critical theory, visual culture, art, society, technology and creativity. His research interests are focused on philosophical approaches to contemporary culture, which include understanding how films, images and media technologies shape our experiences, make us who we are and make society what it is. What differentiates his research is his use of visual culture to explain critical concepts rather than using theories to explain creative practice.

ABSTRACT

There are two philosophically inclined ways to understand films. The first comes from the belief that the world we inhabit is constructed from the thoughts we have about it. With this in mind, films are understood as a dialogue between what they present and the world as it is shaped by our own imagination. While the second position sees film as a purely realist phenomenon, focused not on our subjective power to imagine but on film's formal presentation of what is. Of course, how we tend to approach films is usually from somewhere in between these two positions. In failing to fully convince us, being neither entirely idealistic nor realistic, films then serve to activate an unsettling thoughtfulness around our own subjectivity. Through a reading of the film *A Single Man* (2009), this paper examines how subjectivity is best understood dialectically, as an idealist project undergoing a never-ending transformation toward realism. It outlines what I tentatively call a *subject of the cinematic*: a subjectivity shaped by the questions we have about how we understand films.

KEYWORDS

phenomenology, subjectivity, idealism, realism, nihilism

> *It takes time in the morning for me to become George, time to adjust to what is expected of George and how he is to behave. By the time I have dressed and put the final layer of polish on the now slightly stiff but quite perfect George I know fully what part I'm supposed to play.*
>
> - *A Single Man,* Tom Ford

There are at least two philosophically inclined ways we can try to understand films. The first comes from the belief that the world we inhabit is constructed from the thoughts we have about it. Films can therefore be understood as a dialogue between what they represent to us and the world as it is shaped by our own imagination. From this position, meaning comes from the intersection between our cultural horizon and our experience of the film itself. This places film firmly within the realm of thought, perception and imagination. The other, contrasting position sees film as a purely realist phenomenon. In this view, films rely not on our subjective power to imagine but on the formal, filmic presentation of what is. As such, films depict the world in an apparently objective way. This results in the audience having to do nothing more than observe the reality of the film. Of course, how we tend to approach films is usually from somewhere between these two extreme positions. But in failing to fully convince us of either position, being neither entirely idealistic nor realistic, films activate an unsettling thoughtfulness around our own subjectivity. What unites these philosophical perspectives is how they pose a question as to why it is we understand films in the way that we do. At the same time, they ask a similar question of ourselves: who are we when we watch films? The paradox is how films make us think about who we are at the moment when we are most deprived of our own subjectivity (McGowan & Kunkle xiv). In what follows, I will explore the tension between idealism and realism through the film *A Single Man* (2009), a romantic drama directed by American fashion designer Tom Ford. The dichotomy of its idealised aesthetic and narrative, which is sustained by a realist drama, provides the context for my line of argument. However, what motivates this paper is how the transformation of the central character, George Falconer (played by Colin Firth), can provide a refracted view of films in general and filmic subjectivity in particular.

The shaping of subjectivity through film has long been one of the many topics focused on within film theory, especially for writers such as Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and others during the 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, semiotics and the predominantly Marxist cultural theory of the time, an influential group of writers on film saw it as one of the mechanisms through which ideology was transmitted. Motivated both by Althusser's description of a subject who is hailed or "interpellated" by ideology (232), along with the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan and his notion of "the gaze" (67), theory understood film as integral to how subjectivity is shaped. For Mulvey, film "reflects, reveals and [even] plays on" (6) the established ways we look, and subjectivity is directly linked to who is looking and at whom. Metz explored how the audience is able to identify with itself and become a knowing "transcendental subject" (49). In other words, a film allows its audience to be made aware of itself as an audience. Such awareness makes the audience conscious of the limitations that being

an audience brings. Cavell develops this when he describes how, for films, the audience members are not present to either the actors or the characters (179): they are only present to themselves. While these ideas about film have evolved over time, I take from them, as a starting point, the idea of subjectivity shaped by film. I then develop this into what I tentatively call a *subject of the cinematic*. This is subjectivity shaped not by film itself but by the questions we have about how we understand the films we are seeing. The trajectory I take is to reflect upon how subjectivity can be understood dialectically: as an idealist project undergoing a never-ending transformation toward realism. My approach to understanding the *subject of the cinematic* is phenomenological and my ambitious aim would be to uncover something about the experience of all films. In this spirit, I approach *A Single Man* as a cypher to expose a tension between idealism and realism which is woven into both the form and narrative of the film.

A *subject of the cinematic* is not a subject brought into being as a consequence of going to the cinema (it is not the theoretical equivalent to Roald Dahl's characterisation of Mike Teavee, a boy who did nothing but watch TV all day, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*). Instead, my framing of cinematic subjectivity is a way to think differently about our response to film. To understand a *subject of the cinematic* is to grasp something of the metaphorical transition from the darkness of the cinema to the experience of the real world outside in all its vividness. Of course, in a time of streaming media and mobile technology, the cinema as a particular place where films are shown is less and less relevant. Many of us no longer go to a cinema, choosing to watch films on our mobile devices, on computer screens or at home. As a consequence, our relationship to cinematic experience is both everywhere and nowhere in particular. I shall argue how the experience of watching a film and the consequential transition from our experience of watching to the experience of lived reality creates the conditions in which subjectivity is newly shaped. This transition then points to ontological questions about film itself. The twist is how these questions return us to ourselves, to our own place in a film's life and outside of it. Crucially, our passage from one to the other, from the idealism of the film to the realism of experience, is never concluded. The process of becoming a *subject of the cinematic* is never fully achieved.

Based on the novel by Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* is set in Los Angeles in 1962. It depicts the story of George Falconer, a middle-aged British college professor who is struggling to come to terms with the recent death of his partner, Jim (played by Matthew Goode). The film takes place over the course of one day, following George as he goes about his daily routine while dealing with his grief. While the film is a commentary on themes of grief and relationships, in its formal presentation it also declares itself to be about filmic style, about paying attention to the details of life and about the intrinsic importance of how things appear. Behind the order and precision of its visual aesthetic lies a subject who performs being a subject. There is no George Falconer as such, there are only the rituals that stand in for his existence. Responding to the void that grief has created, Falconer creates his place in a symbolic intersubjective universe by becoming George. In this act, we can see the split between who he is and how he is, or at least

how who he is does not coincide with the person he needs to present to the external world. The tension that resides in George becoming George is similar to that of the realism of experience and its expression through the idealism of the film. A film is always a *film* of experience. If we understand it as an experience of anything, or a way to understand lived reality, then we can only do so by incorporating the experience of film itself.

As I have suggested, idealism and realism are thematically interwoven within the film's form and narrative, especially in its depictions of George's various relationships and his personal journey through grief. To emphasise different facets of the story and the emotions being portrayed, the film is formally divided into scenes which slowly become saturated in colour or are depicted entirely in black and white. Ford's creation of a "unique cinematic experience" (Dima), along with its attention to design details, allows us to grasp something of the constitution of such an experience. The colour shifts heighten our awareness of film as a medium of images, while the highly stylised sets portray an idealised, filmic, yet ostensibly realistic world. I claim the way *A Single Man* stages reality is through the idealistic presentation of the qualities of the medium of film. The key point here is how we can only learn what films are through films themselves. This is how, in *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger understands the phenomenological method as a way for something to "show itself from itself" (50). It is then, through a direct (or indirect) reference to phenomenology, that we really only understand films when our analysis is rooted in them. Our understanding of film constantly moves between idealism and realism, between the cinematic world shaped by thought and that shaped by the lived experience of what is. When at the cinema, despite being immersed in a film, we might become more aware of who is also there watching the film with us. Our attention then oscillates between the film and the projection of the film (the film as a projection) in the room. This situation creates confusion between the concrete beingness of watching and the transcendental thoughts about the film itself. Cavell expresses being aware of an audience when he states how audiences have created a "casualness of movie-viewing" such that he feels he is "present at a cult whose members have nothing in common but their presence in the same place" (11). The conditions of a cinema are designed so that the audience can focus their attention on the film and not be distracted by what is there in the room. If, as Cavell suggests, the audience has nothing in common but their presence together, it is this presence together that they, ideally, wish to ignore.

As one might expect from a film directed by a fashion designer like Tom Ford, *A Single Man* looks visually striking. The styling and costumes in the film reflect Ford's work in the fashion industry to the extent that one could be forgiven for mistaking the film for an advert for Tom Ford's clothing brand. Despite its highly stylised presentation, the film can still be viewed as a realistic, period drama. Set around the time when the Cold War was ending, there is a clear sense of how the spectre of nuclear war has been avoided. Yet, in stark contrast to this apparent optimism, George observes how his students "aspire to nothing more than a corporate job and a desire to raise coke-drinking, TV-watching children" (00:19:07). George's gentle critique of American culture can be read in contrast to its opposite: the annihilation of

humanity in a nuclear war. Perhaps, there is no right outcome. Despite avoiding the catastrophe of war, in George's observation, what emerges is a culture that has little intrinsic value or worth. While this reflection clearly expresses something of George's state of mind, the nihilism of his manifest grief and depression, it also suggests that a certain symbolic superficiality motivates the film. In stark contrast to the trauma and pain of his personal life, the post-Cold War world is decidedly optimistic. But as George observes, a world that has avoided a nuclear catastrophe merely makes way for a reality underpinned by the superficial ideals of capitalist society.

If nothing else, the film is a visual study of how meaning ebbs and flows through life. As the day passes for George, his slow, passive, withdrawal is depicted through an inventory of precisely configured *mise-en-scène*. Its idealised aesthetics reinforce the film's thematic resonance, yet at the same time, they obfuscate its emotional impact. As a result of this tension, the audience is held in abeyance; they never fully grasp any metaphysical sense of things-in-themselves, since things in the film tend to be presented in an idealised form. But nor are the audience able to grasp the grounding reality of their own selfhood. Instead, they are seduced into becoming lost in the film's aesthetic narrative. In effect, both subject and object are understood to be outside of knowledge, they resist knowing or being known. Such nihilism is directly manifested in George throughout the film as he plans his own suicide. However, it is the highly idealised aesthetics of the film that convey to the audience a certain distance from reality that serves to mask the metaphysics of objects and subjects. The central point I make here is that, when understood as film about transformation, *A Single Man* articulates an idealism that is fundamentally realistic in expressing its own nihilistic qualities. In effect, idealism can be understood as being realistic, honest, and even truthful about its own superficial qualities that, in film, help to shape an existential nothingness.

At the beginning of *A Single Man*, George says that he feels as though he is drowning, sinking, unable to breathe; he goes on to say, "for the first time in my life I can't see my future" (00:07:13). Given the declaration that he has nothing to live for, George articulates a state of personal alienation: the death of his partner has rendered his life meaningless. It is this encounter with nihilism, the utter despair suffocating George, that can be seen as a counterpoint to the aesthetic beauty of how the film is staged and shot. Throughout the film, Ford uses colour to articulate different emotions and sentiments but there is something more complicated to how these affective qualities can be accounted for than simply different choices of colour grading. In rendering the nothingness of George's emotional state, we are confronted with a 'somethingness' of the film's aesthetic form.

In his book *In Excess*, Jean-Luc Marion introduces the concept of "saturated phenomena" (29) to describe the kind of experiences that do not fit into our normal perception and comprehension. We encounter saturated phenomena when we experience art, music, or even the birth of a child. These experiences are characterised by their overwhelming or excessive nature. There is something more to them than a simple encounter with an object. What these experiences do is challenge our notion of perception since we are

unable to reduce them to any one thing in particular. Often, we feel there is something that we cannot quite grasp but that we are very much aware of. As a result, we feel as though we cannot properly know or understand what we are experiencing because there is something outside of the scope of what we are directly encountering. The expansiveness of these experiences means we never fully understand them, instead, we only experience an aspect of what they are. Marion argues that the ungraspable nature of certain experiences has implications for the general nature of perception, representation and human experience. His aim is to incorporate exceptional, paradoxical experiences into phenomenology. Unlike science, which is determined by proving things, phenomenology is about appearances, it deals with how things show themselves (7). Phenomenology reduces things, ontologically, in order to understand how they fit within our experience. It does this by understanding everything through the *appearance* of phenomena (although neither Edmund Husserl nor Heidegger achieved this). However, excessive experiences of things like art, relationships or other significant events cannot be easily integrated within phenomenology because these kinds of experiences cannot be completely accounted for ontologically. What differentiates them is how there always remains something unknowable about them.

When we see a work of art like a sculpture, we see more than simply the physical object before us in the gallery. We may admire the technique, the materials used or even the aesthetic formal beauty of the object itself, but we cannot reduce our understanding to any one of these things. In a similar fashion, music cannot be ontologically reduced to a series of notes in a particular order. Marion maintains that phenomenology can accommodate these excessive experiences only when they are understood by the way they appear to us. He argues that since we cannot, ontologically, understand the things in themselves, saturated phenomena can be reduced to the way they appear or, as he puts it, reduced to their *givenness* (Deketelaere 4). In saturated phenomena, the way things appear (their mode of givenness) is also a necessary part of their appearance (the fact of their givenness). Thus, we can understand *givenness* as being where the mode and fact of the appearance of phenomena are the same (Marion 23).

In *Being Given*, Marion uses givenness to think at some length about painting (39). He outlines how a painting is not what it is made up of. None of its facets can be reduced to its essence (the paint, the canvas, the subject matter, the style or genre, the frame etc.); rather it is the multiple ways it becomes visible to those who see it that accounts for its givenness. For Marion, this is a dynamic process of something *becoming* visible. It is the "coming forward" (48) of its visibility, as he puts it, that givenness addresses.

Alain Badiou describes film as life cut out and withdrawn from what is there (27). This cutting from reality is how film becomes (visible to us as) film. What Badiou is asserting is that the counterpoint to life might be film, not because there are no other ways of documenting life, but because of how we experience a break between filmic reality and lived reality. Of course, other mediums of representation, most notably photography, share this notion of the break between reality and representation. But unlike the still photograph, film is saturated with the phenomena of the real, with sound, movement and

time. In *A Single Man*, we can read Ford's visual aesthetic in all its exaggerated gestures as the film explicitly declaring itself as a film, containing sound, movement and time. An example of this cutting from what is there can be seen in a sequence that features near the beginning of the film. It begins with George reversing his car out of his drive as he travels to work. We follow the car in a tracking shot that moves from the outside to the inside, and from the inside to the outside. The sequence is slowed and soundtracked with classical music against the sound of the car's ticking clock, which eventually turns into an echo. In slow motion, we see his neighbourhood, framed by the windows of the car. A girl dances and a small boy aims his toy machine gun at the car. George raises his arm, shapes his fingers into a pistol and closing one eye aims and pretends to shoot. The car continues to move slowly and a neighbour waves to him. In this sequence, what we are seeing is a commentary on cinema from within the film itself. This classical tracking shot restages the experience of cinema, wherein George observes the reality of the world outside from inside his car, through the frame of its windows. As he drives George projects his own inner turmoil onto the ordinary life in his neighbourhood. And even though we know this is his everyday experience of travelling to work, in his perception and in ours as the viewer, reality is seemingly transformed into the world of cinema.

Film constitutes itself as a film because of how its mode of appearance is inscribed into the very way it appears to us (as film). What Ford shows in *A Single Man* is how experiences that become too intense need to be fictionalised and removed from the substrate of the real. The intense shifts in colour throughout the film are not simply visual cues indicating different emotional registers within the film. They are interruptions in the reality of the film that remind us of how it is entirely structured by particular filmic conventions. Its mode of appearance is possible because it is a film, and such a mode of appearance is its filmic reality along with all the tropes of its genre. What this means is that we know what we are watching is, first and foremost, a film. More importantly, we cannot easily shift our perception from the fantasy of watching the film to reality itself. But if we do so, we encounter the gap between the two, between what is film and what is our lived reality or, to put this differently, between the idealism of experience and the material reality of the world. Perhaps, what we should hope for is a reality that incorporates film into its own structure. However, it is the reverse of this, the appearance of reality within the film, that allows us to continue watching unabated. While *A Single Man* has a highly stylised form, with its colour shifts and carefully constructed aesthetics, its idealised reality still takes place within a staged realistic context. In other words, the idealised filmic reality is firmly situated within a framework of an understandable lived reality, even if this is somewhat stylistically exaggerated. At the same time, reality itself appears to be elevated to the level of film. But which comes first, the reality of the idea or the idea of reality?

There is a philosophical tension between our conception of idealism and realism. Idealism takes the position that ideas are what shape our reality. There are no substantive things or objects outside of our consciousness perceiving them. Thus, thoughts and ideas are what shape our reality. Idealism is about how circumstances or conditions are only accounted for

through our awareness of them as ideas. Whereas realism views the world as being full of objects that have properties and qualities and that are there without being thought into existence by thought. The philosophical struggle between idealism and realism can be condensed into the following position. Although we are unable to properly account for the ideas posited by idealism, we do seem able to examine how material reality emerges simply by understanding the conditions of its being. The argument against idealism is that only material reality incorporates the mind and consciousness within it. While idealism is unable to think about itself thinking: its mode of thought does not coincide with the very fact of thought. In film, realism and idealism coincide in a particular way. Films are things, objects, in themselves but they are also intersubjective ideas about other things. They ask us to think. But what should we think about when we watch films? Should we try to understand how closely the realism of a film resembles our own lived reality? Or should we focus on how the ideas a film expresses either do or do not articulate our own beliefs and values? Of course, a film may engender any of these viewpoints or their opposite. Which line of thought is taken will, of course, depend on the film and the audience. But I argue what the experience of film invites, universally, is for an audience to contemplate how the complex and often indescribable nature of our lived experiences and emotional responses are almost always beyond comprehension. In this way, the *subject of the cinematic* understands film as a refraction of a non-understandable life. In other words, films are understood by their direct engagement with what illudes us.

Perhaps, what we should not think about when we watch films is the story itself. In this regard, we can be free to read *A Single Man* in all its explicit visual excess. Ford's visual aesthetics can be understood as the phantasmatic support that ensures the narrative proceeds. But why would we need this to enjoy the film? The clue is in how film operates at the level of fantasy, within the register of its audience's imagination. To think about the *subject of the cinematic* is to be concerned with the ontology of the experience of film. In its formulation, it seeks to question what is necessary for films to appear to us as films. It seems films can only be films when they pass from the realm of idealism to realism and back again continuously. In other words, at the moment where the real of our ideas intersects with our idea of the real. The underpinning element in this passage from realism to idealism is the veil of fantasy that encompasses film. What is most disappointing about most films is the crushing realisation that they are neither real nor entirely unreal. At their most basic level, films stage a visual fantasy in order to temporarily relieve us from having to face our everyday lives. However, it is only once we return to our reality that we are confronted by the pointlessness of our fantasies (Žižek, "Barbie Can't Handle the Truth").

This filmic nihilism arrives, via the Kantian critique of metaphysics, at a point where we can neither grasp the true meaning in a film nor our own film-watching self. Any meaning which should be apparent in life is hollowed out by a cinematically induced nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism is when we realise our attempts to find meaning in the world are themselves meaningless acts (12). We are then condemned to return to find nothingness and to endure that process relentlessly while we survive in the world. Throughout *A*

Single Man, George is both passively and actively nihilistic. His resigned demeanour, his acceptance of his own circumstances, is coupled with a determination to actively end his life in order to stop the visceral pain caused by the death of his lover. The film interweaves the memories of George's past life with Jim into the narrative of the day as it plays out. Many of these sections interrupt the day that George is living as we are transported to an earlier time. It is in these scenes that Ford makes use of colour to delineate the different timelines within the story. If formally the flashbacks create a context to understand how George feels, then what they also do is transform the past into the space of thought. The film shows how George's life is continuously infiltrated by his thoughts about his past. Paradoxically, his grief can only be truly reconciled through a real encounter with another man, Kenny, towards the end of the film. This encounter suggests that George can only really escape grief if he can escape his own thoughts. The appearance of the past, or at least its symbolic texture, smothers and suffocates the day as it is slowly played out in the film. Again, what we see here is how the film presents in George an explicit tension between thought and lived experience. He cannot reconcile the memories he has of Jim with the world he now lives in. Crucially, Jim is only present throughout the day of the film in the form of George's thoughts. In this sense, something of the passage toward filmic nihilism is encapsulated in Jim's death. In its depiction of how George deals with his grief, the film contrasts the present day with the episodic memories of the past.

Mourning is the process of detaching from an object that is no longer there. It requires those who are mourning to accept and acknowledge this loss. For George, the trauma he endures after Jim's death is ever-present. He will never experience any post-traumatic stress as a result of losing Jim because Jim will always be missing, forever absent. There can be no post-trauma since his loss will never pass. What we see in the course of the film is how loss is sustained in different forms. Even though George attempts to function normally, his trauma is renewed moment by moment. Only occasionally is it suppressed or replaced by a distraction or a diversion. The continuity of a life with Jim is replaced by George's ontological uncertainty and, ultimately, his decision to take his own life. Surviving may be the best George can hope for but by the time the film begins even survival seems to be pointless. What does it mean to mourn the loss of someone when that loss is ongoing? Freud points out how there is a tendency to assume that our period of mourning will eventually end and that trying to interfere in the process is not helpful (*On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia 443*). Those in mourning must simply wait until it is overcome. It is only because we can easily explain why we feel this way, i.e. that we can point to its cause, that mourning tends not to be seen as being pathological. And yet it is still possible to watch *A Single Man* and make a diagnosis of the pathology of grief. What resonates throughout the film is how the real of George's world is at the same time both beautiful and tragic. Yet, what we usually fail to grasp is how these two positions are not antagonistically opposed; instead they are rendered together into the tragically beautiful. Through grief emerges the poignant details of all that is left for George. What is often the most painful aspect of any loss, the love of the lost object, is expressed in how George continues to love Jim even though he is no longer alive. This unrequited gesture is what eats away at him

and causes his unbearable suffering. The solution, then, is for George to imagine himself somewhere else. Faced with enduring the pain of living without Jim, we learn at the start of the film how George has decided not to live at all.

It is only at the end of the film, after his evening socialising with Kenny, that George burns the suicide notes he left and locks away his gun. What follows is, perhaps, the true tragedy of the story: a heart attack kills George at the moment he appears to be beginning to find a way to accept his grief. This ending is not only a part of the narrative arc that completes the story but also allows us to see the necessity of what has happened. Once Jim had died, George's life was utterly changed, and he could only really cope with the situation by dying. In presenting this tension between life and death, the film expresses the paradox of the Freudian "death instinct" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) or death drive as it is better known. The death drive is not the endless pull toward death but the relentlessness of living in a state of pain and grief. It is, as Žižek describes it, the state of being undead while living life (*The Parallax View* 62). The death drive is an excess of life that sustains living and is not the wilful urge toward death.

A film's narrative functions like a frame because it gives a particular shape to the story we experience. However, what we might understand as being the spectacle of cinema, with all its incumbent escapist qualities, emerges from the inherent limitations of life itself. Like many forms of entertainment, film provides a distraction from a reality that seems to constrain us. In this way, film can be distinguished from life simply because it is a spectacular, fantasised version of living. It feels as though there is more of life in film than there is in life itself. But film is not a sublimated experience: we are not observing life as we watch a film. There is something distinctly different about watching life as it is mediated in film, not because of how we watch it or the context in which it is watched, but because film life is distinctly different from lived life. There is, then, a kind of persistent excess in all films, an urge to continue, despite everything, that echoes the thematic arc of *A Single Man*.

This brings us to a reflection on the aesthetics of the film. The aesthetic form of A *Single Man* is not neutral, nor is it outside of the narrative. The film itself can be understood by its three distinct layers: the aesthetic-real, the aesthetic-symbolic and the aesthetic-imaginary. In each of these, aesthetics represents a relation between the material and immaterial, "between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas" (Eagleton 13). Not only do the aesthetics of the film provide a texture behind which any audience can escape, but its organisation of the details within the filmic world provide a formal way to cope with the grief and trauma of death that is central to the narrative. In the film, everything is accounted for and every detail is placed with purpose. We see this most obviously as George dresses in the morning and as he organises his things in his home. There is no longer a place for Jim and therefore George reorganises his world with only what is left in his absence. In one scene, a flashback to a phone call about Jim's funeral, the significance of absence is played out when George is told he is not invited. The scene is used, primarily, to highlight social attitudes toward same-sex relationships, but it

also signals how grief is an emotion underwritten by isolation. Despite being surrounded by beautiful things, George is consistently confronted with the ugliness of his world. Importantly, the aesthetic beauty of the film does not function simply as a rhetorical contrast to the sadness of the story, it also helps mask something of the reality of the narrative from the audience. This is necessary since fundamentally all audiences share the isolation George experiences.

Let us consider how each of these layers can be understood within the film. Firstly, the aesthetic-real can be understood through the unbearable reality of life without Jim. This is formally depicted through the film's rendering of a perfectly organised, stylised world. The essential question the film asks is how appearances can be more striking than the miserable reality of George's feelings. However, it is not that either appearances or reality should be prioritised. What matters is the struggle itself: the unresolved tension where the subject is never fully substantiated by either position. Whatever position we feel validated by, there always remains a lingering residue of the opposite position. The filmic reality resides neither in its aesthetic perfection nor in the tragedy of the real; instead, its reality is to be found in the incommensurability of the positions these two set out. The aesthetic-real is therefore a distortion of perspective or position and not a perspectival distortion.

The next layer is the aesthetic-symbolic, the texture of appearances that structure the reality of the film. In the symbolically perfect world, George can be understood as the empty space, the void measured by the richness of everything external to him. In death, he will become the non-subject who represents the impossibility of love and its contradictions. The symbolic themes of the film are love and loss. Love is not about discovering something special in another person. Love is about seeing in the other person their own inability to identify with the special thing you claim you see in them. In this sense, love is about how the person we love cannot identify with what we think we love about them, it is this self-reflective doubting quality we actually love. So it is with film, what satisfies is not the film itself but the aesthetic-symbolic effort to render a film from reality.

Finally, the aesthetic-imaginary can be understood by how George's feelings for Jim cannot be sublimated through anything else. Sublimation is how we replace what we don't have with something else in order to achieve the same kind of feeling or satisfaction. Throughout the film, George is unable to deal with his feelings of loss. We see his frustrated attempts to divert his attention from how he feels to focus on what he can do. This control over what can be ordered and regulated sits in opposition to what is ostensibly out of George's control, namely his thoughts, emotions and the utter devastation at Jim's death. a film sublimates the reality of the audience by projecting a fantasmatic reality in its place.

As I have outlined throughout, phenomenology allows us to describe the world in terms of experience and its appearance to us. But what is the experience of a film beyond being an encounter with sound and vision? More importantly, what does such an experience provide? What I have been

attempting to reflect on is how understanding film experientially reveals not the subject of the film but the *subject of the cinematic*.

Jacques Rancière describes aisthesis as the experience of perceiving things to be art or sensing things to be within one of the many categories of art. Aisthesis is about the "sensible fabric of experience" (Rancière x) in which art is produced. This experience includes not only the material conditions and relations but also incorporates our perceptions, emotions, thoughts and interpretations. All of these operate together to make a work into art. Rancière's thought is useful since it rests on the idea of a transformation of what we sense or understand as art by virtue of the intrusion of everyday things.

Art is fundamentally unconnected from everyday reality. But it only enjoys the status of being art because everyday things can be transformed from life into art. This move, from the ordinary into art, creates a paradigm shift in both art and thought. These are the moments when the world seems differently different. The logic behind the transformation of the ordinary into the world of art, which is driven by thought, perception and affect, is what Rancière calls the "aesthetic regime of art" (xii). His explanation of how everyday things transform into art suggests something that can be related to film. All films, like art, are worlds unconnected from everyday reality. Yet, when reality is represented as film it affects a shift in thought and perception. This happens as a result of the transformation of lived reality into a filmed reality. In addition, there is the paradoxical relationship between a lived reality that contains films within it and how those films are often depictions of lived reality. This paradox is not about the construct of a film within a film that has been used throughout the history of filmmaking, it concerns the reality within a film that is itself in reality. This then brings us to how we might understand films differently.

As I have outlined, our knowledge of films comes to us through our lived reality, yet at the very same time films are also a reality in their own right and they shape the lived reality they emerge from. Of course, we can interpret films, we can theorise them, and we can enjoy them as spectacles or entertainment or as art. We can appreciate how they transform things in the world into a visual representation, augmented by sound and movement. However, the *subject of the cinematic* does not emerge from the consistency of film or from how films themselves are creatively seductive forms of escapism. The claim I make is a formulation in which the *subject of the cinematic* emerges as a nihilistic resistance to the intensity of the experience film. It is the frustration of how film is never enough even when it is all there is. It is the sense of how film is not the flickering movement of light on a screen but the tension between the reality of light and the idealism of the stories it shapes.

Films always leave us. As George says toward the end of *A Single Man*: "I can never make these moments last. I cling to them, but like everything they fade" (01:27:56). Becoming a *subject of the cinematic* is about an ongoing adjustment to the expectations we have of both film and ourselves. It is also

about the realisation that we never fully know the part we will come to play in our own lives.

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