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*An archive of student filmmaking*



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# A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

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As someone who joined Delta Kappa Alpha to try new writing styles and mediums, I wanted to create more opportunities for writers to practice their craft, while also being involved in our usual film programming. *The Cinejournal* was made to be a playground for dekas to experiment with new creative styles and this issue exemplifies that; the stylized cohesion of typical magazines is replaced by unique graphics, writing styles, and layouts throughout the entire magazine. I'm really excited to share this with you all and can't wait to see how *The Cinejournal* grows in the future.

I'd like to give a big thank you to all the incredible writers and artists who made this possible: Giselle Carlos, Leeann Remiker, Zaleah Henderson, Levi French, Wase Sanani, Ally Nercessian, Laura Abellan, and Josh Zhao. Thank you for bringing this to life with me. I couldn't ask for a better team.

Yours in Delta,  
Layth Handoush, Editor-in-Chief

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# THE MAKING OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

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## A Q&A WITH GRACE MILTON

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by Laura B Abellan

*I met with Grace Milton, a writer-director and third-year Gender Studies major originally from Burbank, California. She is also a member of the Delta chapter of the Delta Kappa Alpha film society. Grace has recently completed her first short film, Alcoholics Anonymous, and we broke down all the behind-the-scenes details about the production. Learn more about Grace and her work below*



**Welcome, Grace! So excited to share this time with you and get to know you better. To begin with, could you tell us a little more about yourself?**

I grew up in Los Angeles, in the Burbank area, where all the film and TV studios are, so I was always going on studio tours with my family for fun. Because of that connection, it felt natural in the long run to do something related with entertainment. And as I grew older, I realized I wanted to be a writer, and directing came hand in hand,, so I could make my own stories come to life and share them to the best of my ability.

**What are you studying, by the way?**

I'm a Gender Studies major and a Film minor, so I put a lot of that perspective into the things that I make. I like to make stories about women's experiences. We need more of it, and I've found a lot of joy in doing that. I used to really want to be a Film major, but now I realize I can do movies in my free time; that is one of my passions, for sure.

**Your latest short, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, is currently in post-production. Can you tell us more about it?**

*Alcoholics Anonymous* is the story of a young woman named Christy who's about to graduate college. She is very alone and does not have a lot of friends, so she goes to Alcoholics Anonymous to talk about her relationship issues in private, as a safe space. And in those meetings, she meets a guy named Ethan, and they have a lot of chemistry, and they really hit it off; he shows her that she doesn't have to be that rigid in life. They're two very different people with something to offer to each other. In a nutshell, it's a romcom about these two people that are polar opposites meeting and showing each other that there's more to life than what they're currently doing. And she eventually realizes that she needs to break off with her boyfriend, and she hooks up with Ethan. It's sort of a 'find your independence' story.

**Wow, that is great, thanks Grace. And what inspired you to do it?**

I guess what really drew me to make it was that I had this random image of someone sitting down at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and pretending to be an alcoholic when they're not. And I thought it was really weird and funny, and imagining conversations between two characters like that was what really drew me to the story and to what the characters mean to each other. I enjoyed the idea that these people needed to open up in life, and so they learned not to be judgmental because of the differences. They end up finding each other, and they learn about their values; that connection is really important. Those are things I hope I really communicated in the short.



**Do you think the idea is also related—to some extent—to the end of your school years?**

I've definitely been thinking a lot about that. I'm a junior right now, technically, but I recently found out I only need eighteen units to graduate; that's like one quarter, and I really don't want to graduate early. So there's definitely a bit of anxiety about graduating college and feeling you have to be a whole new person with everything figured out. But I know that's not the case for most people, they graduate and they don't know what they're doing. Even if they know what they're doing, they find out that they don't actually know what they're doing once they graduate.

**Totally agree, life after college should be a whole dedicated course. We know you'll succeed, though! Regarding the production process, were there any challenges that pushed your creativity to the limit?**

The production process was amazing, and my team was great. And honestly, it was also really smooth. I try to do most of my projects low budget and with a very minimal number of spaces. I feel restriction really breeds creativity, like the less you have to work with, the more creative you have to get. So the idea of having just two settings (a parking lot and the meeting room) was the basis for what I wanted to create here. All of the actors that auditioned were fantastic. We were in the audition room for a long time because we were having such a hard time deciding, we had so much awesome talent show up. And the two actors we did eventually cast, we cast them because they had great chemistry. We thought they really understood the characters very well.



**And how did you find the locations?**

We had one big location scout day, and honestly, there was one location that I really wanted to use that we didn't end up getting to utilize. I really was hoping to be able to film in the backlot of the TFT (Theatre, Film, and Television) school in

Melnitz for the outdoor scenes, where there was this perfect spot with a staircase and a no-smoking sign. It was perfect for the irony, because the actors had to smoke in front of the camera. And then we get there on the shoot day, and we're going for a rehearsal of the scene, and someone comes out of one of the stages inside the building, and they told us they were actually filming in there, so they couldn't have us talking outside. So we had to adapt and switch to a different area, and it worked fine, but I wished we could have filmed that there, the sign would have worked great.



**That's a good thing to know. And how was it working with the actors? Can you tell us any anecdotes from the directing process?**

Cam and Adam were great actors. I feel the characters, their tones and voices, came really naturally to them. That's what I loved about them. And they already got that connection in the auditions. Especially Cameryn, she has such great comedic timing and personality, I was giggling in the audition when she was speaking for the character. One really hilarious anecdote happened during the smoking scene. The situation with the actors was the reverse of what the characters were experiencing, where Adam, who's playing Ethan, had never smoked a cigarette before, while Cam (who didn't have to smoke) actually knew how. We had to do so many takes of him lighting and inhaling the cigarette, I felt so bad! Luckily, they're herbal cigarettes, but those taste even worse. So, we had many takes of him trying to light it and breathe it naturally, and he would try and it wouldn't light, it was just really funny, but I felt for him. And it was so late, too. It was one of the last scenes we were shooting that day.

**What was a valuable lesson that you learned after having filmed that you didn't expect?**

The lesson that I actually learned is that it's okay as a director to tell people what to do. I feel writing comes a lot more naturally to me than directing. I feel more comfortable writing than directing. I can express a lot more if I have time to actually sit down and think, versus, say it out loud while on set with all the time constraints and a team to lead, so that was a challenge for me. And I also have a hard time calling cut. I look around, and I wonder, 'Is everyone done? Is everyone okay with me calling cut right now?' It's definitely a learning experience, and I want to direct more projects so that I have the opportunity to learn how to speak up for my artistic vision and myself, and feel I'm in control of the set to allow the collaborative process to happen.

**And why do you think that this is a film that matters here and now?**

I definitely feel it touches upon a lot of subjects that are very relevant today, like the youth culture right now. I feel graduating seniors or anyone in their later half of college can relate to that aspect, the anxiety that's looming there. And I think the film really tells people that it's going to be okay, even if you don't know what's going on. It's fine, and it'll work out. And you don't have to know exactly where you're heading to be a valuable person, and that's expressed in the metaphor of Christy's relationship, while it can apply to a lot of other things, too.

**I like that, it is an optimistic message. We need more of those right now.**

Yes, it's an optimistic message. And this idea of shielding yourself, like not wanting to experience other things outside of what you already know, is very prominent in our culture right now, and I think it's because people are very afraid of what is going to happen in our adult lives. There's such a terrible economy, and so we want to feel like we're sticking to what we're doing, and we're doing it well, and so we can know what we're aiming to, and stay with it, even if it's not making us happy. You know, hard choices. And I think that *Alcoholics Anonymous* is combating that feeling a little bit.



**Can you tell us more about the directors and styles you enjoy that influenced your narratives?**

I saw this movie in a film class, and I fell in love with it instantly. It's called *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, and it's this Spanish film by director Pedro Almodóvar. It's amazing. I love the comedy, and it's just about ladies losing their minds, but with their friends. It's a really aesthetically inspiring film, too, it's just fantastic. And in terms of TV, I also was inspired by the show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. I love how casual the dialogue feels, where you hear the characters bouncing off each other. It just feels very naturalistic, but also kind of over-the-top and funny. So I'd say those are really two big inspirations for me.

**Are you thinking of taking the movie to the festival route? Where would you like the film to premiere?**

I would absolutely love for it to go into a festival! I'm expecting the editing to be completely done by the end of Winter quarter, so Spring will be the perfect season for festivals. I know there are some student festivals specifically, as well as indie filmmakers fest, which I think would be the perfect place for it. That's very ambitious. I don't have any specific names in mind, but the premiere will probably not be at a festival, just with friends and family, crew and cast, in a safe space.

**Are you thinking of taking the movie to the festival route? Where would you like the film to premiere?**

Really love what you write before you get into the process of directing! If you're confident in what you have written, and everything that you want to have is actually in there, go for it. When you have gone through all the process and thought of how you want to shoot it and why, it makes directing a lot easier, because you have that confidence instilled in you already. And also, don't be afraid of what you're writing. If you're enjoying what you're saying, and you would watch what you're putting down on paper as a movie, I think that's a great sign to make your script into a short.

**Any upcoming ideas for your next project? Would you be exploring the same topics, or would you be pivoting towards other genres?**

I think I would like to stick with the genre of comedy for my next project. I feel it comes easily for me in a short film context because good comedy is fast comedy, so it fits perfectly in a short story span. I think I'd want to make one that explores...female friendships. I do have one idea about a road trip between a group of five friends who maybe don't even like each other that much anymore. But there's still something very deep and connected there where they don't want to say that out loud. I'm figuring out what those themes and the message would be in my head right now, but I think I will be writing that one soon. I don't know if I'll be able to film it while in school though, because it's sort of a complicated thing to film, like an interior car scene on a road trip, but we'll see.

**Thanks so much for giving us a door into your creative process and all your insight, Grace. We look forward to watching the film soon. Before we wrap, is there any other thing that you want to add?**

Thank you so much for sitting down with me. I'm really, really excited to have the short premiere, I'm just about to watch the first cut soon. It's been really nice having the opportunity to share the details of the film with you. I liked all the questions you asked. Hope you can see it soon!

# “Orientation” by Daniel Orozco in Conversation with The Office (US): How Workplace Comedies Reinforced Failing Post-Recession Capitalism

By Leeann Remiker

For the past four decades, the American entertainment apparatus has played a major role in shaping how audiences understand labor, capitalism, and ethical responsibility in the workplace. The genre of workplace comedies, particularly seen in works like *The Office* (2005-2013), frame the workplace not as a site of economic precarity or of systemic failure but as a space of identity, belonging, joy, and “family.” While these comedies appear to critique the absurdities of corporate culture, and even began their run as just that, after the 2008 Recession and the fallout thereafter, their humor ultimately came to soften the realities of overwork, stagnant wages, toxic management, and Sisyphean meaninglessness. By inviting audiences (after their day of work) to watch and empathize with characters trapped inside exploitative institutions, workplace comedies normalize those institutions themselves.

Before the recession, early 2000s workplace comedies such as *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and *Office Space* (1999) cast the office sometimes bleak space; through discomfort. from the banality of la- of management. But workplace comedies pedagogical turn. (2009-2015) and (2013-2021), and the *Office* (U.S., 2005-reaucratic institutions purpose-driven en- dedicated employees change, or at least find along the way. In these



economic hardship and grander cultural ennui was not structural reform but the strengthening of the professional community and the pursuit of individual passion projects inside the workplace. In contrast to the optimistic, purpose-driven ethos of *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *The Office*, Daniel Orozco's *Orientation* (1994) preserves the earlier, bleaker vision of office life as a space defined by depersonalization, meaningless ritual, and quietly devastating absurdity. The short story treats the workplace as a bureaucratic purgatory: employees egregiously expand or compress their labor to fill the workday, tragedies must not interfere with productivity, and even horrible boundary violations, such as LaFountaine's forays into the women's restroom, are absorbed into the full flat line of routine. Early *Office* episodes share this absurdist tone. "Sexual Harassment" (S2 Ep2) exposes a workplace marked by hostility, systemic sexism, and a refusal to take HR seriously; Michael Scott (Steve Carrell) and Todd Packer's (David Koechner) behavior is clearly harmful, even

as a claustrophobic, the goal was satire Their humor derived labor and the ineptitude after 2008, American took a decisive and *Park and Recreation* *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* main culprit, *The Office* (2005-2013), reframed but through optimistic, environments where could enact meaningful love and friendship shows, the solution to

even though Michael is given the opportunity to redeem himself when he checks Packer's joke at the end of the episode, however flawed. The show frames this sexual harassment comedically, flip-pantly, and as harmful to only those who are cagey or prudish about sex. Like Orozco's office, Dunder Mifflin initially presents itself as an institution where employees numb themselves through ritual and banter, where crises are managed through denial, and where people remain stuck in cycles of insecurity and inertia. But as the series progresses, especially in "Niagara" (S6 Ep 4 and 5) and "Good-bye, Michael" (S7 Ep 22), the show undergoes a tonal transformation from cynicism to cloying. The office replaces family; coworkers attend Jim (John Krasinski) and Pam's (Jenna Fischer) wedding en masse, Michael offers a paternal toast, and personal milestones unfold to become company-wide events. Where *Orientation* insists on the impossibility of genuine connection within corporate structures, *The Office* eventually finds salvation in those very structures. The grim absurdity of Orozco's story makes the show's turn toward warmth even more striking: the same institutional conditions that



crush individuality in *Orientation* are redeemed in the *The Office* through community, a bizarre amount of successful office relationships, and the rhetoric of an "office family," a shift that aligns perfectly with the cultural demands of a post-recession capitalism.

Kerry Soper's analysis of *The Office* further illuminates how this tonal shift reflects larger transformations in the politics of the genre of comedy under late capitalism, and the robbery of comedy's greatest powers, its ability to critique power structures and uphold democracy. *The Office* more or less excels at this in its original seasons. Jim is always there to undercut Michael's insanity, Dwight is always there to serve as a reminder of the absurdity of corporate culture. Soper argues that the show's deadpan naturalism and broken sitcom conventions, like the lack of a laugh track, ordinary-looking (and, originally unknown) actors, mockumentary realism, initially function as a form of anti-comedy, an antidote to the slick artificiality of traditional sitcoms. In its early seasons, the show uses this aesthetic to

critique postmodern work culture: the collapse of boundaries between public and private life, technological acceleration, anti-union corporate rhetoric, and the demand that workers devote both too much and too little of themselves to their jobs. Episodes like “The Alliance” (S1 Ep4) in which downsizing rumors are glossed over with an absurd birthday party for Meredith (Kate Flannery), exemplifying how management weaponizes festivity to obscure hierarchy, co-opt satirical impulses, and neutralize resistance. As Kerry Soper argues, *The Office*’s form initially functioned as an antidote to overproduced sitcoms. Yet its satirical energy gradually softened into “a superficially flexible and progressive work environment” that masked the economic anxieties of postmodern labor.

For Soper, this process reflects a broader tendency of the culture to commodify subversive or democratic comedic forms, as corporate structures seek ideological hegemony. *The Office* becomes a product that softens its own critiques, transforming carnivalesque disorder into something safe, consumable, and privately pleasurable. By the later seasons, the show’s sentimental focus on the “office family” reveals how effectively satire has been absorbed into corporate mythology. The characters’ drifting, absurd, and often meaningless careers echo the existential tone of *Orientation*, yet unlike Orozco’s workers, whose alienation is eternally unredeemed, Jim and Pam ultimately acquiesce to the very system that traps them. Their passivity and longing for stability become an emotional justification for the fantasy that corporate life can provide belonging and purpose. In Soper’s work, this evolution marks the collapse of comedy’s critical edge into corporate affirmation, a shift that mirrors the post-recession need to re-enchant the workplace, even at the cost of obscuring its structural failures. While both “*Orientation*” and *The Office* depict the absurdity and meaninglessness embedded in American office life, *The Office* ultimately comes to reinforce post-recession capitalist structures by reframing systemic dysfunction as charming, humorous, and emotionally fulfilling. In contrast, “*Orientation*” refuses sentimentality in all its forms: its rigid rules, depersonalized workers, and surreal escalations illuminate the dehumanizing logic of late stage capitalism without offering viewers the consolations of community, narrative resolution, or love. Together, these texts reveal how workplace comedies have shifted from critiques of bureaucratic absurdities to cultural instruments that soothe audiences within the very systems that exploit them.



# ALPHA

AND THE DISTANCE OF GRIEF



*by Josh Zhao*

“I caught something.” Amin (Tahar Rahim) whispers to his niece, a five-year-old Alpha (Ambrine Trigo Ouaked/Mélissa Boros), before slipping off into a substance-induced high. These haunted words permeate Julia Ducournau’s “Alpha”, an interwoven and enigmatic depiction of the height of the 1980s-90s AIDS/HIV epidemic. Rife with personal tragedy, indiscriminate paranoia, and prejudice, “Alpha” eschews the direct viscera of the body horror genre in favor of a more psychologically driven multi-character (and multi-generational) drama.

The opening sequence, set to the blurry psychedelic tone of Portishead’s “Roads”, thrusts the viewer into a party with a band of rebellious teenage misfits - filled with smoking, drugs, and flirtatious exploration. The dramatic premise unfolds as a strong-willed and wiry Alpha (Mélissa Boros) receives a crude stick and poke tattoo of the letter “A” by one of her peers. Upon returning home, her equally tenacious Maman (vividly portrayed by Golshifteh Farahani) fervently questions her about the tattoo. As a mother, and a doctor at that, she fears that Alpha may have contracted the bloodborne virus plaguing the community - one that has been slowly and excruciatingly turning its victims into marble statues. There lies the fidelity of “Alpha” (as with much of her oeuvre): body horror is utilized to transform identity and social perception.

Awaiting test results (administered by an Infirmière played by Emma Mackey), Amin suddenly reintroduces himself into the mother-daughter duo’s life. To Alpha’s alienating shock (yet her mother’s familiarity), it’s as if she has seen a ghost. “I may not be



mentioned, but I do exist,” he says. A statement that epitomizes those who face substance use disorders, shunned into the margins of a paranoid society. The narrative unravels as the family trio’s dynamics suffer under the weight of the pandemic’s uncertainty and their own acceptance of terms yet to be defined.

The tattoo’d “A” spurs both horror and alienation amidst her peers. Acting as a beacon of visual enmity à la Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter, classmates take every chance to spew and perpetuate hateful rhetoric. Attempting to lock Alpha into a shower stall or fearing her participation in school sports - there is absolute disdain. Similar to another film in this year’s Un Certain Regard category, Charlie Pollinger’s “The Plague”, Ducournau understands that youth social circles are vitriolic, acting on a basal level of perception and understanding. In

the world of adults, social ostracization is still vastly present, albeit quietly. They grapple with the reality of the slow transformation on loved ones, grieving and loving in the face of apparent defeat. In this manner, Maman is the narrative's crux by exploring her tumultuous past with Amin and her future with Alpha. Traversing both worlds of her peers and adult figures, Alpha gains a duality that entrenches the film's ideas.

Amidst the new-wave of modern horror films, Ducournau's cinema remains distinct for its ubiquitous display of identity and family. Her Cronenberg-esque ties lay not in body horror but in her empathetic exploration of interpersonal connection in the face of its apparent viscera. The transformation of flesh to marble is slight but vivid. In a scene where patients in varying stages of infection crowd an overwhelmed hospital, the initial visual shock gives way to an empathetic understanding. "He's my brother", a family member pleads to Maman. The inherent objectification of turning into stone is subverted when the narrative makes an emphasized point that these are family and friends. An empathy lost upon many who seek an alienating lens of "preservation".



Structurally, "Alpha" is hypnotically edited together. Ducournau - and longtime collaborating editor, Jean-Christophe Bouzy - offers an assemblage of the present and past, climaxing in a piercing blend of both. Shrewdly setting the film

through the lens of a teenager, Ducournau provides a double-edged effect of temporal distance and juvenile naivety. Aptly drawing on her own personal experiences growing up in the crisis, Ducournau describes the period as a "society cannibalizing itself". Where animosity is self-sustaining, crumbling the roots of societal affinity into dust (embodied by the film's namesake red wind). In the cryptic manner in which the narrative is assembled, yet its bluntly laid out thematic exploration of mortality, the film embodies the appearance of a director's "late style" legacy piece (with Cronenberg's "The Shrouds" coming to mind). However, the film struggles to find its pacing with its more grandiose disposition.

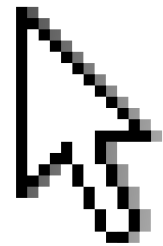
"Alpha" is Ducournau's personal reckoning with a period fueled by ignorant prejudice. A haze of memory shadows the film, refusing to grant a certain clarity. It is a memory of agony and grief, but one filled with determined beauty. She grants Alpha and Maman the dignity of remembrance in our mind-numbing digital era, which seeks to forget. The distance of memory is never as far as it seems. Left untouched, it crystallizes into a behemoth. "Alpha" works best at its extremes - the quiet intimacy of family, and the grandiose scale of the epidemic - struggling to find a clear balance between the two. Despite its unsteady nature, it manages to capture the empathetic essence that is sorely lacking in a world of violence.

# HUMAN INPUT

## A Director's Introspective

by Giselle Carlos

A few weeks ago, I was able to sit down with the writer-director of DKA's second winter production, *Human Input*. Lucy Ballinger is a fourth-year student at UCLA majoring in Theater, and has been a member of the fraternity since Fall of 2024. Since the moment I met Lucy, I was struck by her drive and creativity, as well as her openness with everyone she interacts with. I wasn't at all surprised when she birthed *Human Input*, a compelling story about two students who discover something sinister at the company they're interning at. It explores complex topics like the rise of AI, college internship culture, and the untouchable Big Guys Up There. I was lucky enough to be a part of the crew and watch Lucy at work – but this interview took place the week before filming, where I caught her at the cusp of watching her brain child come to life, a special moment for any writer or director.



It's late February, chilly enough for me to put on a cardigan as I walk through Westwood's shabby streets. Lucy's apartment is fitting, quaint and baby blue, tucked up a set of stairs. The inside has potted plants and a comfortable couch I've frequented a few times (i.e, on the set of *Human Input*). I walk in as she's packing for our upcoming retreat, which we're both leaving for the next day. As always, she's bright and attentive as I ask her questions. We make conversation about politics, our writing processes, AI, and our beloved DKA.

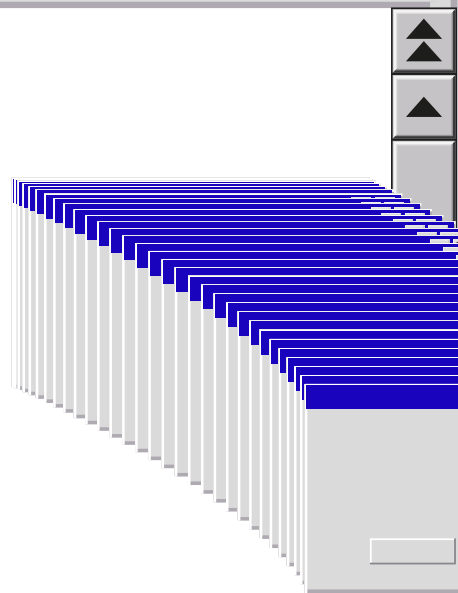
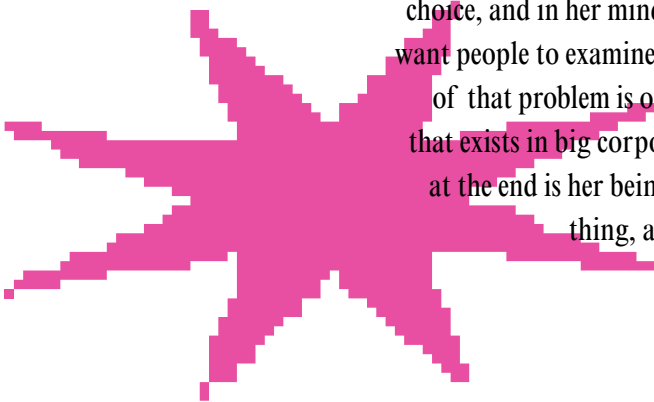


**G: The central theme, the hallmark, of “Human Input” is its narrative focus on the darker, grittier side of internship culture, as well as the rise of AI. What personal experiences did you bring to the table when writing?**

**L:** Wow, well, personally, there’s a lot of things that I brought to it. The first thing is that I was an unpaid intern. Obviously, I was not doing computer science or anything quite like that since I’m a theater major and also studying film. But, nonetheless, I did feel in my unpaid interness, that I was doing a lot of labor for no money and honestly, not much else. I wouldn’t say that I had a bad internship experience, not gonna throw that out there— but, it just, you know, it really illuminated to me how crazy it is that unpaid internships are even a thing at all, especially considering that we’re college educated UCLA Bruins working so hard – some of the smartest minds of the generation at this school who are doing free work just to maybe get a job in the future – maybe. And that just doesn’t sit right with me. In terms of the more AI route, one of my roommates had an internship this summer, not unpaid, he was paid quite well actually – he did fine. But, he was doing comp sci stuff and realized that he was programming AI, kind of like the interns in the film are. He came home at one point and was like “I feel as though I’m in kind of an ethical dilemma of ‘I’m doing this stuff with my job and this is what my degree is for, but it still feels a little more morally ambiguous’” but that’s just the reality of the tech-media landscape at this point. If you’re studying math or comp-sci, you’re studying AI. So, it was interesting to watch him grapple with that. I’ve been feeling that with our industry as well, film and acting and television and entertainment as a whole, we’ve just been having so many AI-related conversations this year, in every single one of my classes. I never expected actors would be the type of people to fear AI, and now I’m actually fearing AI. I do think in film and acting, you need the human voice, but it’s been very relevant in my classes and stuff, so it’s definitely something that’s been on my mind.

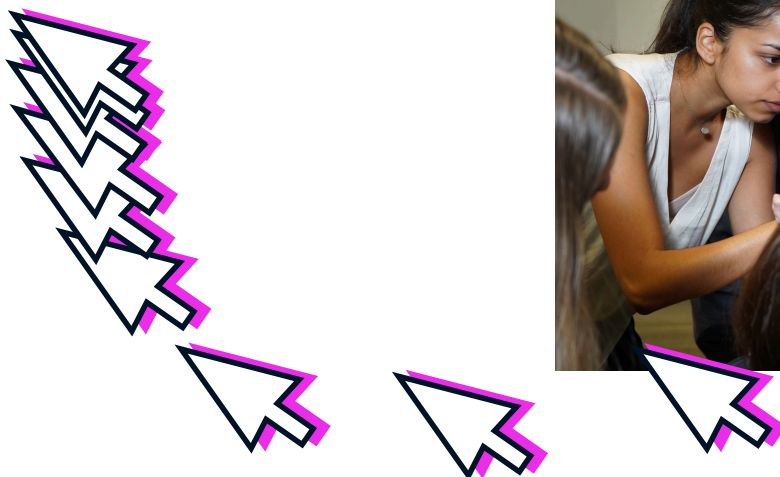
**G: And what do you hope audiences will gain from watching the film?**

**L:** The film has kind of a grim ending, doesn’t it? In that, one of the interns chooses to sacrifice her peer instead of standing up to the authoritative oppressor because it’s kind of the only choice, and in her mind, it’s the only way out. What I want the message of that to be, and what I want people to examine more so, is how people are pinned against each other when the root cause of that problem is often in just the completely other reality, this type of untouchable presence that exists in big corporate leaders. I wanted to visualize that a bit, and I think that Nia’s choice at the end is her being a kind of cog in the system. And she’s doing what she thinks is the right thing, and she is taking action, but she’s taking action against the wrong person.



**G:** How do you feel the two protagonists contribute to the story's voice and nuances? What led you to the decision to have two protagonists over one, and why the ones you chose? In what ways do they push the story forward?

**L:** I'll start with the fact that I absolutely wanted two because I did want to show the camaraderie side of internships and just being a young person entering any industry at this point, in the year of 2026, and your peers, and coming out of school, and coming out of college – that's just a big part of the culture. So, I definitely wanted them to be able to be each other's rock in this very precarious situation. In addition, I wanted to showcase that competitive side as well. Both Nia and Josh are obviously successful and were chosen for this internship, but I think the internship is a means of pitting them against each other and constantly having to prove that they are the "top intern" and they're the most prepared person, so even though they're friends they're also somewhat adversaries. In that way, I thought the two-person dynamic was most essential. In terms of their differences and what they each bring, I think Nia represents more of the self-motivated grittiness. She has that ambition, and that's why she's been successful and is the "survivor" at the end of the film. She's the one who I think is a little more self-motivated and self-aware of the situation she's in, and she's a little more comfortable with the moral ambiguity cause she's a little more power hungry. And no harm in saying that! That's what she's gotta be at this point, and that's what we're told, and what professors tell us – you have to be ahead of everyone else. Especially as an actor, something we hear all the time is "no one in this industry wants you." No one needs you, no one's asking for you to do this, you have to be running for it. So I think she represents that ambition. Josh is also ambitious, but I'm imagining for different reasons; Josh represents external pressure that can fall on a younger person, whether Josh has family that's relying on him, or friends, or, you know? I think that a lot of kids at UCLA and in general feel as though they're in a provider position, especially being at a prestigious school. Nia and Josh don't go to UCLA, in theory, but I imagine they're in a high level institution as well.





**G: You mentioned some of the comps for the film were *Black Mirror*, *Severance*, and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. What other films from the sci-fi thriller genre did you draw inspiration from? And/or what parts of these comps particularly inspired you?**

**L:** I watched *Save the Green Planet*, a 2004 Korean film that was the original *Bugonia*. That film is so inspiring for me because I love the way it balances sci-fi, horror, and humor. I watched that film for one of my film classes, and it was the first one I've seen where the entire class was up in their seats the entire time, eyes open, laughing, engaged. That already made it so fun, but I just loved that film. The pace of it is so great, it's pretty different from my story but it has similar conspiracy elements, which I love, as well as a footage effect it includes, which I love too. It's also just really funny, and I think all great sci-fi/horror movies are a little bit funny. Another inspiration was *Fight Club*. I love the footage sequence in that, where they're fighting in the stairwell in the end and he's just fighting himself. I love that. I love intercutting for pacing, and I do it a couple times in this short film, and I think it moves the pace forward. I'm super into surrealist stuff, I'm very inspired by Charlie Kaufman. He's more surreal than what I'm doing here, of course, but something about those movies have just an unsettling tone about them and I love them.

**G: As we all know in *DKA*, you are a very talented actress and a UCLA TFT student. How do you feel your experience as an actress shaped or helped your writing? Have you written something before?**

**L:** Well, as an actor, I feel like I've been forced to be a writer, always, in the sense that we're constantly writing our own stuff in school. I also have a pretty significant improv background – I did seven years of improv – which is building a world and being a character and all that. And as an actor, I'm supposed to do so much writing too because your imagination is supposed to fill in all the blanks that the script doesn't show, so I'm so used to receiving a script and being like "okay, here's my character, here's what I know, and now I need to write, like, an essay, about their history." And I come from an especially methodical acting background. The methodology that speaks to me the most is Uta Hagen. With Uta Hagen, the whole philosophy is that you need to know the characters as well as if you know your own self. Like right now, I could tell you a memory from my childhood or what I ate for dinner yesterday. You as the character need to have that same level of inner world and depth. You need to do so much of the work, and so much research and writing work, so that when you actually show up on set or on a stage, you forget all of that and you just live in it. All of that being said, I'm very comfortable with developing a world around a character. Because of that, building a world around these characters felt pretty natural to me and also just writing dialogue felt comfortable because I'm so comfortable speaking dialogue. It's easy for me to just be like, speaking it out loud as I go or being able to visualize the scene or see how it'll play out. Also, as an actor, I've encountered a lot of good writing and a lot of bad writing. It's hard when it's your own writing, because I have moments even now, when I look at a script and I'm like "would anyone say this ever?" But I still think the acting background is useful, and gives me some

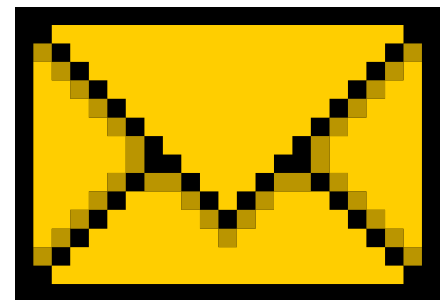
perspective into character motivations and all of that. Other than that, I have a fairly big creative background, I grew up creative writing and I've taken a couple creative writing classes at UCLA. And for class, I've always had to write scenes, sketches, etc. I've written some screenplay stuff, but this is the first fully completed script I've done. And it's getting made!

**G: Since I'm interviewing you pre-filming, I'm wondering how you're going into this as the director. How are you feeling about filming, and what headspace do you want to be on the day of filming? What do you feel is going to be especially important to keep in mind while directing in order to create the story you'd like to?**

**L:** Ugh, well, I've been playing the producer game all year. I produced in the fall, and I've still been producing acting showcases this quarter. I think it's been so much producing that next week, I just want to remember that I am not producing and just relax a little bit. I'm so used to being like 'I have to think about this, this, and this,' so my director's plan is to not think about anything at all except for directing, and being present with the actors, and all of that good stuff. I'm excited to be creative and be present on set. I'm so lucky to have a crew of like fifty people, so we're gonna be fine. So many people are going to cover me and cover each other, so I'm feeling really excited about it. I've already rehearsed with my actors, and we're rehearsing more next week, and that's all been so much fun. I also just want to treat it for myself, a little bit too, almost like I'm doing my acting work but for all three characters. I do think good directors are always able to answer a question, so if an actor asks me about history or relationships, I want to be ready. So, I want to take the end of this week and the beginning of next week to delve into the world and have the world as I've made it be what it is and let my imagination fill in all the blanks, so that when we show up on filming, I know everything that has happened prior to that scene and that moment. Realistically, it's not gonna be that crazy, but moreso, I want to sit down and be sure that I know what's going on. It'll be all improv, yeah.

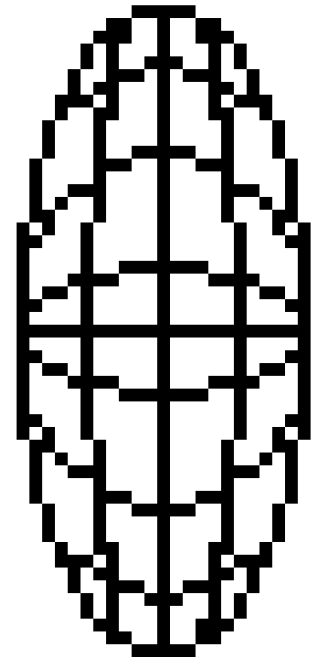
**G: And how does it translate, from, you know, being an actor and receiving direction, to being a director and giving it?**

**L:** It translates majorly because I just know what type of note works and what type of note doesn't. Any sort of emotional note is such a no-no for me. You never tell someone to be sad or be more enthusiastic, it's gotta come from action and motivation and verbs, as they say. Because that's my acting philosophy, I feel like I can translate that into directing pretty well and give notes that are more actionable. In acting class, we talk about how the most important person in the scene is the other person, so every single line that you say, you're saying it because of them. I feel like I want to channel that into the notes I'm giving and make sure I'm really focused on relationships as the most important thing, and not just how things look or appear.



**G: Why choose DKA in particular to create your film? And how do you think the members of DKA will fare in bringing your film to life?**

**L:** Ah, well, that last question I just feel great about. I mean, DKA is just so many talented people and so many people that can do things that I can't even fathom trying to do. So, that's easy. In terms of why DKA in the first place, the truthful answer is that if I were trying to do this without something like DKA, it just wouldn't get done. Especially being in school, just because I'm a little picky, especially about my own work and I'm a perfectionist and that's a quality I'm trying to let go of a little bit. For that reason, I think that if I wasn't given a timeline, the timeline would just be never-ending and it'd never get made. I'd second-guess so many things, and now, I'm in a position where there's nothing to second guess – it's happening. With or without me, it's happening, so I'd better be ready. And that's so great about doing it with DKA. I had to buck up and pitch the script, script got picked – great! Let's go, full steam ahead, and the balls rolling. It's good for me to have that motivator and be like 'I have to lock in.' This isn't something I can put off for other things. I have to put this creative project that is my own, first which is really scary. And the timeline feels so small, but it's good because if it was bigger, it'd be too big and I'd be overthinking it and all this stuff. And now I've been given the room to be comfortable with what it is. And, again, the people in DKA. Even if I were to somehow self produce this on my own – which wouldn't happen – it would all be DKA people, anyway. So why not do it within the club? So many talented people, so many people who've worked on so many different things, so many different projects. It's pretty wild.



**G: And what do you think the film represents about DKA's core values?**

**L:** In terms of DKA's core values, I think the film has a level of resiliency and diligence about it. These two main characters are pretty resourceful in how they handle the situation. Obviously there's panic and commotion and all these things, but the fact that Josh even got to this point where he was able to uncover this big secret, that takes a lot of courage. And that's not technically a DKA value, but I think a lot of our values require a bit of bravery to execute. And there is an element of camaraderie, and at the end, they're friends who are trying to figure it out and are there for each other. And I think that's DKA resourcefulness and diligence.

G: Lastly, if there was one thing you could hope audiences would take away from watching your short, what would it be?

L: I guess the one thing is that if action is not actively taken against these types of institutions, where power is so isolated in small quantities and amongst few people, that only the people on the bottom are going to lose. I guess that's what I'm aiming to show, in the ending, in that Josh gets hurt at the hand of his peer. Brian is the one in the wrong in every single way, but the one that loses in the end is a peer of our protagonist. And that's something I wanted to emulate since it's such a recent thing in our political and economic landscape. The people on top stay on top, and I wanted to bring attention to that, even though there's no solution. The film doesn't have a solution, I don't claim to know any sort of solution – but it is something to keep in your mind's eye.



# Absence of Joy in Latin American Cinema - *Canoa: A Shameful Memory* and *La Ciénaga* By Leeann Remiker

Latin American cinema has long served as a vehicle for political and social critique, exposing the underlying postcolonial structures that sustain oppression and decay, and has also served to preserve and harness moments of Latin American joy and camaraderie. Felipe Cazals' *Canoa: A Shameful Memory* (1976) and Lucrecia Martel's *La Ciénaga* (2001) are films that engage with these themes from starkly different aesthetic vantage points. Yet, both interrogate the consequences of isolation and paranoia induced by post-colonial stressors. *Canoa*, a film set in rural Mexico, portrays the horrors of mass hysteria and state-sanctioned brutality at the hands of one's own community, while *La Ciénaga*, centered on a decaying upper-class Argentine family enduring a suffocatingly humid summer, depicts the slow, self-induced rot of privilege and detachment. Both *Canoa* and *La Ciénaga* offer contrasting explorations of the power of joy as a force of resistance: *Canoa* presents fleeting yet impactful moments of camaraderie and laughter between the doomed boys as a memorable counterweight to their impending deaths, while *La Ciénaga* renders joy completely absent, illustrating the moral stagnation of the white-passing Argentine aristocracy. Joy, whether present or absent, functions as a crucial marker of national resilience, shaping the fate of individuals and societies within oppressive, post-colonial structures. Through cinematography, sound design, and narrative structure, both films critique the lingering, everpresent effects of colonialism, economic disparity, and social fragmentation, revealing that unity and joy are not only humanizing forces but also essential tools in resisting systemic decay.

In *Canoa*, camaraderie persists in the face of destruction. The university employees, portrayed as innocent victims of red-scare mass hysteria, share a sense of youthful optimism and fraternity throughout the first half of the film. Cazal employed the real-life "infamous massacre at Tlatelolco" to create an experimental and deeply felt "simulated documentary... with a narrative rendering to events" (Treviño). Their journey to the hike they never do represents a connection to national progress, a belief in friendship and national identity as a force for change, and a representation of unity in the face of colonial violence and influence. Even as the boys face the brutality of their own community, fueled by Red Scare paranoia and distrust of their (perceived) academic class, their bond underscores a form of resistance— the refusal to succumb to fear, a commitment to staying together. These moments of laughter and camaraderie, distinct from the comedic, inobtrusive "churro" films of 1960s and 70s Mexican cinema, function as a form of defiance against systemic oppression, demonstrating how unity and connection challenge "othering," the divisive tactics imposed by colonial capitalism and racism (Treviño). By contrast, *La Ciénaga* presents a world devoid of human connection, or a family driven by libidinal desires and a selfish desire to maintain power and, therefore, indolence. The "zombie-like" existence of the inexplicably wealthy protagonists see them trapped in their own lethargy,



sinking slowly into a swamp of their own design, drinking and languishing in a dilapidated country house, a symbol of the corrosive power of capitalism on national unity (Gemünden). Unlike *Canoa*, where solidarity is violently ripped apart yet remains intact until the end, *La Ciénaga* suggests that the ruling class has lost all capacity for joy, rotting away in their privilege as their racism and isolation corrode their soul, ultimately eroding any sense of national solidarity or community necessary to combat the racist implication of colonial structures.

Both films explore gender dynamics: while *Canoa* exposes the consequences of a dominant, violent theocratic patriarchy, *La Ciénaga* stresses inter-feminine warfare fueled by class discrepancies, namely between Mecha and her maid, Isabel. *Canoa* sees the power concentrated in the hands of a corrupted, patriarchal system, helmed by the priest. This priest, a representative of both religious and political authority, manipulates the townspeople into attacking the outsiders, our protagonists, embodying the toxic influence of authoritarian control. Women in the town, while present, are largely silenced, unable to intervene in the cycle of paranoia and violence. The priest's control over the people not only perpetuates fear but also dismantles any sense of community resistance, inducing inter-class warfare and ensuring national unity remains fractured for the sake of capitalism and control. The rise in films like *Canoa*, as well as *El Apando* and *Zapata* represent not only an "impatience with churros" but also a desire to introduce a new style of filmmaking that reflected true Mexican values and resistance (Treviño). In *La Ciénaga*, notably directed by woman Lucrecia Martel, matriarchy reinforces the film's critique of social stagnation and the regression of inter-gender



conflict in the face of colonial powers and poverty. Mecha, the family's matriarch, dully presides over her haptic household with detached apathy, physical fragility, and loose, revealing clothing mirroring the decline of her social class. Rather than offering guidance of stability, she is consumed in her own malaise, and her own alcoholism, allowing chaos to fester. If *Canoa* demonstrates the brutality of patriarchal oppression, *La Ciénaga* presents a vision of a failed matriarchy, a lack of direction, and female solidarity resulting in generational decay, which ensures that unity and collective joy remain inaccessible to those under its influence. The portrayal of class in both films further highlights their contrasting themes: *Canoa* centers on the struggles of working-class young men against class contemporaries, and working-class farmers subjected economically and morally by the priest. The victims of the beatings are poor, unable to defend themselves against deep-seated fears and superstitions that the priest can exploit because of his economic status. Their suffering is not only a moment of grotesque physical violence but also a larger metaphor for state oppression and the suppression of Latin American connection. *La Ciénaga* turns the violence inward. The upper-class characters engage in self-destructive lethargy, "sensuality, dread, paralysis," and violence towards their surroundings and their servants (Gemünden). They demonstrate that their privilege does not protect against societal collapse, it only delays it.

Both *Canoa* and *La Ciénaga* use formal techniques to reinforce their themes of oppression and decay, using distinct camera work and narrative experimentation to create a sickening and doomed atmosphere. *Canoa* employs an almost cheeky faux-documentary style, with its grainy, jittery handheld cinematography



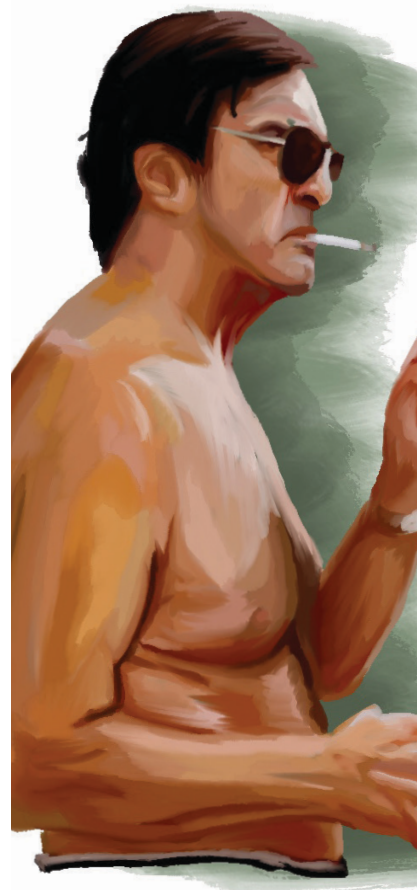
and stark lighting enhancing its immediate realism. The film's close-ups, focusing on smiling mouths and crisply landing punches, capture both joy and fear in the same breath, communicating the hysteria of the mob of townspeople and the vulnerable fear of each of our protagonists, intensifying the viewer's immersion. The sound design is equally critical: the film's crisp, naturalistic soundscape amplifies the whispers, shrieks, and sudden bursts of physical violence, making this real-life terror all the more palpable. While *La Ciénaga* employs a vastly different and unique approach to aesthetics, the film achieves a similarly oppressive effect. The film's opening sequence, introduced by its "slithering opening credit font" which recalls a "cheap horror film," uses handheld closeups of carnality, sweating, lethargy, and elderly bodies to communicate a sense of unease (Gemünden). The scraping sounds of metal chairs pierce the viewer's ears, a sense of dread rising. By curing off the character's faces, a suffocating sense of fragmentation and alienation is induced. The oppressive heat and humidity are made almost tangible through layered, hyper-detailed sound design and makeup work— water splashes, glasses clink, fans whir, mouths pant— conveying the heavy atmosphere of privilege and neglect. The stark brutality of *Canoa* and the suffocating inertia of *La Ciénaga* both show a narrative hurtling towards the inevitable.

The themes of colonialism, capitalism, and resistance are ever-present in Latin American film history, and these films approach those themes from different angles. *Canoa* highlights the power of state-sponsored propaganda in mobilizing a rural community against its people. The townspeople, who have been manipulated by a corrupt priest and their fear of economic insecurity, enact violence on innocent young men that reflects the long-standing colonial practice of using faith and fear to control Indigenous and rural populations. Both *Canoa* and *La Ciénaga* offer powerful commentaries on the enduring colonial legacy in Latin America. *Canoa* highlights how the deeply entrenched class differences in Mexico were exacerbated during the colonial period at the hands of the Spanish and the Americans. The lynching in the film, spurred on by the priest, underscores how colonial power structures of church and state persist in sowing division and paranoia. The priest's exploitation of the townspeople's superstitions mirrors the ways that Spanish colonial powers utilized religious and cultural manipulation to control Indigenous populations and the lower class. In *La Ciénaga*, colonialism manifests through the aristocracy's dependence on Indigenous laborer Isabe l and their colorism towards her and her people throughout the film. According to film scholar Gerd Gemünden, *La Ciénaga* is "a film about the decline of the provincial bourgeoisie." The upper-class, white-passing family's failure to recognize or confront this clear inequality reflects their comfortable detachment from the rural poverty around them and reflects the ongoing exploitation of Argentinians of color as a direct byproduct of colonial rule. Both films ultimately demonstrate that colonial legacies are not just historical events but living, parasitic focuses that continue to shape the class and racial dynamics of Latin America into the present, robbing its native people of joy and national unity.

Homoeroticism and taboo are engaged throughout both *Canoa* and *La Ciénaga*, both films looking at same-sex desire as a reflection of broader societal constraints that impose on joy and community in Latin

American society. In *Canoa*, the relationship between the university employees, and the bond shared by our protagonists, hints at an unspoken intimacy that is framed within the context of fraternal bonds and male camaraderie. While not overtly sexual, the emotional and physical closeness of the boys is portrayed as a form of resistance to the oppressive forces at play, the encroaching divisive force. The film's tension, crafted by a warm palette of close quarters, subtly comments on the repression of non-normative desires in the conservative, patriarchal town the boys find themselves in, where male bonding is viewed as suspicious. In contrast, *La Ciénaga's* approach presents a more explicit, yet still repressed, exploration of homoeroticism through the interactions of Isabel and Momi. Momi's attraction to "the Indigenous maid" leads to her family labelling her "Momi sucia," or dirty Momi (Gemünden).

The two young women, one employer, and the other employee have interaction laced with an undercurrent of one-sided desire. The film carefully depicts intimate moments—stares from Momi, physical closeness on dirty beds, and lingering touches—highlighting the complex emotional bond that exists between the pair, hinting at a homoerotic forbidden romance between the oppressor and the oppressed. Momi's unconsummated desire, set against the backdrop of her decaying aristocratic household, reflects not only the taboo surrounding same-sex attraction but also the moral decay of the upper class, where boundaries are increasingly crossed. The incestuous undertones of the rest of the families' relationships with each other, particularly Mecha and her son, Jose, serve as a metaphor for the breakdown of social and cultural norms within the privileged class, suggesting the rot at the center of



their world is not just physical but deeply psychological. Both films explore how taboos—whether rooted in gender, sexuality, or familial bonds—act as tools of oppression prescribed by colonial forces, reflecting the broader social anxieties and constraints that define Latin America. In doing so, they both critique the stifling forces of cultural conservatism and highlight the lack of joy when desires bump against societal control.\

Joy, often portrayed as a fleeting or even absent force in Latin American cinema, plays a critical role in the resistance to systemic oppression, seen in *Canoa* and, strangely enough, *La Ciénaga*. *Canoa* emphasizes the devastating effects of violence and colonialism through its brief moments of joy, brotherhood, and laughter between the main male leads, their source of resilience throughout their brutal attack. Their shared optimism, even in the face of overwhelming brutality, acts as a quiet resistance to the systemic violence they will come to face. The scene in the candy store, populated by drunk patrons, cute girls, and a disgruntled owner, demonstrates this camaraderie and community. These moments, where stories are shared, laughs roar, and dreams about futures are told, represent a form of unity that stands in stark contrast to the division sown by the priest and his colonial ideologies. Contrasted with other Latin American films like *Barren Lives*, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, and *Hours of the Furnaces*, dominated by bleakness, despair, and irrevocable decay, *Canoa* stands out for its fleeting yet memorable moments of youthful optimism. These moments of joy, from their excitement for their hike to their running in the rain, create a profound sense of connection and humanity, making it an effective tool of resistance through human-

The absence of joy in films like *Barren Lives* and *Hours of the Furnaces* contributes to their heavy, nearly suffocating critique of colonial injustice and poverty, leaving little room for hope or resistance beyond a necessary display of suffering. Similarly, *La Ciénaga* portrays not the suffering of the oppressed class, but the self-induced amorality and indolence of people committing such oppression. The lack of joy and connection in *La Ciénaga*, besides brief moments of intimacy between Mecha and Tali or the children, represents the corrosive effects of colonialism and racism on all parties involved. It is the most innocent, most joyful character, the young Luciano's death at the end of the film that rocks the audience to the core, his loss symbolizing the final absence of unity, hope, and care in a world rotted by colonialism.

Joy, often portrayed as a fleeting or critical role in real-world Latin American cinema, is seen in *Canao* contrasted to vacant landscapes in Santos' *Barren Lives* (1967), *Underdevelopment* (1968), and Solanas' *The Hour of the Furnaces*. These films are dominated by a sense of irrevocable decay as revolutionary cinema of camaraderie and defiance. These moments of joy, even in the face of violent attacks, create a profound sense of connection and humanity. Resistance is not just about surviving, it is about continuing to live as fully and as vibrantly as possible. Joy in films like *The Hour of the Furnaces* to their suffocating and injustice, leaving hope necessary for an acknowledgment however, offers a form of its brief yet powerful suggestion that joy and near-unattainable under acts of defiance in the face of brutality. These moments, running through the rain on their final night, underscore the importance of human connection as a means of reclaiming agency and resisting the "othering" present in post-colonial Latin American culture. As seen in *La Ciénaga*, the lack of unity and obstruction of joy between Momi, Isabel, and Mecha disrupts the transformative power of joy, the family never recognizing their path forward out of their self-imposed treachery; according to Gemünden, "the swamp will devour them all".



absent force in Latin American cinema, plays a can resistance to systemic oppression. As films like *La Ciénaga*, Nelson Pereira Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories* and Octavio Getino's *Fernando Furnaces* (1968), the latter bleakness, despair, and a while *Canao* stands apart for its fleeting moments of youthful optimism. Joy, even in the face of violence, creates a profound connection and humanity. About survival, it is live as fully and as vibrantly as possible. This bleak absence of joy in *Barren Lives* and *Furnaces* contributes to their suffocating critique of poverty and injustice, leaving little room for hope or resistance beyond a necessary display of suffering. *Canao*, of resistance through depictions of solidarity, connection—though often obscured by oppression—can serve as a means of reclaiming agency and resisting the "othering" present in post-colonial Latin American culture. As seen in *La Ciénaga*, the lack of unity and Mecha disrupts the transformative power of joy, the family never recognizing their path forward out of their self-imposed treachery; according to Gemünden, "the swamp will devour them all".

Joy, when present, represents a form of defiance, a refusal to surrender to the systems that seek to suppress Latin American community and unity. As *Canao* tragically shows, this resistance may not always succeed, but its mere existence is a powerful challenge to the forces of post-colonial dehumanization. Without the boys' unity, none of them would have survived that hellish night. *La Ciénaga*, conversely, demonstrates the price of losing joy entirely: a descent into moral and social decay from which there is no return.

# CANDLE SOULS

## DIRECTOR

### Q & A

BY JESSE MARTINEZ

I met with Leeann Remiker (she/her), a third year Art History and Sociology major, and Film, Television and Digital Media minor. She is the director of *Candle Souls*, a Delta Kappa Alpha animated short film. The film centers around Leeann's family in Cuba, and a dream her great grandmother once had.

**JESSE:** Can you tell me a bit about the initial inspiration you had for *Candle Souls*?

**LEEANN:** Yeah, that's an easy question. This was a story told to me by my grandmother about my great-grandmother's dream. My great-grandmother's name was Esperanza. She was a single mom in Cuba in the 1940s, and she had a dream about a room full of candles, where every candle represented a soul. And she was worried about abandoning her children. She—as much as she was suffering and working so hard every day to support her two children—was so scared of prematurely leaving her children. And she had this beautiful dream about a room full of candles, and each candle represented a soul, and the lifespan of a soul. Her candle was the longest in the room... She lived to be 96 years old. My grandma has told me a litany of sto-

ries, not only from her mother's life, but from her own life, her brother's life, her extended family's life from Cuba. And I just have a Notes app that's just pages and pages worth of stories, and I just picked out that one because I felt it was very cinematic. I think about it all the time. But hopefully all of those stories one day can be turned into [something]... [*Candle Soul's*] a trilogy in my head.

**JESSE:** What is the significance of the art style?

**LEEANN:** My favorite class I've ever taken at UCLA was Cuban Art History, taught by Professor Rosenbaum, she is the freaking best. Through that class, you learn about the entire history of Cuba, from the native Taino people who lived there before Spanish colonization to this colonial period, to the Revolution and then the contemporary time, which I really appreciated because I feel like...no one thinks of Cuba as a contemporary society, and a lot of literature on Cuba is that it's stuck in the 40s and 50s. You know, the famous streets in Cuba, the cars, it's all stuck in the past, and that is true. A lot of the aesthetics of Cuba are from the 1950s and 60s because of a lot of embargoes placed on Cuba by the United States. But it's still a society that has continued after...such a period of strife, so what I really appreciate about that class is that you go into the contemporary art history of Cuba and stories of immigration. But the art style is inspired particularly by art from the pre-revolutionary periods, like the 1920s and 30s and 40s. Artists like Victor Emmanuel, primarily inspired the art style. It's free-floating brushwork, inspired by the dance and the music of Cuba at that time. It feels like it's exploding with life and culture. I mean, my grandma would always say this, but from poverty comes incredible culture, and sharing, and community. And beyond the food, and the dance, and the music, the art was incredible as well.

**JESSE:** Tell me generally about the animation process.

**LEEANN:** I mean, this process is gonna be long... And I hope that throughout the process, not only me, but the rest of the animation team gets to meditate on and get to know my great-grandmother in a way. I never really got to know my great-grandma. She



passed away when I was six. I spoke a little Spanish as a kid, but I was a child, you know, I couldn't communicate in a way that I would have loved to. So getting to study her face and her home, and kind of make up this dream of what her life could have been like through animation is hopefully not only healing for me, but also maybe for the rest of the animation team. That's the process, though. It's frame by frame. Meditative. And this is why I love having a team, I can't help but adopt my own style. I've been an artist since I could hold a pencil, but having a team around me who has different art styles, and ways that they think about that process of animation is going to be so cool because it's gonna be this wonderful merging of aesthetics, which is going to be awesome. And already seeing what you guys have worked on has been so cool, and the fact that you were willing to help me with so much, so many hours put into it.

**JESSE:** Tell me a little bit more about the era that the film is placed in and what that means to you and your family.

**LEEANN:** Yeah, so my grandma was born in 1944, which was 8 years before the revolution. She was growing up under Batista, who everyone hated in Cuba. And they wanted a change. They wanted some sort of...regime change. So, by the time the film is set, she's, you know, a young toddler, she has yet to have access to more formal education, but she's still learning from her mother...So, the time period is really important because my grandma was at the center of this huge change and overhaul in Cuba, and while it birthed a lot of positives in her life, wealth stratification exploded. It was already like that, but being embroiled in this kind of regime change means that there's going to be a lot of instability. For my great-grandmother, who is a single mom, you know, she was just waiting for these bi-weekly checks from her ex-husband. And she's kind of like this personified version of this changing landscape in Cuba. She had to find her own form of agency through sewing, through bartering with people who were selling chickens, finding chickens in the street and killing them and de-feathering them because it was cheaper. And I think that kind of fight and stubborn-



ness to survive is at the core of the themes of the film. My grandma was 18 when she left Cuba, so in '62, 10 years after the revolution. And she wasn't one of those Operation Peter Pan kids. She was able to come to the States because my uncle was an illegal immigrant. He figured out a way to get to Miami via plane, to further his education, but he was undocumented. He was undocumented for 2 years, and they waited for 2 years for him to be able to secure two visas for my grandmother and my great-grandmother.

**JESSE:** Yeah, I think it's beautiful that you're talking about all of this change and instability, and from the tone of what I've already seen of the film, it feels like your great-grandmother was creating stability.

**LEEANN:** Yes, my grandma used to say, she didn't really know the actual political conditions of the island, because Mima made it seem like there's nothing wrong.

**JESSE:** Tell me about how writing the film's dialogue entirely in Spanish went. Was there a debate about whether you were going to do that, or was it the intention from the start?

**LEEANN:** Yeah, so the intention always was to have the film be in Spanish. I don't think there's a way around it. I wanted to make it obvious that the film was Cuban, in dialogue and in the music. That was never up for debate. I can understand Spanish conversationally, but I don't trust my own ability to write in Spanish, so I called up my goats, my mother, and my brother. I wrote the script entirely in English, and then I had them help me translate the dialogue, so we sat on the phone for, like, 2 hours. And then Claudia really worked hard to study the Cuban accent because she's Puerto Rican, and...I was very proud of her for that. It was something I was not expecting her to do. You know, there's such a fucking, Anglo-Saxon view of God. That's not who my grandma was praying to, you know? She's talking to a God that speaks in Spanish. So I thought that was really important. I couldn't even imagine a world where it was in English. And I think that's another reason why I wanted to make the film, was to feel more in touch with my Cuban side... I was also inspired to make this movie because...when you look up Cu-

ban films on IMDb [like] Scarface, Al Pacino... [it's] your [typical] fucked up Cuban accent and your super, super fucking violent movie. [Same with] All the President's Men because two of the guys who robbed Watergate offices were Cuban Americans...I wanted to help change that, so I watched some Cuban films. There's this Cuban film called Lucia, which is fantastic, but it is also a portrait of suffering. That's a mainstay in Cuban cinema. Soy Cuba is probably the most famous Cuban film, even though it was directed by a Russian. And, while it is this portrait of the island, a lot of it is suffering. And that's the main theme. You know, the main theme is, like, this regime took over and everything went to shit, and that's not the entire portrait. From what my grandma's told me, you know, it's hard for her to go back, especially under the Trump administration. But she wants to go back, and she always says when she passes away, she's going to fly over the island and say goodbye to it, which, oh, it's gonna make me cry. But that was the main inspiration, too, to make this, was because...my grandma. I wanted to make something for her.,

**JESSE: What does making this now mean to you? In this contemporary moment?**

**LEEANN:** I mean, personally, it's just something I wanted to do for forever, and finally, through DKA, I have been given the resources and the people around me to finally do it. I guess in this contemporary moment 'Ice Out'. I mean, that's been permeating our lives for forever, but then when the Trump administration took over and, you know, talking about 'a caravan of illegals, and these aliens are gonna come in and rape your wife, your white wife'...It's just seeing that on the news when my grandparents are just sitting there. That's not what's going on. So I think in this contemporary moment it's important to tell stories of immigration as stories of human beings. I think in this contemporary moment, it's really important to tell stories of immigration, and just humanizing immigrants and celebrating immigration. And also celebrating the fact that, coming to America doesn't mean getting rid of your culture. It means bringing your own special memories and culture and food and everything to the United States, and the

idea that America should be this hegemonic state, should be a white Christian nation, as the Trump administration is trying to push right now, is heartbreaking. Those small steps, I think, of making a short film is just one drop in the convo.

**JESSE: Yeah.**

**LEEANN:** Fucking ice out, man. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for undocumented immigration.



# DKA'S

# FASHION

# Style

Julia: my fav place to thrift is the downtown Pasadena under \$25 flea market 😊 such good deals and everyone is so sweet



Emma Ann: I honestly think I get my inspo from my childhood outfits. My mom always dressed me in brightly colored and patterned vintage-esque happy clothes! That, and whenever I see cool eclectic fashion in movies I get inspired!



Ava: Most of my favorite pieces of clothing are actually from my mom! Either she'll pick out something for me or she'll give me a hand me down that becomes my most worn piece- I'm totally a chronic outfit repeater!



Gianna: I think my favorite things to wear are tube tops, or anything off the shoulder, they always look good!!



James Simon: Ornate apathy clashes with hedonistic flair in monochrome black and silver highlights. Modern sensibilities are defined and defied by a distressed Affliction tee and Terra Incognita wide cut jeans. A cropped All Saints biker jacket and Rock & Republic cowboy dress shoes provide a healthy dose of leather. Somewhere between post grunge maximalism and indie sleaze rock revival a timeless outfit is refined with the final touch: a centerpiece in the shape of a chrome hearts cross.



Keira: A lot of my style inspo comes from just looking at what people around me are wearing and figuring out what things I like! Most of my closet is just a culmination of individual pieces that make me happy; fashion should be fun! My dream is to one day thrift a vintage afghan coat



Rene: One of my hot takes is that I think the way men crop a flannel and make that their whole wardrobe is corny. I think capris are ugly too.



Layth: A lot of my inspo comes from white skater boys and anime characters"



*spread by zaleah*



# STARS IN

An interview with Zaleah Henderson  
on her directorial debut

# YOUR EYES

by Wase Sanani



Photos by Gabrielle Sokolow



# THE INTERVIEW



Zaleah Henderson's short film "Stars in Your Eyes" follows the dark and twisted story of Gemma, a secluded UCLA freshman, who struggles to cope with social anxiety, parasociality, and isolation, leading her toward incomprehensible acts. Combining horror with social fear, Henderson directed her first film for UCLA's Delta Kappa Alpha Film Fraternity this past fall quarter and sat down with us to discuss all about the process.

**WS:** What made you want to tell this story?

**ZH:** I thought about this idea when I was driving back to school from San Diego. I was contemplating the idea of combining horror with social fear and I wanted to talk about the typical freshman year experience. I also wanted to tell a story about something I felt deeply connected to and I believe that the scariest things are things that are real and that people have to go through. So especially being a black woman entering freshman year, I don't necessarily think most other freshmen had the same experiences as me so it was important for me that I tell this story.

**WS:** What inspired the character of Gemma?

**ZH:** Well actually I have always loved the name Gemma, I wanted to name

my kid or my pet but obviously won't be doing that anymore. But for her character, I wanted to illustrate my own anxiety manifesting in a physical way, like we see her biting her nails, messing with her hair, trying to find imperfections. Obviously this story is fictional but the experiences of feeling unwanted or being put off by male attention is something that came from my own personal feelings and experiences. I was trying to personify my anxiety through Gemma."

**WS:** Was there any piece of media, film, or literature that inspired this short film?

**ZH:** I am a very big fan of Black Swan (2010), and actually Lucy Ballinger during casting pointed out how similar Megan from Black Swan and Gemma are. I definitely was inspired by Black Swan's display of obsession and the ideal of a perfect woman and how someone could fit

that. More horror related I would say I was inspired by this one film called The Blackcoat's Daughter (2017), that movie had themes of isolation, I was also inspired by A Girl Who Walks Home Alone (2014) this movie focused on a seemingly sweet girl who ends up being a vampire so I was inspired by the duality of that character for Gemma.





“I love DKA through and through, there are no other people I would rather have made this film with.”

**WS:** There is a common theme of mirroring, obsession, and the dangers of social media, who do you think these messages are relevant right now?

**ZH:** I definitely wanted to capitalize on parasocial relationships, it's something being talked about more these days. Parasocial relationships paired with anxiety is just a lethal combination. Parasociality connected to isolation and doom-scrolling is something I and a lot of young people fall victim to. So I wanted to especially capitalize on how watching someone on your for-you-page and then them living down the hall from you makes it so someone like

Megan feels in reach of Gemma yet so far. That connection or disconnect that Gemma experiences with Megan is definitely reflective of how social media can form how you see yourself, how you see others, overall that comparison.

**WS:** How was the filming process with your fellow Dekas? Was there anything that went wrong or any roadblocks?

**ZH:** Oh my gosh I love DKA through and through there are no other people I would have rather made this film with. You know this was my first film I've directed and these are people I feel like know me,

know my intentions, know what I like and don't like. It was even so nice being able to get feedback from certain Dekas before I even pitched it. But for what went wrong, we definitely had issues with getting a permit and some location scouting logistics but that was more pre-production. Some people did not think we should do guerilla-style filmmaking. Some people wanted to risk it, but at the end of the day DKA gives you full creative control of your film. I also think our DP did amazing, we tried a lot of fun experimental shots we were all interested in. My first A.D. Syd Lehman did an amazing job of keeping everyone on schedule, Malena doing gaffing had full pages of notes on everything she had to do beforehand. So in all there was no one else I would have rather done this film with, they made it a super supportive space.

**WS:** Being both the writer and director of this film for this first time, is there something you learned about your own creative process?

**ZH:** Well I learned that I don't love writing! Yea I love making things but writing is really not my strong suit. I love the creative process and making ideas but when it comes to the specific details in writing I am really not great at that, that's why





I was so thankful to DKA because they helped me with all of that. However I really liked directing, after putting myself out there with his film it's definitely something I would wanna do again in the future. Before this film I was really passionate about cinematography and I also think having this directing experience is going to inform the cinematography process for me after seeing both sides.

**WS:** Finally, what would you like the audience to take from this film?

**ZH:** That's a good question, hmm I think it is hard for me to say what I want the audience to take because in

my head I want everyone to take different messages from this. You know I hope there is a different message for different kinds of people. I think that's what is so amazing about film is being able to see a perspective and a life that you would never get to experience. Especially with UCLA being a PWI, I wanted people to see this specific experience as well. I also think seeing this experience can help connect us all together. In this day and age most people have anxiety and go through these similar anxious experiences. So I want people who watch this film to see that there are more similarities between everyone than you might think when you disregard race and gender and all those similar things.



INTERVIEW BY WASE SANANI  
PHOTOS BY GABRIELLE SOKOLOW  
ARRANGED BY LEVI FRENCH



Victoria Marchetti's short film *A Tint of Me* was shot in January 2026, and for which I had the immense pleasure of being the script supervisor. This non-narrative short film follows a woman as she explores a hallway lined with differently colored rooms, within each she learns new dance styles from the characters inside.

**What really kickstarted the making of *A Tint of Me*?**

I had the idea for *A Tint of Me* for a long time, over two years. I had the script written out, a lot of the pre-production stuff already done, but didn't have the crew to do it. And then I was going to the movies with Leeann and Natalie, and we're like, "Wait, we know a lot of really cool people right now who would be willing to help," and we had just done a bunch of projects that were random and helping other people. So then they were like, "Hey, we can make it happen." And I was like, "We can make it happen." So having the idea there and then, realizing that there's a beautiful community of people around us kind of jumped it into place.

**With this variety of dance styles comes a variety of talent. What was the casting process like for finding your lead dancer and all the other great dancers who accompany her?**

Our main focus for casting was finding our lead dancer, Lena, who is so beautiful and gorgeous, and we had put out an open casting call, and had people submit a dance reel. Her's really stood out to us specifically because her lines are just gorgeous, and her dancing is stylized. I personally love how, like, she has a little bit of herself in every piece she has. So then we set up a Zoom call and talked with her. And then from once we casted Lena, we put out calls specifically for each room, but I would say mainly the cast was kind of created around Lena, and then choreography was created through rehearsals.

**It was really incredible to watch her move on set, and her facial expressions were so impressive.**

Yeah, I think she has done a little bit of acting before, and she's interested in that. She was talking about how ballet is her main foundation, and she calls herself a ballet dancer. Although she is beautiful in all styles, she's like, I don't do hip hop that much, and then she does an absolutely gorgeous job of it, right? Ballet has a lot of pantomime and using your face and expressing it with your eyebrows and your hands. I think you can really see that with her.





**There's a lot of these different dance styles in the different rooms. Were there any of them that you had to study further in preparation for choreographing them?**

Yeah, Zaleah helped with hip hopping last minute. She kind of swooped in because I personally don't know too much about hip hop, and I think that's a style that's really nuanced and has a lot of history and specifics to it. There's specific foundations, there's new styles, moments in LA, so I think calling in Zaleah was cool. Then calling in Joey, who had a fresh perspective, was really fun as well because it was like bouncing ideas off of someone who I haven't danced with before. I didn't do specific research to find inspiration for the movement I wanted to do because I've had this idea for so long that it was like I [already] have a general idea of the movement I want to do.

**I think that's really beautiful that you had that realization at the movies too.**

It was really funny because we were literally sitting in the movie theater, and Natalie had a spreadsheet out in her phone, and she's like, "Wait, I can list off names for all of these positions, and we have multiple people that would be willing to help." And that was also really cool to see because I was like, "Oh my gosh, there's so many people that come to mind, that's so cool."

**From seeing your Letterboxd and hearing you discuss film on your radio show, it's obvious you have an extensive cinematic knowledge in your toolbox. So I'm wondering, what were some of the movies that inspired this film, be it in their stories, their visuals or their choreography?**

For choreography, I definitely say it's more pulled from cinematography, music videos, and experimental life experiences I have seen, rather than just cinema. I mean, I love all old classics, like *Singing In The Rain* and *The Girl in the Red Shoes*. And then we have *Climax*, like, still crazy, disordered, oh my god. Following the rooms [in *A Tint of Me*] was not inspired by this, but I love the idea of a hallway. And in that film, it's very much horror, experimental, crazy esque. And for this, I wanted it to be settled and curious and very much more mellow and very different. But the idea of hallways and exploring new physical spaces was influenced.

**Were there any particular choreographers who have influenced the movement in this film?**

Yes. I believe to some extent no choreography is just one's own. Everyone's influenced, from their dance teachers growing up to what they see around them. So each room was a different style, and I had Joey and Zaleah help me a lot, which was really amazing to have. But I say whenever I look at contemporary dance, Jose Lemon and Martha Graham, who are founders of contemporary dance styles, are what I love to look at because Martha Graham focuses on dance with the female body, and she's one of the first people to really create a style around the female body. And then Jose Ramon has a lot of swinging and circular movement which I love, that's beautiful.

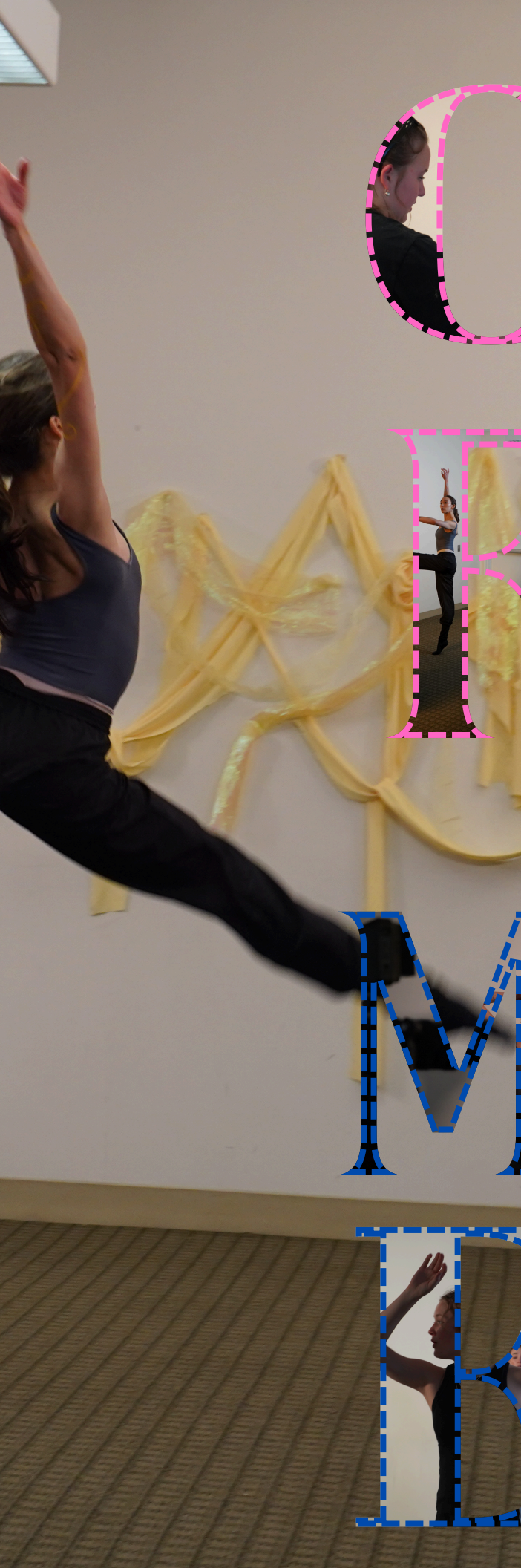
**There's a theme of transformation that weaves throughout the film. Would you say you've experienced any transformations of your own through the process of making this film?**

I think it feels almost backwards transformative because I just feel more curious now. I don't think I've transformed in a specific way from before versus after A Tint of Me. I think I've just become more curious and maybe more confident, and this is something I really want to explore for transformation. I also think it's the idea of transformation within the film, of finding your own style, and dance is something rooted in when you're first dancing...like the transformation in your style as a dancer. And that's something I did experience. But now that I dance less I don't get to experience that so much, and that's something I miss.

**Was this your first time coordinating the choreography for a film?**

Yes, I haven't choreographed for a film before, so that was really fun to do. I've done workshops, like Dance Camera West and some others before that. I've participated in talks about how to move the camera, how to interact with the camera. I've also done some gear [training], I've taken some courses on it as well. But learning through reading and observing is a lot different than actually doing it. And I think making this film made me just want to make another one because there are 4 million things I think I should have done differently, and I think I could have used the camera differently and all these different things, but it's like this is the first time I actually put it into action. It's inspiring me, and also urging me to do another one.





**Pick one out of those 4 million things to be changed.  
What would it be?**

Dance is such a beautiful and established art form. And I think something that's so beautiful about dance is experiencing it live, like going to the ballet is going to a theater. It's seeing it in human form because it's working with the human body. So I think the challenge of moving it into the camera really forces there to be a reason. You know what I mean? It can't be like, 'Oh, here's a room, let me film this.' Like, why are we bringing the audience there and physically showing it? And I think that is really important. So I think you get to move the camera differently. I think you get to break more rules with dance because it is a bit more playful, especially with this being a specific dance film, and not a scene in a film that has dance.



**You have been dancing for a very long time now. So would you say that making this film was just like the logical next step for you as a filmmaker and dancer?**

I think my relationship with dance is so interesting because, I was talking to one of my friends the other day, and it's like--this sounds so dramatic--but I will always say dance is my first love, and it's something that feels so weird that I don't do it every second of every day anymore. There was a point in my life where dance was truly what I cared about and nothing else. And I think it's very beautiful that that's not my life anymore because I still love dance, but so differently. I think a lot of the reason why I wanted to make the film was I love filmmaking, and I want to play with the differences that the camera gives you. I was also really inspired to create something of my own that I have not done before. I have choreographed...but not for the camera, which was cool. The past summer before the film, I was working for a company, doing marketing and interning with them, and I got to experience a lot of live performances and experience dance again. And then I was performing locally again and doing dance education. It was just kind of, once again, a part of my life. And I was like, 'I feel like I need to do something that's my project' because for the past few years with dance, I hadn't really worked on something that was my project. So rather than [this being] the next step, it was more of like, I would say, an active decision to be like, 'let me create something that's from me, that's really beautiful.'

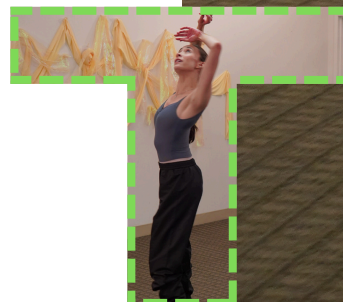


## How does this differ from choreographing for the stage?

Choreographing for the stage, you have specific limits. You have where your audience is, you have what can be seen and not seen. You have physical limitations, and then for the camera, you still have those limitations, but they're different and they're new. So it's like the angles at which the audience, which is now the camera, can view the movement completely changes the location. The amount of things you can see at one time and also the editing changes. I want to do some mixed media in the hallway in the edit, and that is something you can't really--I mean, you can do effects and stuff--but that's something you can't do. And you can change time differently [than] in film, like you can't double speed or rewind [but] you can move your movement slower and play with time in dance, which is a whole point of dance and making it beautiful, but having that power in post production is completely different. So there's a lot of nuances here and there that I want to learn more about and play with, [same] with the difference too.

## What were some of the challenges that you faced on set? How did you work through those?

Yeah, I think some of the challenges were just logistics. Every student short film has a bunch of logistics. So anything from like, 'How are we finding what spaces we are using?', 'How are we finding a time where we can get all these amazing people to work together?' I think just filmmaking with your friends in college is a challenge in itself, but specific to dance, I think some of the challenges we had were in playing with color because each of the rooms has different colors and stuff, and I wanted it to be a big motive for the film. So it's like, 'oh, you can add a gel to a light, but what does it do?' I want it to be fully engulfed, and there to be fabric and paint and a lighting change, and then maybe an editing process as well.





**On this set, I saw a blend of Dekas with other people you've met in the UCLA filmmaking community. What was it like working with this blended crew?**

Oh, that was so amazing. All the Dekas are always amazing, and truly, Dekas always pull through. Over half the people were Dekas, and I think that was the most joyous experience.

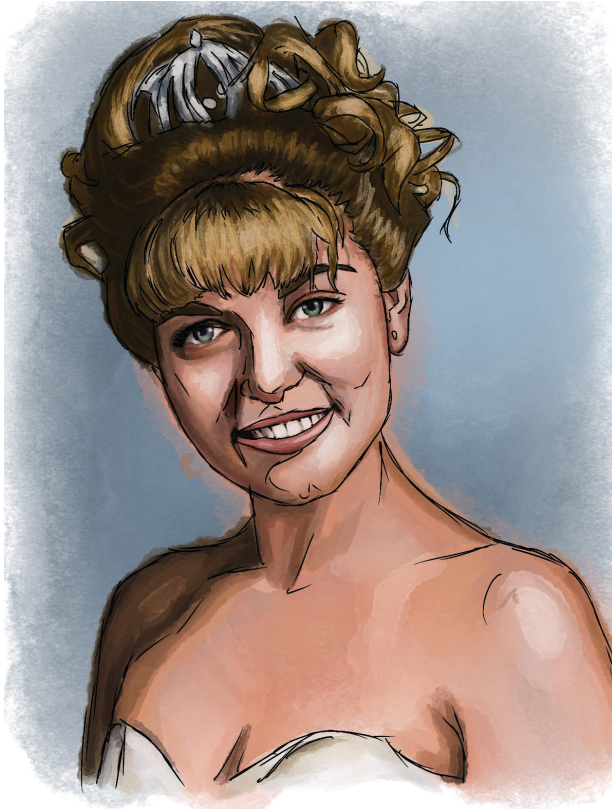
Having people show up is kind of almost a surreal feeling, especially when it's your friends. It's like you're committing this time and effort to me, that's something I view as an act of love, and I really appreciate it. And then other people who are helping out, I appreciate them just as much as the Dekas, I promise. I saw everyone blend great, and it was really cool to see because even people who didn't know each other personally, they connected through the process of the project and coming together to create stuff. And Lena was able to connect with all the different departments too as the main dancer. So that was something really great. I would do it again. I'd do any project for the Dekas. I'm excited to work on your project.

**What can we expect in the future from dancer, writer, director, cinematographer, Victoria Marchetti?**

That's crazy, as I was talking about earlier. What else? I want to keep making dance stuff. I want to do experimental projects, maybe a music video project, mixed media, all the things. Right now, I don't have a definite, certain project, but this summer, I'm hoping to cook up some creative things, if I wish. I think the real question is whether or not I'm gonna get back into dancing. It's always irking me, but I think for now, I would love to just guerilla shoot some dance scenes with a set [even smaller than this], working with a few dancers, having an inspo board, and giving ourselves a weekend to create something that we think has meaning. That's it.

# “Laura is the One”

## An Analysis of the Evolving Incarnations of Laura Palmer Throughout the Twin Peaks Saga



Laura Palmer is at the epicenter of Twin Peaks, the sun around which it revolves, and the thematic core of the saga's ethos. David Lynch's Twin Peaks is a haunting mystery meditating on trauma, identity, and the representation of female trauma. Across the original television series (which aired from 1990-1991), the prequel film *Fire Walk with Me* (1992), and the sequel series 25 years later, *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), Laura's character shifts from a mythic absence, to a painfully embodied subject confronting her own abuse, and finally a cosmic, fractured figure forced between timelines and identities. This progression, and Sheryl Lee's brilliant performance as Laura, reflects a wider engagement with the ethics of portraying violence against women rooted within the specific eras of their production, a progression that forced viewers to reconsider the allure and horror of Laura's story beyond nostalgic melodrama. In doing so, Lynch makes a radical move in granting Laura, a nuanced and agent female character, cosmic significance on the grandest scale, transforming her trauma into a profound symbol of resistance, loss, and the limits of salvation.

### Laura Palmer in Twin Peaks: The Absent Presence

The opening scene of *Twin Peaks* tracks the discovery of Laura Palmer's body by Pete Martell (Jack Nance). "She's dead, wrapped in plastic," Martell states over the phone ("Pilot," *Twin Peaks*). She, Laura, becomes the emotional core of the series and a radical departure from the "Murder of the Week" victims of episodic crime shows of the 1980s and 90s. In shows like *Miami Vice* (1984-1990) or *Columbo* (1971-1978), the victim of the murder was often little more than a narrative prop, her body examined coldly by forensic technicians, her body parts atomized by a voyeuristic cameraman, her personality and inner life left invisible and unspoken. The camera, like a mortician's scalpel, cuts open the physical form for the audience to peer into, with little engagement from her as a fully realized subject (Lopez, 284). The men around her, whether police or potential perpetrators, become the characters of interest. These shows perpetuated a "murdered woman" trope, in which the victim existed primarily as a catalyst for the male investigators' quests, her story fading quickly once the case had been solved.

The original series of *Twin Peaks* radically transforms this trope by positing Laura Palmer not as a forgotten corpse but as a mythic and haunting center of the entire narrative universe. Originally cast to play the corpse of Laura and pose for archival photographs, Lynch was so moved by Sheryl Lee's allure that he crafted flashbacks for Laura to bring Sheryl to the screen. Awash in a silky, soft lighting in the flashbacks,

Although nearly every character claims some sort of privileged insight into Laura's secret desires and true nature, none can fully comprehend her complexity or inner life. According to Christy Desmet, she becomes the "objet petit a" – an impossible object of desire that propels the mystery forward yet remains fundamentally unknowable (Desmet, 130). This deliberate absence cultivates a tension between yearning for easy answers and the impossibility of ever grasping Laura's subjectivity. Her fundamental unknowability forces the audience to reckon with the unsettling nature of her premature death and its obsession with the allure of the dead woman, as they become obsessed with the way she lived, not just the way she died. By denying viewers the comfort of fully knowing their innocent victim, the creators preserve Laura's subjectivity.

The presentation of Laura's body is likewise a direct subversion of the aestheticized, clinical depiction of female corpses in crime TV. From the moment Pete finds her body on the lakeshore, Laura's death is imbued with a cosmic weight. The opening montage of the show, as the camera swaps between a humming Josie Packard (Joan Chen), flowing Douglas firs, and Pete preparing for his morning fishing, the idyllic images and mournful foghorn build a quiet dread of discovery. Her corpse becomes not just a piece of evidence, but a rupture in the fabric of a town propagated on a wholesome sheen, a sacred wound that cannot be easily sutured. Lynch's camera lingers, not to objectify but to mourn. As Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) drives into the "town of Twin Peaks," he approaches the woman who would come to define his career and his life, the white knight who will only discover her murderer after losing another, reinscribing Laura into a long history of female figures who are failed by structures of government and patriarchy ("Pilot," *Twin Peaks*). Laura, her face blue yet serene, is made into an icon: homecoming queen, golden girl, America's daughter, but she will not remain that way – her death is not the end of her presence, her spirit lives on in her community and sets Twin Peaks on a course towards a cosmic battle between good and evil. She is a dead victim of rape, and a measureless angel of good.

In this space, Lynch interrogates and disassembles the Madonna-whore dichotomy, rather than reinforcing it: "Laura and Maddy seem to illustrate the familiar patriarchal division of women into virgins and whores" (Desmet, 99). As Desmet notes, Laura is both a saint and a sinner: she helped Johnny Horne (Robert Davenport), tutored Josie Packard, and assisted with Meals on Wheels, while she is also a prostitute and is addicted to cocaine. However, what Desmet fails to reckon with is that Laura is also everything in between – through the brief glimpse we get of her in the original series, mainly her and Donna dancing on the video recording, shows a girl who is both adventurous and innocent, rambunctious and loving, rebellious and looking for order (Ledwon, 268). While the first season does leave Laura mostly silent, defined by others' stories, her overwhelming presence reveals the cultural and psychic structures that obscure real violence beneath fantasy. She embodies the contradictions enforced on women by the patriarchy, yet *Twin Peaks* breaks from its contemporaries by using Laura to indict, rather than reinforce, the genre's casual misogyny. Laura's dignity in death, her angelic high school photos, and the intimacy of her wrapped body make viewers complicit in the myth-making that so often follows violence against women. By refusing to grant Laura full personhood in the original series, Lynch does not fully erase her voice. Her silence indicates the systems, both fictional and societal, that demand women remain beautiful, voiceless, and dead. That silence will be ruptured in *Fire Walk with Me*, finding Lynch reexamining his own culpability in selling the myth of Laura, and ensuring the public sees her walk, talk, cry, and laugh, whether they like it or not.



## Fire Walk with Me and Embodying Trauma

David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) is perhaps his magnum opus, representing a significant reconfiguration of Laura Palmer's character, shifting audience understandings of her as the absent, mythic object of desire to a fully embodied female character and subject enmeshed in trauma and psychological fragmentation. Sheryl Lee's performance is central to this transformation, her eyes, sexuality, and bated breath conveying Laura's complex interiority with a nuanced blend of vulnerability, cruelty, defiance, and despair. Her nuanced work captures Laura's oscillations between mocking vamp and tender girl, revealing the instability and fragmentation of a young woman suffering under unbearable trauma, with nowhere to run. Through Lee's fearless work and the insistence on narrative focus around Laura (well, despite the first 30 minutes spent in *Deer Meadow*), Lynch disrupts the detached, voyeuristic fantasy of the original series and the conventional crime genre's objectification of murdered women, and the patriarchal domination of film output in the 1980s and 90s.

Where the original series constructs Laura primarily through the perspectives and fantasies of others, rendering her a mysterious, unattainable figure, *Fire Walk with Me* foregrounds Laura's own experience



in the last week of her life, thereby challenging the audience's desire to maintain her as an inscrutable icon and regrounds the *Twin Peaks* saga in its core, Laura. While Desmet argues that the film "both clarifies Laura's status as a saint and simplifies her relationship to the *Twin Peaks* community," I contend that this perceived sanctification, especially when Laura is visited by the angel in the Red Room in the final moments of the film, is a complex process that challenges and reconfigures Laura's role within the wider narrative (Desmet, 98). *Fire Walk with Me* resists reductive hagiography by foregrounding Laura's interiority and agency, revealing the complexity of her interpersonal relationships—her viciousness to Donna (Lara Flynn Boyle), her unsettling interaction with Harold (Lenny Von Dohlen), and her simultaneous vulnerability and antagonism towards James (James Marshall)—dimensions that remain unarticulated in the series. In doing so, the film complicates the idealized community's (and the audience's) memory of Laura, offering a more nuanced and intensely empowering female "saint" who embodies subjectivity and disrupts simplistic dichotomies of victimhood and sainthood.

In direct opposition to the fetishized depictions of women (and their deaths) common in crime films of the 1980s, like *Blow Out* (1981) or *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Fire Walk with Me* offers a graphic, unflinching portrayal of abuse and rape, most harrowingly embodied in the train car murder scene. Rather than voyeuristically dissecting Laura's body as a spectacle for male pleasure or narrative convenience, Lynch grounds

Laura's suffering in Lee's eyes, eyes encapsulating the cosmic weight and spiritual significance of the suffering of women within the Twin Peaks universe. As Leland (Ray Wise) and BOB (Frank Silva) fade in and out of frame, bright white lights flash onto Laura's lipstick-stained face, and she stares at herself in the mirror below, Laura's death becomes neither aestheticized nor dismissed. It is rendered with painful dignity and complexity; her anguish and resilience coexist. The face the audience has gazed upon in every homecoming photo transformed into a shrieking face of fear, yet in being forced to watch, the audience sees Laura transformed from a purely tragic victim into a figure of resilience. Lynch's film exposes how Laura embodies contradictory patriarchal fantasies collapsed into one figure, virgin and whore, innocent and manipulator, thus forcing viewers to endure the "objective position" of the Americana they find satiating and reckon with its reality (134). Laura's refusal to recognize her father, Leland, as BOB underscores the places she is forced to go for resistance against the emptiness and violence imposed by patriarchy. When Laura takes the ring and seals her fate, the moment becomes the ethical defiance of Laura, her only outlet an act of self-possession in the face of systemic violence. The angel's return near her death offers a fleeting salvation, a matriarchal vision of safety, suggesting that beauty, evil, and spiritual endurance coexist, complicating the idea of Laura as a simple victim.



#### Fire Walk with Me ini



viewers and critics who were invested in returning to the comforting mysteries of Twin Peaks established by the original series. By not following up with what happened to Dale in the film, Lynch forces audiences to confront the painful reality of Laura's experience, an experience they reveled in when clues were revealed and mysteries were solved, rather than allowing her to remain a distant, unknowable icon. Significantly, *Fire Walk with Me* also functions as a pointed response to the prevalent cinematic depictions of women in contemporary media of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Films such as Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) often rendered female characters as either disposable victims or sexualized objects, frequently instrumentalized to further male-centered narratives of crime, power, and violence. The death of the female protagonist at the end of *Blow Out* does little but render the arc of John Travolta's character as tragic, wherein female suffering merely serves as a plot device without an ethical reflection or deeper subjectivity. Lynch's film confronts and radically subverts this tradition by centering Laura's interiority and trauma with a level of complexity and dignity absent from many genre counterparts. Lynch had contemporary 1990s audiences, saturated with bloody crime films, to watch the day in the life of a teenage girl, as she experiments with sex and drugs, and also writes in her diary and chats with her best friend. *Fire Walk with Me* demands ethical engagement and empathy, highlighting the systemic patriarchal violence often glossed over or fetishized in mainstream cinema. As Desmet articulates, the film "marks the possibility of an ethical subjectivity" (136).

## Laura Palmer in *The Return*: A Cosmic, Unsavable Heroine

Just as the original *Twin Peaks* exposed the emotional and structural void at the center of procedural crime television's "dead girl" trope, and *Fire Walk with Me* gave Laura Palmer interiority and ethical subjecthood, *The Return* presents a daunting metaphysical and conflicted depiction of our fallen heroine. Arriving amid a media landscape dominated by morally ambiguous men— the "prestige TV" anti-heroes of *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *True Detective*— *The Return* critiques this paradigm through the base evil of Mr. C and the failed mission of Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan). Through the bifurcation of our beloved Dale Cooper into the malevolent, calculating Mr. C and the near-blank Dougie Jones, David Lynch stages a narrative and aesthetic investigation into the fantasy of the white male savior. *The Return* concretely elevates Laura to a cosmic status; "Part 8" sees *The Fireman* (Carel Struycken) transport a golden orb of Laura's face onto Earth after the detonation of the atom bomb and the creation of BOB by Judy. She becomes not only the mythic center of a small town, nor a human survivor of violence, but a force of spiritual resistance designed to combat the abstract evil represented by Judy. In this way, Laura becomes a piece in a cosmic chess match, a disquieting element of *The Return* that transfigures Laura into a metaphysical counterweight, wherein the narrative risks stripping her once again of her agency, flattening her trauma into a necessary step in the universe's grand scheme.



Laura becomes the savioric force against the evil borne of contemporary America, the atom bomb, and the counterpoint to BOB's darkness, the soul to his soulless hunger. While mythical and radical, as positioning a complex female lead populated with moral failings and bad decisions as savior of the universe can be considered uniquely feminist, the moment also displaces Laura from her historical and psychological specificity into a spiritual abstraction. Her trauma is no longer purely hers, but cosmically instrumentalized. Throughout "Part 8," it could be understood that Laura's suffering is necessary for universal equilibrium. The political implications of this reframe are unsettling, but can also be generative. This narrative move does something uniquely radical: it grants a female victim, not a male detective, superhero, or chosen one, the status of the universe's savior. In a televisual landscape where cosmic importance, spiritual design, and symbolic destiny are overwhelmingly reserved for men, Lynch places a teenage girl at the center of the metaphysical order.

Yet, this gesture is not without tension. Cooper's intervention into Laura's timeline in "Part 17", however well-intentioned, enacts a familiar form of patriarchal control. In attempting to undo her death by leading Laura into the woods and away from her fate, he therefore revokes the exact agency she claimed in the film when she donned the Formica ring. Laura never got the chance to choose the ring, choose death, or choose to deny BOB's possession of her soul and her continued abuse at the hands of her father. His journey into the past is not just a failure to save Laura; it's a failure to recognize that she had already done her best to

save herself, and releasing her back into the community that watched her suffer and die would only retraumatize her. As Todd McGowan states, “The Return, by playing out the logic of fantasy [of saving Laura] to its endpoint, shows how fantasy exposes the inescapability of traumatic loss” (McGowan, 125). The Return confronts us with the limits of the savior fantasy, not only its futility but its capacity to retraumatize the very person it aims to redeem. Still, the image of Laura as Carrie Page (the final missing page of Laura’s diary, personified), screaming as the lights of her former house go out, does not merely signify defeat. It is, perhaps, a final act of resistance. Her scream ruptures Dale’s (and the audience’s) fantasy of resolution, exposing the failure of masculine heroism to contain female trauma. While The Return is heavy-handed in its mythologizing of Laura, it never allows her to become fully legible or controllable. In this sense, her cosmic elevation is not a silencing, but a refusal to be anything other than vast. Lynch reimagines the rape victim not as broken or passive, but as essential. She is the secret history of the universe, and she still screams.



## Laura is the One

Taken together, the evolution of Laura Palmer across Twin Peaks’ three major texts charts a radical reimagining of the murdered woman in American television and film. No longer just the haunting catalyst of mystery, Laura becomes a complex embodiment of ethical inquiry, formal experimentation, and feminist critique. Her trajectory, from absent icon to embodied woman to mythic redeemer, mirrors shifts in cultural attitude towards female trauma, authorship, and genre itself. At each turn, Lynch interrogates not just who Laura is, but how we see her— what it means to watch, desire, romanticize, pity, or attempt to save her. In a media landscape long saturated with the aesthetics of violated women, Twin Peaks dared to unravel the fantasy, expose its violence, and then refigure its central woman as a figure of cosmic consequence. That she resists coherence and containment, and ultimately cannot be saved by the beloved heroic male, only underscores the power of her scream. Her scream does not restore order, but ensures her pain is never forgotten, that her pain can inspire change, and disrupt the forces of evil that killed her.

