

WASTELAND ARTS FEED BACK

WASTELAND
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DUOS



FEATURING

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BOGIE AND BACALL

Nicole Sanacore

When Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart met on the set of *To Have and Have Not* in 1944, sparks flew on and off screen, and continued to do so in the following three film noirs they starred in together. Despite the couple's differences in age and background, their chemistry was undeniable. Bacall and Bogart are still considered one of the great power couples of the silver screen, and their real-life marriage lasted from 1945 until Bogart's death in 1957.

Both Bacall and Bogart stood out in the film noir genre on their own, but together, they were a force to be reckoned with. Of the four films they starred together in, *The Big Sleep* is the standout. Warner Brothers studio capitalized on the public's interest in the couple following the success of *To Have and Have Not*, as *The Big Sleep* was filmed in 1944 but not released until 1946. The gap between filming and release allowed for rewrites of old scenes and additions of new ones, emphasizing the couple's sexuality as much as possible during the restrictive Hays Code era.

The Big Sleep stars Lauren Bacall as Vivian Rutledge, the sly femme fatale archetype and Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe, a stone-faced detective investigating the disappearance of one of Vivian's father's colleagues. The plot of this crime drama takes a backseat in just about every scene that the couple are in together; their natural chemistry overshadows all else in the film, their first film after officially becoming a couple. Indeed, the screen became a mirror, reflecting the true to life passion that they felt for each other.

They went on to star in two more films together, *Dark Passage* and *Key Largo*. *Dark Passage* sets an interesting narrative; Bogart's character is on the run from the law to clear his name for a murder he didn't commit, and isn't shown until after he gets "plastic surgery" to change his appearance. Bacall's character had taken an interest in Bogart's character's case and believes that he's innocent, helping him evade police and clear his name. *Key Largo*, a crime drama set during a raging Florida hurricane, was the last film Bacall and Bogart starred in

together, with Bacall playing the widow of one of Bogart's war buddies who was killed in action in Italy. Both films are captivating for their leading performances alone; both possess the theme of a relationship defying the odds, a couple that shouldn't work but does. This is, of course, reflective of their off-screen romance.

One could wonder just how interesting seeing the actors on screen together four times can actually be, but Bacall and Bogart prove again and again how compelling they are. When watching their films in the current era of cinema that's been criticized as "sexy yet sexless," seeing the two on screen together, even under the constraints of the Hays Code, is like being

struck by a bolt of lightning. When Bogart died of cancer in 1957, Bacall had him buried with a gold whistle, engraved with "If you want anything, just whistle," a nod to the iconic, provocative line she delivered to her future husband in their first film together, *To Have and Have Not*: "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow."



NORA EPHRON AND MEG RYAN

Lauren Mattice

According to the latest commercialization of nostalgia, it is “Meg Ryan fall.” The term was created as a play on a line from *You’ve Got Mail*, in which Ryan starred under the writing and direction of Nora Ephron. Through cycles upon cycles of social media posts, we are reminded to appreciate the autumnal outfits Ryan wore in *You’ve Got Mail* and other seminal romantic comedies, *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Though this appreciation often comprises nothing more than collages of turtlenecks or short clips of Ryan moving her wide-framed glasses to the top of her head. This format, in itself, cannot do much more than acknowledge and simultaneously create a spectacle that extricates Ryan from the films. What results is a transformation of Ryan, her role, and Ephron’s movies into what seems like a concerted effort to ooze femininity, fantasy and comfort — a transformation that erases the seminality of their partnership and the effect on the romantic comedy genre itself.

As a journalist and novelist, Ephron made a living in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s as a semi-antithesis to writers like Joan Didion; Ephron avoided complete cynicism to instead imbue each line she wrote with a sarcastic and dripping sense of “aside,” especially with regard to romantic situations. Each line mattered, and each word unspoken mattered, which made Ryan’s performance all the more critical.

In a classic *When Harry Met Sally* scene where Sally (Ryan) is telling Harry (Billy Crystal)

about a dream that starts and ends when a faceless man rips off her clothes, she qualifies that the dream varies, and as Harry enquires “which part”, she responds: “what I’m wearing.” The scene is credible for its humor, but at the same time an example of the title characters’ exacting interactions that favor substance over sensuality, though not to either concept’s detriment. Indeed, the intimacy between the lines is what drives their relationship forward.

Shortly after Ephron’s death, Ryan spoke to the *Hollywood Reporter* about the dependency of her characters and their belief in the romantic myth being tethered to Ephron’s pen. “She earned that perfection, and it was her pleasure to earn it,” Ryan said. “You’d go, ‘God, if I just wrote down all the directions she’s whispering in my ear, you could submit them to *The New Yorker*.’ Not line readings; she would just sort of explain the sense of something. Sometimes it was nonverbal: a little less, a little more, faster, funnier, may emphasize this. It goes easier and easier, a shorthand. Always precise, funny, smart.”

Precision is foundational to the intimacy Ephron emphasizes in her films. In *You’ve Got Mail*, bookstore magnate Joe (Tom Hanks) and small-business owner Kathleen are comfortable getting to know each other behind the veil of online semi-anonymity. But when Joe brings Kathleen daisies to apologize for putting her out of business, his verbal apology concedes that the move “wasn’t personal.” Irritated, Kathleen responds, “I’m so sick of that...All that means is that it wasn’t personal to you. But

it was personal to me.” Using this in-person interaction to emphasize no-holds barred honesty, Ephron contrasts the emptiness of romantic gesture to the intimacy of candidness – the latter truly giving rise to meaningful relationships.

What “Meg Ryan fall” does to this series of groundbreaking work, both within the genre and as written achievement, is reduce the impact of Ephron and Ryan’s work to fragments that should be consumed rather than appreciated in their fullness. The costume work by Gloria Gresham, Albert Wolsky and Judy Ruskin are fantastic in their own right, but when removed from the full mise-en-scene and performance, they are trivial and ephemeral — a criticism often charged to the romantic comedy genre itself.

Ephron wrote in a 1973 Esquire column that she had “spent a great deal of my life discovering that my ambitions and fantasies—which I once thought of as totally unique—turn out to be clichés.” Ephron worked hard throughout her life to bring her words, and the media they were contained in, to life. Meg Ryan helped realize these efforts through more than posing and gesture — their working relationship set a high note in the genre that still gets reduced despite the movies’ triumphs against frivolity in every line and sequence.



THELMA & LOUISE

Olivia E. Taylor

Ride or die. Die or Ride. The highways and intersections of outer Arkansas are littered with lorries and the unpleasant men that drive them. Horns, tires and motors bleed into each other and become one large howl in an echo chamber of vehicles. Under a bridge, Louise throws up the liquor she had consumed earlier that evening. From the time between her first drink and this moment she had witnessed her darling best friend Thelma sexually assaulted and consequently, vengefully, shot the perpetrator with his pants down. Shock and horror and booze -- all culminate into this one grand combustion of feeling. Spew on her turquoise 1966 Thunderbird's wheels; bent over in her Levi's with doe-eyed beauty queen Thelma in the passenger seat holding her crotch. It's not quite the trip she had planned.

Controversial upon release due to its overt feminism and exceptional ending, *Thelma & Louise* balances itself between a road-trip flick and a sociopolitical drama. Confined by the pressures of their sex and roles in America's post-war-50s and pre-sexual-liberation of the 70s, the duo embark on a holiday they hoped would allow them to ignore the pressures of being a woman during this time. Tragically, the opposite ensues; and every step of the way they are betrayed by the opposite sex. Screenwriter Callie Khouri portrays the American woman in

Thelma & Louise as radically disenfranchised by the world surrounding them. The answer to their survival is to destroy everything on their path, this includes; husbands, boyfriends, policemen, detectives, lorry drivers and beautiful criminals (Brad Pitt). The women establish killing as a survival technique not because they're romantically escaping to express boundless love for each-other like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or *Kit and Holly* in *Badlands* (1973). Rather, *Thelma and Louise* kill to carry on. They love each other platonically and entirely; like waves meet the shore, Louise is stoic and certain whilst Thelma moves fleetingly and wild through trauma. They both want the other to thrive; to exist beyond the idea of the 'perfect woman.' They dismantle their internalised misogyny by supporting each other, by and large convincing each other to split with their significant others. But most poignantly, deconstructing the male gaze; wholly demonstrated in the line, "No, you've always been crazy. This is just the first chance you've ever had to really express yourself," further revealing their unwavering championship of each other.

Think the American road trip; think *Easy Rider* (1969); oiled motorbikes, dusted Californian roads, *Born To Be Wild* by Steppenwolf, long hair blowing in the wind. *Easy Rider* symbolises the male-centric hippy fantasy of

the 60s. In comparison, *Thelma & Louise* is headier, darker. On the run from the police, fighting for survival and underestimated every step of the way. *Easy Rider* is misunderstood; *Thelma & Louise* is war. Aesthetically, the feature pulls from the road-trip genre in style and symbolism. The use of a tracking camera to follow the miles travelled along highways and deserts. Withdrawn motels filled with an assortment of strangers. Ripped articles of clothing that collect hours of sweat. Muddied faces with rosy cheeks. These features convey the arduous journey taken, this is most obviously shown in *Thelma's* attempts to preserve her femininity via her dress code. She begins in a white dress, a bikini and lipstick then swiftly develops into a ripped t-shirt, dirtied jeans and boots, metaphorically displaying her transition to independence. By the apex of her journey *Thelma* states, "I don't recall ever feeling this awake. You know? Everything looks different now. You feel like that? You feel like you got something to live for now?" Inversely, from the get-go *Louise* is dressed androgynously, adorning a buttoned shirt and gaudy scarf covering her head, possibly displaying confidence in her sexuality.

Or rather, her fear of sexualisation (something she is acutely aware of), an example of this is in *Louise's* resentment to *Thelma's* "openness" as she judges her decisions like dancing with a stranger in a bar or trusting the handsome student who needs a ride. Worn by the road, *Louise* slowly exposes her skin, opting for torn vests instead of neck-high shirts. Her fierce attempts to prove herself dissipates. She realises no matter how she dresses, she is still a woman and there's no escaping that.

Primarily, *Thelma & Louise* is an 'us against the world' fable; it's a freedom that crashes. They decide their ending, tragic or not, is better than the archetypal 'happily ever after.' Their determination to experience freedom takes over their embedded guilt women unfortunately possess. *Thelma & Louise* shows the beauty in partnership; the beauty in gambling everything against the odds. Their pilgrimage together ebbs and flows between escape and resolution until the pair fly like an American eagle, soaring over the grand canyon hand in hand. Sexism, crime and social confinement; these pains of femininity cut deep, still; the plight of a woman is easier done with a friend.



DUALITY IN VORTEX

George Turner

A cosy Parisian apartment, both symbolically and literally a time capsule of two lifelong lovers, is revealed to be as mortal – as temporary – in its existentiality as its elderly inhabitants.

Gaspar Noé's seventh feature, his most recent, will be instantly recognised as in many ways departing from the director's former oeuvres. A lugubrious, sluggish, and relatively quiet film, *Vortex* distinguishes itself by sparing its audience from the vehement and vociferous portrayal of extreme violence, graphic sex, or drug usage that frequented the screen in earlier works. It remains, however, no less confrontational in the unforgiving telling of its tragic story, which employs powerful performance and effective formal devices to establish overlapping matrices of dialectical relationships – both within and beyond the diegesis.

The first of such relationships is that of the married couple, portrayed masterfully by Dario Argento and Françoise Lebrun. The father is an academic spending his later years attempting to establish a revolutionary psychoanalytic theory regarding films-as-dreams. His spouse is a retired psychiatrist who is gradually falling victim to dementia.

The pair live in a quaint Parisian apartment, brimming with incalculable assortments of books, papers, binders, receipts, and sentimental decorative keepsakes. As the mother's condition worsens, her symptoms escalate and her husband and son (with his own son and an array of substance abuse problems)

are made to meddle with her mulishness as she episodically becomes afraid of her husband, vacantly strays from the flat, or disposes of her husband's work down the toilet. The couple refuse their son's encouragement to move out of their flat, insisting they are fine to continue living there. Upon their passing, the flat is emptied of their myriad belongings.

The cogent performance of its two leads is supplemented by the use of various formal devices, most notably a literal screen divider. Only in a short prologue do we see the couple share the frame together. Shortly thereafter, during the mother's first onscreen 'episode' of confusion while she lies beside the husband, the frame splits, placing each character on either side of the screen. For the remaining duration of the film, the pair will not be completely together in the frame again.

The diptych visualisation renders each disparate experience of the protagonists far richer than if they were viewed in isolation. Opening scenes of the mother's thoughtless wandering around a Parisian shop, or the father's solitary studying, are given new emotional depth when they are viewed literally adjacent to one another. No longer individuated events, they are instead a contrasting whole that induces (among other things) a gruelling fear for the mother's safety, and anxiety regarding the father's ignorance of her condition. This visual duality offers a uniquely continuous collision of two images, yielding a correspondingly unique output of emotional and artistic significance à la Kuleshov.

Occasionally the two images will feature overlapping components, such as one reaching across a table to console another, or a character's head partially crossing over to the other side of the screen. The result, evocative of a magic-eye illusion, offers a solemn formal narration: these partners are now splintered fragments of a previous romantic whole, sharing only sparing lucid moments together.

The diptych tool is further supplemented by documentary-esque aesthetics, with handheld camerawork and extended take lengths that sometimes last for over ten minutes. Narratologically, these formal elements afford greater access to each protagonist's events in the plot – a unique alignment which, in turn, produces a unique moral ambiguity regarding our allegiance to these characters.

Firstly, we are progressively morally distanced from the mother by virtue of her comprehension of daily life being almost entirely divorced from our own, leading her to make irresponsible, if innocent, decisions. The formal aesthetics of *Vortex* underscore this disparity by maintaining eye-level handheld cinematography and often unbroken takes of her pacing the flat or the streets of Paris, while also reminding the audience via the split screen of how underqualified her husband is in caring for her. In doing so the film observes (and thus encourages the audience to observe) her in a way at once both intimate yet distant, forcing on the viewer a sympathetic yet helpless moral stance.

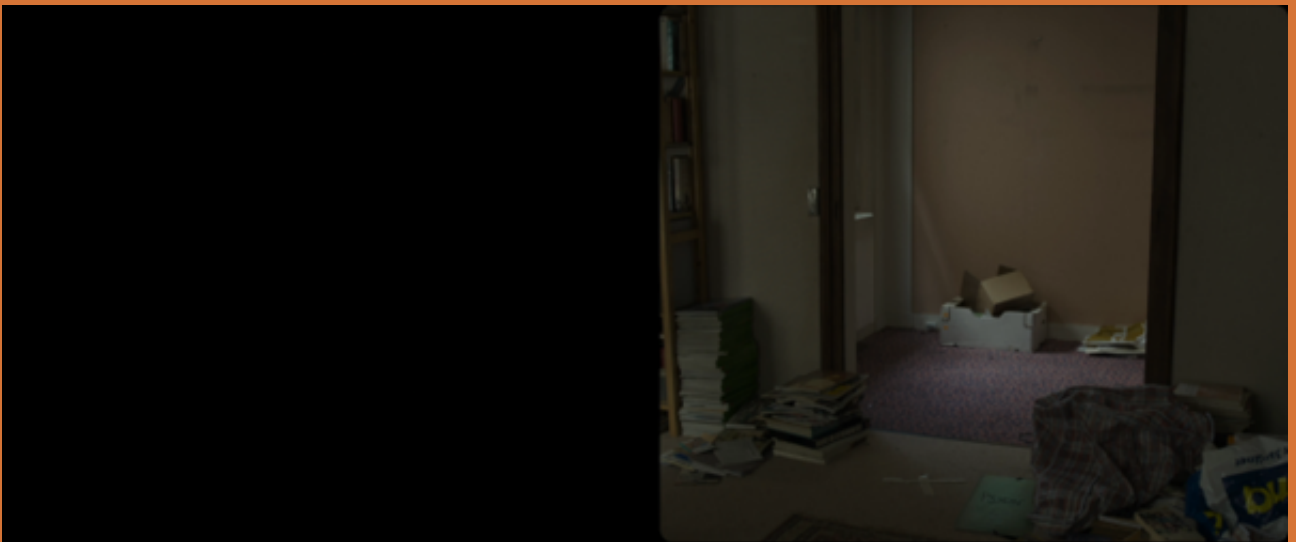
The audience is likewise alienated from the father as a result of extended exposure (again, afforded by the split-screen and long-take documentary aesthetic) to his naivety about his suitability to live in the apartment; his

frequently unsympathetic retaliation to the mother's declining mental state; and his maintaining of a long-term romantic affair. We are thus granted access to more information about the events of each person than their respective partner, but in doing so our allegiance to them both is stifled. A muddy, melancholic ambivalence results.

A final, equally interesting duo in the film is the couple as a unit and their apartment. In employing the aforementioned formal devices – forcing to the forefront the obviously comforting yet confounding effect of the labyrinthine apartment on the mother, and its symbol as a marker of adequacy for the father – Noé establishes an additional implicit duality that is experientially human: the duality between the living and the spaces they live in.

The film's closing moments, depicting the gradual emptying of the apartment, juxtaposes earlier scenes, shifting from the claustrophobic concentration on the couple to the apartment's importance throughout their lives. The inhabited spaces in the apartment (as markers of the chronology of their inhabitants' lives) themselves become nonhuman characters that have a human-like fragility and impermanence. The ontological role of these spaces as inhabited environments remains only so for as long as their two cohabitants require them as such.

At its most sentimental, *Vortex* establishes a further, implicit dichotomy between the frenetic and cruel reality of domestic life (and our comprehension of its finality), and the banal spaces that bear witness to it – evincing the human imprint on them, and thus serving as reminders of our existential impermanence.



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