

---

HIM 1990-2015

---

2015

## Reimagining Desire: Queer Time, Liminal Space, and Narrative Anxiety

Aidan Mitchell  
*University of Central Florida*



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses1990-2015>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIM 1990-2015 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Aidan, "Reimagining Desire: Queer Time, Liminal Space, and Narrative Anxiety" (2015). *HIM 1990-2015*. 608.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses1990-2015/608>

REIMAGINING DESIRE: QUEER TIME, LIMINAL SPACE, AND NARRATIVE ANXIETY

by

AIDAN N. MITCHELL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in English Literature in the College of Arts and Humanities and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Summer Term 2015

Thesis Chair: Dr. Anna Maria Jones

## ABSTRACT

Media shapes and supports certain ideas about how we view ourselves and others. The narratives that we consume train us to desire a particular formula of what critic Lauren Berlant calls “the good life”: growing up, becoming a man or a woman, getting married, having children, and retiring. People who fail to fit into these narratives are often punished and excluded from society. However, queer theorist Jack Halberstam asks us to reconsider failure as a means of resistance. The texts that I examine fail to conform to narrative expectations or to fit formulae that are easily consumable or defined. They present queer characters and relationships that exceed social norms and generic conventions. These characters and relationships encourage us to reconsider the models of desire given to us, and to embrace a more nebulous state of anxiety found in liminal space. In Chapter 1, I discuss Argentine-Spanish-French film *XXY* (2007), which follows the story of Alex, an intersex teen who refuses to fit within the binary of male or female. In Chapter 2, I argue that Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) lays the groundwork for the visual representation of anxiety and desire in the Japanese manga *Aku no Hana* (*Flowers of Evil* [2009–2014]), which explores non-monogamous relationships structured around sadistic voyeurism. In the conclusion I turn briefly to children’s cartoons *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*, in which failure has been reimagined as queer utopia. By focusing on media that resist heteronormative conventions we can start to reimagine models for more empathetic and compassionate communities.

## DEDICATION

For my mentor, Dr. Anna Maria Jones, who has endlessly supported me.

For my created family who have endlessly loved me.

And for all the queer kids. In the words of songwriter Cosmo Jarvis, “We deserve much better than we’ve had.”

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	ii
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	iii
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	iv
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	15
How to Come of Age .....	15
Adult and Non-Adult Bodies .....	19
The Abnormal Body in <i>XXY</i> .....	22
Consumerism and the Consumable Narrative .....	30
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	35
Sadomasochism: Boring and Unpleasant .....	35
Vertigo: Kim Novak as Two Women, Both of Whom Must Die .....	37
I Saw You: The Perverted Power of Observation .....	41
<i>Aku no Hana</i> .....	43
Repetition: The Comfort and Cruelty of Everything Being the Same .....	46
New Female Desire: The Female Sadist .....	48
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	53
Imagining Utopian Liminal Spaces .....	53
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	61



## INTRODUCTION

Advertisements, media, events, products, as well as cultural narratives, such as film, television programs, novels, and manga are not only products for consumption, but models through which we imagine ourselves. The narratives that we consume train us to desire a particular formula of what critic Lauren Berlant calls “the good life”: growing up, becoming a man or a woman, getting married, having children, and retiring. We are surrounded and actively influenced by these narratives whether we are aware of them or not. Everything from kitchen sets and lawnmowers to romantic comedies and pornography function as narrative props which imprint onto us a heteronormative lifestyle that is equated with the “good life,” as Berlant describes it “the discipline of normativity, which is that a hygienic, morally constrained version of the aspirational good life is always available as an instrument of moral trumping in the political public sphere” (*Female Complaint* 9). Berlant explains this aspirational “good life” in relation to “women’s culture” as: “the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot” (7). While women may be read as the obvious victims of romantic pressure, it would be foolish to discount the ways this “emplotted desire” affects men. In fact, it would be foolish to discount anyone who is a part of contemporary society, because whether a person fits the model or not (and most importantly many do not), no one escapes the pressure to conform. As some queer theorists have noted, this pre-packaged version of the good life increasingly embraces “homonormative” gay couples who assimilate to rather than challenge the status quo with their queerness. As Lisa Duggan argues in *The New Homonormativity*, “new neoliberal sexual politics ... does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). In other

words, the things we consume become our path to domestic (normative) bliss and personal fulfillment. Our identities are forged through what we consume, and in turn themselves become consumable commodities.

In this thesis I argue that there is little room for inconsumable identities within consumer capitalism and that an examination of the processes that create these subject positions can challenge the lack of a space for marginalized identities. Consumable identities are constructed from trait groupings that can be distilled into segments that are neatly packaged for the purpose of marketing. For instance, if the ideal woman has perky breasts, then everything from exercise regimens and vitamins, to padded bras or surgical implants, can be marketed to people who identify as female and want to move towards this feminine ideal. Conversely, women who fail to achieve this ideal—for instance, women of a certain size, women of color, older women, disabled women, and trans women—are told that lacking these traits excludes them from the feminine ideal, which can not only affect their perceived attractiveness but also call into question their very womanhood. Men face a similar challenge; masculinity is presented as the opposite of femininity as if on a sliding scale. In order to achieve the masculine ideal, they must erase that which is feminine, discounting the fact that masculine and feminine traits arbitrarily assigned by cultures, and often intertwine and overlap.

Inconsumable identities resist being marketed and marketed to because they cannot be broken down into predictable, consistent pieces. A fluid identity is an inconsumable one because of the absence of a “goal ideal.” How can breasts, or muscles, or a certain style of clothing be marketed towards someone who is not trying to assert a coherent identity? An individual’s life choices—their aesthetics, career preferences, interpersonal relationships, hobbies—may not all work toward a coherent identity. Without something to strive towards that they can never fully accomplish, there is no drive to purchase things that will reassure themselves or others of their identity. If things are not

desirable for their perceived ability to deliver on the promise of the “good life” or the “ideal” identity, then we must reconsider the things that we desire and why we desire them.

For everyone to be kept in their places, everyone must have a place. Inconsumable identities resist attempts at pigeon-holing them in a manner which makes filling out a census as difficult for an individual as it is for a company to determine the best method to market to that individual. Anne Fausto-Sterling states, “If the state and legal system has an interest in maintaining only two sexes, our collective biological bodies do not ... if nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural concepts” (31). I argue we should question and reject the binary formulas of identity and success given to us, and move towards embracing the anxiety of the inconsumable identities of others and ourselves.

Our identities are shaped by the narratives we consume. When you do not have a language for yourself, you cannot exist. Jack Halberstam asks us to consider “learning is a two-way street and you cannot teach without a dialogic relation to the learner” (13). Halberstam states that through “the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject” (2). When we create lenses through which we can observe our own desires and ideals about success, we can start to see how moving outside of “the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations” can offer us more. In order to move beyond these binary formulations we have to look deeper into our current relationship to anxiety and how to move from fear to making “peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of the counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (2). Anxiety is a mechanism through which we are taught to consume narratives of the good life that are unattainable so that we will stay anxious, and thus continue the

cycle in hopes of escape from anxiety using the same mechanism that makes us so nervous to begin with.

Plan C, an online activist collective, reach out and offer an alternative narrative. Plan C is the political action Halberstam encourages us to take, by poking holes in the “positivity of contemporary thinking” and offering more creative ways to combat binary systems (*Queer Art of Failure* 3). Anxiety rates and the severity of anxiety in contemporary society appear to be climbing exceedingly quickly. Although it can be difficult to quantify exactly how many people are experiencing pathological anxiety and how extreme this anxiety is, there appears to be a rise in the rate of incidence of conditions such as agoraphobia, social anxiety, panic attacks, etc., with social media often cited as a root cause. Plan C argues that “each phase of capitalism has its own dominant reactive affect” labeling the previous era of Fordism and “housewife malaise” as boredom, and the current era, here defined as the 1960s to the present, as anxiety (1). “Each phase blames the system’s victims for the suffering that the system causes. And it portrays a fundamental part of its functional logic as a contingent and localised problem” and in doing so, individuals place the blame on themselves rather than a system (1). As I will discuss later, things like positive thinking, self-made men, and rags-to-riches stories may seem positive or, at worst, harmless, but they create a climate that blames those taken advantage of by an unfair system, and sells capitalism as the (fair) chance at the vague idea of a better life. People may be comforted by the idea of control over their own destinies, but they are also held at fault if miracles do not occur.

The demand for consumability creates a climate in which people become interchangeable and disposable and people are given “an absurd non-choice between desocialised inclusion and desocialised exclusion” (1). There is a parallel between personal responsibility and the threat of communal punishment where the individual is forced to make choices concerning their well-being while resources may be available but not accessible. Anxiety is treated not as the result of a social

climate, but “as individual psychological problems, often blamed on faulty thought patterns or poor adaptation” (1). To combat this climate of social anxiety we first have to realize that it occurs and to validate these experiences. Plan C suggests we challenge the “personalization of problems”; to move past outrage, anger must become “less resentful and more focused” (1). Similarly to shifting from destructive forms of anger to more resistant forms of anger, I suggest here that narratives that embrace anxiety help prevent the gaslighting of individuals in our culture and to move from paralyzing anxiety into liminal spaces in which there is no limit or withholding of space or resources allowed.

Our society offers encouragement and reassurance that you as a person have many choices about your identity, life path, interpersonal relationships, etc. These choices, and the resulting consequences, that follow seem to come from within you, and are purported to be within your control. As Halberstam reminds us, “positive thinking is offered up in the U.S. as a cure for cancer, a path to untold riches, and a surefire way to engineer your own success. Indeed believing that success depends upon one’s attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender” (*Queer Art of Failure* 3). The word person is interchangeable with consumer, or consumed. It is important for society to create ideal archetypes of not just beauty, but personhood, in order to necessitate the desirable, but unachievable, male and female. To be the perfect female one must wear the right size, wear the right clothes, and have the right kind of romance including the right kind of wedding, ring, and gifts. These do not just indicate wealth, beauty, and status, but also the intangible personality traits e.g., the right sporty shoes will make you the kind of person who walks instead of drives. The right designer handbag will make you the kind of person who is on time to important business meetings. The right white flowered bedspread says that you have your life in order. Making the right choices,

or perhaps selecting the correct options, is important to the successful transition between childhood and adulthood.

In this thesis I examine texts that disrupt readers' and viewers' expectations for heteronormative narrative progress and closure: the Argentine-Spanish-French movie *XXY* (Lucía Puenzo, 2007); and the Japanese manga, *Aku no Hana (Flowers of Evil)* by Shūzō Oshimi (2009—2014). What these works have in common is that they challenge ideas about desire. Both works focus on adolescent protagonists for whom the prospect of moving from childhood to adulthood seems nebulous and threatening. They must transition into adulthood for the comfort of those around them, and if they do not do so within a certain amount of time they will be forever stuck in an anxiety-inducing state. Adolescence is typically viewed as transitional in contemporary culture, and if it does not have an end point, the character moves into a zone of child-adult that may become comical (e.g. movies such as *Elf*, *Step-Brothers*, and *Big* where grown men play childish characters) or creepy, off-putting, or uncanny (e.g. *Orphan* and *Cyrus* where adults who mimic children actively harm those around them), as they are neither fully child nor adult. In other words, they fail to achieve the “goal” of adulthood.

Adolescence and the failure to transition into adulthood can provide a useful space to occupy indefinitely. Jack Halberstam states, “failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (3). The gap that adolescence represents relies on social expectations and labels; in order for each of the characters to pass through to adulthood they must be labeled and categorized according to things like gender, sexuality, desire, and personhood. But the failure to move fully into adulthood might be more beneficial than originally assumed, because it provides us with a space to critique and reconsider the choices given to us.

Each of these main characters in the texts that I analyze resists deciding, or labeling themselves, or allowing others around them to decide and label who they are for them. People surrounding these characters are accustomed to projecting onto others what would make them most comfortable. These characters face external pressures to conform that readers are complicit with. These narratives help us to see that if one's identity is not consumable, then, for a capitalist society, it is questionable. The narratives make us uncomfortable because they force us to realize our desire for characters that are easily defined and plots that offer closure.

The characters in the narratives I discuss here refuse to make concrete choices, thereby inhabiting liminal spaces. While there is great external pressure to conform and move out of liminal space, the characters do not see the positives of this end goal beyond relieving this pressure. The further they move away from conformity, the less appeal it holds. In order to see conformity's appeal, there must be a certain amount of buy-in from the start. The inability or refusal to buy into the system causes unease for the main characters, the characters who surround them, and for the audience who is forced to continuously rethink the lens through which they are viewing the characters. These characters realize both that they are unable to readily conform, and that even perfect conformity would not afford them security. Rather than leave their liminal spaces, the characters start and end without answers, without tangible or finite results, and their stories end without definitive resolutions for audiences. This lack of closure is not only tremendously unsatisfying, but also anxiety-inducing. As Richard Rohr argues about liminal spaces: "If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run ... anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing" (1). The uncertainty we are forced to confront in these pieces, and will no doubt resist, the characters inhabit. I argue that these texts attempt to teach us to accept anxiety of ambiguity, and learn how it can challenge and benefit us without having to solve or dispel anxiety. Anxiety is present in these texts, but when the characters are able to inhabit

liminal space rather than fight to reach an unattainable level of security, a shift from paralyzation to realization takes place.

Chapter one examines resistance to conventional bodies. The film *XXY* revolves around Alex, an intersex 15 year old, but also places a large focus on the friends and family members who need Alex to make decisions about altering zir body in order to achieve personal comfort and self-understanding.<sup>1</sup> Alex must have a clear presentation as male or female in order for those around Alex to keep their own definitions of self. The film demonstrates that people's ideas of themselves do not originate solely from within, but are rather derived from external sources, through others and their perceptions. For example, in order for the doctor's teenage son, Álvaro, who comes to stay at Alex's house, to understand if he is straight or gay, he must first know that he himself is male, and whether Alex is male or female, in order to fully intellectualize and justify his attraction to Alex. Moreover, although Álvaro's attraction to Alex is never fully defined for the film's viewer, it is nonetheless categorized by other characters. When Álvaro's father learns his son is attracted to Alex, he responds dismissively: "Good. I was starting to worry you might be gay." For the doctor Alex must be a girl because his son must be straight, whether or not these neat categories actually fit the teenagers themselves. Alex resists these labels however, and shows an attraction to both boys and girls zir age in varying ways. The viewer may then be tempted to view Alex as male/dominant when desiring one gender, and female/submissive when desiring the other, or perhaps being desired, but it is, of course, not that clear cut.

Pressure from outside forces greatly influence the anxiety surrounding and upholding the gender binary. Alex's family upon zir birth had made the decision to move to a small seaside town to escape the pressures of the more structured and rigid society in urban Buenos Aires. They are not able to entirely escape societal pressures, but the sea does represent a much more fluid setting for

---

<sup>1</sup> I will be using the gender neutral pronoun ze/zir for Alex.

Alex than a city would. This only works while Alex is a child-now that ze is adolescent, and thus (according to the standard story) leaving a time when fluidity and lack of definition are okay and entering a space on the linear timeline that ze must choose either male or female; in the film's present Alex's parents need zir to make the choice that has been forestalled by moving away from "civilization." Alex causes great anxiety for the adults around zir who want Alex to make a choice and move into adulthood and society, and for Alex's peers who are unsure what an attraction to Alex means. Alex is wild, if not somewhat feral, having grown up with few friends, away from the rest of the world, and having spent a great deal of time in the woods or by the sea. Alex is uncompromising in zir decision to not alter zir body one way or the other, or package zir desires, forcing audiences to reconceive gender and sexuality, and to reconsider our initial desire for Alex to make a choice as an improper desire. Rather than aligning ourselves with Alex's parents and their view of choosing male or female as a gender being the culmination of the film, we choose to accept the liminal space which Alex inhabits.

Unconventional bodies are often represented in media as unattractive, unruly, and dangerous (*Silence of the Lambs*) or tragic and doomed (*Boys Don't Cry*). *XXY* challenges these standard of representation as Alex's unconventional body is attractive to characters in the film who find zir so, and to the audience as well. More recent narratives such as *Hit or Miss* and *Orange is the New Black* show unconventional adult bodies as attractive and more durable; however, they treat the turmoil of puberty as already past. The transgender characters have already chosen to stay within the gender binary, to transition from one gender to another. Conversely *XXY* focuses particularly on adolescence and on resisting binaries rather than trying to reshape to fit within them. Alex is not allowed by zir community to simply exist in peace with the body that ze has, let alone feel and act upon attraction without social expectations being projected onto ze. Whenever Alex acts upon the attraction ze feels in the film, ze flees the scene when zir partner makes clear their desires as

masculine or feminine. Alex is effectively told that in order to be good ze must choose a gender, and zir suffering has been brought about by zir own inability to do so, rather than the fact that Alex occupies a world that makes it virtually impossible to happily and safely have a body that is marginalized. Because Alex's body is different and ze refuses to get it fixed, ze therefore does not deserve to have or make choices about said body, and deserves to suffer. The film is shot in a way that changes perspective between other's looking at Alex (Alex's parents, the doctor, other teens in the town) and Alex looking at zirsself. In one scene, for example, Alex is looking at zirsself in the mirror, Álvaro is standing outside zir window looking at Alex look at zirsself, and we are looking at Álvaro look at Alex looking in the mirror. The cinematography gives us a reminder of what perspectives we choose to actively take or switch between.

In chapter two, I examine the difficulty of desire and interpersonal relationships outside of singular heterosexual attraction. In Shūzō Oshimi's manga *Aku no Hana (Flowers of Evil)* as in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, we are given a passive female object and active male voyeur dyad that is complicated by the introduction of a third character, a girl who challenges and perverts the norms of heterosexual attraction and romance. I argue that Hitchcock's *Vertigo* provides the visual vocabulary for perverse pleasure in the power of voyeurism. Like *Vertigo's* Midge, Nakamura, the girl with glasses, works as a character who can see what is happening when others cannot, which fuels the relationship between the voyeur, Kasuga, and his love object, Saeki. Indeed, without her their relationship's development would have been impossible (she is the catalyst to the very start of their relationship by blackmailing Kasuga to talk to Saeki and eventually ask her out). While Midge is abruptly written out of the plot of *Vertigo*, I argue, Nakamura presents to us the challenging character of a female sadist who is not erased. Nakamura convinces Kasuga, to make a contract with her. In exchange for doing whatever she demands, she offers to help Kasuga possess his "ideal girl," Saeki, although Nakamura seemingly better fits what he desires. Kasuga desires humiliation in front

of Nakamura, and his relationship with Saeki takes place as spectacle for her. As Slavoj Žižek states, “the Lady in courtly love loses concrete features and is addressed as an abstract ideal” as Saeki does (1182). Saeki is a “narcissistic projection” of Kasuga’s desires but this courtly love is interrupted by the presence of Nakamura and the contract. By complicating the dyad and creating a love triangle, *Aku no Hana* shows us that instead of the conflict being that only two can remain in a sustainable relationship, all three characters are needed. Without Saeki, Nakamura loses interest in Kasuga because there is nothing for her to watch and control. Without Nakamura, Kasuga is unable to engage with Saeki.

Chapter two looks at the difficulty in cleanly separating male and female, and how we often force bodies and personalities into whichever category we think the individual is more likely to successfully pass as, rather than letting them exist outside of these two boxes. Halberstam asks,

What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime—what if someone began life as a boy but became a boygirl and then a boy/man? What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don’t know what the hell is going on? (37)

We must then address the idea that the characters are perhaps not definable by their bodies, that, in fact, identities cannot be tied to bodies as directly as we might hope. Therefore while a body provides lived experience, neither is a body equivalent to an identity nor does it mark the limit of one’s personhood. As readers, we may be pulled to label the characters’ genders and sexualities (for example, if they are not male then they must be female), but when identities are fluid they are often indefinable; there is no opposite against which to define them. In both of these narratives the characters are unsure of themselves and of their desires. This is obviously not uncommon for any coming-of-age tale. Kasuga carries around with him *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which he uses as his own

alternative guide to life, worshiping his copy as well as a picture he has of its author, Charles Baudelaire. Kasuga resists conforming to school life, viewing his classmates as blind followers stuck in a monotonous and meaningless lifestyle. He believes Baudelaire teaches him to appreciate the beauty in decay, and to escape the trappings of a normal life.

However, the manga suggests that is no easy way to escape from the models of life given to us. Kasuga and Nakamura continually try to find a liminal space within a physical world and are disappointed. Their issue lies in their search for an end point to solidify their place outside of normal society. Kasuga and Nakamura choose then to look within themselves to try and find such a place, but inhabiting a liminal space is not concrete, and therefore can be unsatisfying. As Kasuga and Nakamura become more aware of the inability to physically run away from their issues, they turn inward to try and create self-contained worlds that are not reliant on an outside action. They believe that one only has control over themselves and their own actions, and that there is an endless resource of “self” to tap into, that only the individual has control over. These beliefs set unrealistic expectations that nothing outside of the “self” is affected by one’s existence, and that one can become somehow resistant to all that is outside of their control. This creates a situation in which they are doomed to fail, and by their definition of success and failure, failing means they must die. They see suicide as their only option, but in their failure to commit suicide they are given the opportunity to reassess their identities and their desires.

At many points throughout both *XXY* and *Aku no Hana* the characters experience a sense of hopelessness, and indeed the reader might as well. Their situations seem inescapable; like the “absurd non-choice between desocialised inclusion and desocialised exclusion” that Plan C describes, the characters are not allowed access to dominant society should they try to play by the rules, and are not able to run away or create self-contained universes in which they are free of these rules they cannot follow. However, all is not hopeless, perhaps. Plan C argues “structurally, the

system is vulnerable” and that anxiety has occurred “in the absence of stronger forms of conformity” (1). Alternative narratives offer a starting point for resistance against the structure of anxiety as a self-disciplining cultural climate. *XXY* and *Aku no Hana* move beyond previous narratives into a space of liminality and show us what resistance can look like.

As I will discuss in my conclusion, shows like *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* create a utopian look at the future in which this kind of resistance can transform society. These two children’s cartoons move beyond failure and create a new language for ways of being outside of the success/failure binary. They represent queer communities outside of our time and space and thus do not depend on our social norms and narrative expectations.

Throughout these narratives we lack generic conventions or familiar scripts. The narratives themselves are difficult to explain or market because they resist and subvert generic tropes. The characters’ inconsumable identities carry over to the works they inhabit. These narratives lack clean or satisfying endings, which, I argue, helps to train us to avoid seeking simple, concrete answers. Through this thesis I will show how this resistance can offer us more as readers in encouraging the acceptance of anxiety, and teaching us how to deal continually with this apprehension, rather than ignore or run away from it.



## CHAPTER 1

### How to Come of Age

“If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style.” (Quentin Crisp)

Our culture’s emphasis on “coming of age” as a satisfying narrative arc relies on a cluster of assumptions about childhood, adolescence, gender, and social legibility and ties into our ideals of the “good life.” We expect a problem, narrative progress, and then a happy ending. The film *XXY* interrogates these assumptions. Critics like James Kincaid have argued that our emphasis on childhood innocence does not protect children, and is, rather, harmful: “By creating Gothic melodramas, monster stories of child molesting, and playing them out periodically (often), we provide not just titillation but assurances of righteousness,” he writes. “Demonizing the child molester . . . we can connect to a pedophile drama while pretending to shut down the theater” (341). In other words, children must fail at being adults in order to maintain the safe boundaries between childhood and adulthood, while at the same time we enjoy stories in which these boundaries are crossed. The process of growing into adulthood is a common feature among contemporary cultures globally, and one that has been transformed into a cultural artifact and touchstone through film. Teenagers dating adults, adults reverting to their teenage years, adults moving back into their childhood bedrooms, etc.—these recurring motifs seek to understand and codify that process. Teenagers are meant to go through puberty, have sex for the first time, leave an abusive home situation, go off to college, have their hearts broken, or lose a loved one and learn how to continue moving forward in order to mark the growth that must take place to move from childhood—or, more generally, as I will call it, “pre-adulthood”—into adulthood. In these narratives people are seen as inhabiting a liminal space (pre-adulthood) because they do not have the experiences required to prove themselves adult. Although there is no cutoff date on when someone must become an adult, movies that focus on thirty-somethings who have not moved out of their parents’ house tend to include very heavy-handed suggestions that these characters are pathetic, that they have been stunted

in some way, have not amounted to much, are losers, are “man-children” for men, or “babies” for women, and are creepy for acting and potentially hanging out with people much younger than they are. These adults which possess queer and childlike elements are “failed adults” because they do not properly fit into society’s linear timeline, and as a result call into question the naturalness and desirability of this measurement for progress.

The contemporary model for success, happiness, or progress leaves many people caught, as Jack Halberstam puts it, between “cynical resignation” and “naive optimism” (*Queer Art* 1). If we are unhappy with the current narratives because of our inability to fill them, then why are we so stuck on them? The media repeatedly reports on how to love your body as it is, sandwiched between how to alter your body to come closer to an ambiguous and unattainable “better.” If even models are unhappy with their looks and do not look like their own photos, if even romantic leads are displeased with their love lives, if even the rich and powerful COOs and CEOs of today feel unfulfilled, then why not search for alternatives? The larger question is, as Halberstam puts it, “what is the alternative?” (2). In *Queer Art of Failure* he does not simply ask the reader to rethink success, but to rethink failing: “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adult hoods” (3). In other words, rather than rethinking what a successful adult is, we can break down the expectations and boundaries between child and adult (3). The saying goes if it isn’t broke don’t fix it, but it is possible that even if it is broke, still don’t fix it. Leave it. Rather than finding a solution to every problem, such as turning every child into a proper adult, we gain a lot more from accepting instead of denying. And we lose. We lose things like pressure to perform, anxiety, and violence.

In the most simplified Hollywood films, the audience is given a storyline where a single event is what changes the protagonist from non-adult to adult. In the 1999 film *Never Been Kissed*, a

woman named Josie Gellar in her early 20s returns to high school having “never been kissed.” There is an implication that she does not belong among her peers because she has not been kissed, and she is therefore an overgrown girl amongst the adult women at her office. She returns to the scene of what many contemporary narratives view as the most essential formative years of a person’s life, high school. Once kissed, the protagonist can happily “claim” adulthood, while maintaining a free and childlike spirit. It is also important to note that as a heavily feminized character, it is not permissible for her to actively seek out and kiss someone. A man must decide that she is worthy and choose to act upon on her, rather than her acting herself. If she were to take on the role of the one acting instead of being acted upon, the kiss would lose value.

As Laura Mulvey states in *Visual Pleasure*, in much of cinema male equals active while female equals passive. A woman’s job is literally to be looked at, while a man’s job is to do the looking. Josie in *Never Been Kissed*, along with the film’s audience, is led to believe that if she took action it would indicate she was unable to find a man willing to bestow a kiss upon her. Her job is not to act, but to attract. She must not only achieve the act of a first kiss, but must do it through the action of another on herself, separating behavior into male and female that characterizes women through non-behavior, or inaction, and defines women’s worth through being acted upon by men. Other films that focus on a return to high school include *17 Again*, *13 Going on 30*, and *Freaky Friday*. Even if a film does not feature a plot where an adult must return to high school, there exist an incredible number of television shows and films about high schoolers played by adult actors as well as a large adult audience. The viewer experiences vicariously a return to high school.

Society’s obsession with high schoolers is a part of the narrative that those four years inform our lives far after we have left. Adults are often haunted by both what did and did not happen to them in high school. A commonly expressed desire is the wish to return to high school with all of the knowledge they now possess, intending to “do it all right” and the accompanied expression of

how much more they would enjoy their lives as a result. This way of thinking is particularly interesting because even while it fantasizes about backtracking, it remains linear in terms of its ideas about growth and maturation. Why can adults not use what they know now? Why would it better serve them if they returned to high school? Can meaningful growth only occur before adulthood, making adulthood a static space in which a person's character is unchangeable in any noteworthy way?

The focus of the film *Never Been Kissed* is, as the title suggests, the act of kissing, with the "first kiss" held in particular esteem. This quantifies kissing as being something of diminishing value. The first kiss holds the transformative power, while following kisses become less and less valuable, and too much kissing can be seen as a negative value. The climax of the film, Josie's first kiss, takes place on a baseball field before the entire high school, as Josie's brother is reliving his own high school experience: his dream of being a star baseball player. The most important aspects of Josie moving into adulthood have very little to do with Josie. Josie's list of criteria to fulfill is very strange: The high school witnessing and thereby validating the action of the kiss has taken place, its occurrence on a baseball field, which holds more significance to her brother than herself, and the kiss coming from a man who was her teacher and until the very end of the film think Josie is a teenager. Josie undergoes very little change and yet how others see her, and therefore how she sees herself, radically shifts, suggesting the standards of growing up are socially constructed and arbitrary.

The solitary event of being kissed moves a girl to woman, says this film. However, even more nuanced or indie films that reject the idea that a single event so quickly and cleanly transitions you safely into adulthood still tend towards linear timelines. For example, in the film *Reality Bites*, it takes the protagonists almost a full year to outgrow their childish ways. The happy love confession and montage at the end of the film indicate to the audience that our main characters will now be dressing age-appropriately, getting married, moving into a house, and acquiring real (read: salaried)

jobs. People move, even if slowly and in smaller steps, into adulthood. But what are the requirements of being an adult? A widely held belief is that one goes through puberty to become either male or female. One aspect of adulthood, in other words, is that you need what is considered an “adult body,” and that an adult body can only be male or female. Josie is an inappropriate choice for her teacher’s affection when she is a teenager, but without any change to Josie occurring, when it is revealed she is of adult age and has already gone through puberty, his desire for her becomes acceptable. There seems to be a clear line between adult and non-adult, and that it is inappropriate for adults to engage with non-adults, and yet the line is often ignored or muddled with. Adults fail to recognize when someone is adult or non-adult, and fail to follow their own guidelines for behavior towards non-adults. Much of the fault is placed not on the system of identification, or those who are unable to properly identify others, but rather those who are unidentifiable.

The film *XXY* provides a contemporary alternative to this narrative in the physical body of the main character, Alex. I will be using the gender neutral pronoun ze/zir to describe Alex, as Alex does not identify as male or female. Alex embodies many abstract concepts because zir physical body becomes the map for society’s aggressions towards queer bodies and failed adults. Alex does not exist along the child-to-adult success timeline because zir body does not develop into male or female. Alex cannot succeed in the expected fashion, because the transition does not take place, rendering zir unwelcome in most spaces, and forced to create new spaces and ways of being in order to exist.

### **Adult and Non-Adult Bodies**

These coming-of-age films occur in the context of a culture that objectifies and scrutinizes real children’s bodies. Children must fail at being adults. Children who pass as adults, or adults who pass as children, are disturbing for their breakdown in what is supposed to be a rigidly partitioned system. Even dressed in adult clothes, a child is meant to look like a child. Children are encouraged

to play at the act of being or becoming an adult, but they are not supposed to be successful. A contradictory system is put in place that both encourages and rewards child to emulate adults (“you’re so mature for your age” etc.), and discourages it “don’t grow up too fast.” Girls are often perceived as being grown up much sooner than boys as a result of early socialization that encourages “people-pleasing.” Girls are also told that they are naturally more mature and reserved, often because they are heavily sexualized. They are valued for their youth, and also stripped of it when they are acted upon by adult men (e.g., “she looked older than she was,” i.e. she took on another adult’s responsibilities for their actions when sexualized by an adult). This is even more pronounced with girls of color because of the sexualization of race, and the racialization of gender. We also see this with marginalized boys who are reported as “thugs,” “men,” “monsters,” “beasts,” and “animals.” When adult men perceive and act on marginalized youth, blame is often shifted on the children for not being adults. As James Kincaid says, “We have, according to the needs of history and our own whim, made children savages and sinners, but we have also maintained their innocence, a quality we seem to need much more than they do” (53). Children are coveted for their innocence, without being given any agency or power over such innocence. Lack of agency and power is even a part of innocence, the need to be protected and the inability to protect oneself.

Androgynous, gender non-conforming, and intersex individuals inhabit the liminal space between an adult’s body, which has the potential to reproduce and has gone through a binary of male or female puberty, and a child’s body. Their bodies are not able to or do not try to achieve realness within the binary of child and adult, and male or female. There is a double axis of gender and age, upon which they do not clearly fall upon the societally approved points. For this reason these marginalized groups are at much higher risk for violence and aggression because of the lack of understanding and space for non-adult bodies, as well as a lack of protection for individuals who may not be able to advocate for themselves. Body modifications such as tattoos and piercings, or

unusual clothing, also evoke this feeling that people are exhibits in a hands-on museum. These micro-aggressions against Othered bodies are part of a larger culture that dehumanizes and objectifies marginalized bodies for everything from amusement to an enforcement of social order.

As individualistic as this contemporary society may claim to be, bodies are often seen and treated as public property. For example, the notion of “reasonable expectation of privacy”: if people do not want pictures of them taken, they should not be in public spaces. If someone is a public figure, they cannot also hold a private life. People feel free to make unsolicited comments, or even harass others about their weight, hair, skin, clothing style, and the like as they personally see fit. People even touch others’ hair, clothes, and tattoos to determine the quality or texture of them without asking while they inhabit public spaces. This is especially true if the person’s body is seen as abnormal. People will often touch other people’s bodies freely in public without asking (e.g., people who are pregnant, disabled, gender non-conforming). If they do ask, they do so while already touching.

Societies’ view of marginalized bodies as public property is instilled in individuals from an early age. This is not something of the past which only occurs in low-income areas or that is only of older generations. There are a number of examples of children learning that their bodies and identities are disruptive within the last few years. Children learn they must stay up-to-date on how to properly conform to certain standards in order to be deemed acceptable. For example, Navajo Kindergartner Malachi Wilson was told to cut his hair to meet the school dress code policy that only allows long hair on girls (Moya-Smith 1). Faith Christian Academy in Central Florida told African-American parents to “straighten and shape” their daughter’s natural hair or she would be expelled (Channel 6). Author Liz Dwyer spoke about her 13-year-old son wanting to shave his head so his classmates would stop throwing trash in it and treating it “like a petting zoo” or in the reverse, nine-year-old Kamryn Renfro was threatened with expulsion for shaving her head because the school

dress code does not allow girls to have shaved heads (Dwyer 1; Catalan 1). Girls at Tottenville High and schools across the country are not permitted to wear tank tops or shorts on the hottest days of the year because it will encourage others to sexualize their bodies, therefore making it the girls' fault. These girls are taught through being taken out of class and suspension that their bodies are considered more disruptive than making their parents come pick them up or by forcing them to wear bright yellow over-sized shirts as a marker and shame technique for having broken dress code (Lore 1). It happens when boys are not permitted to wear skirts or dresses because adults think the boys will be teased for it, when it typically embarrasses adults more than children (Menachem 1). This happens in Colorado when a transgender first-grader is told she is sexually harassing her peers simply by using the women's restroom and is continually misgendered as a boy, and in Maine when fifth grader Nicole was banned from using female restrooms altogether (Ring 1). Children are taught early on that marginalized bodies do not deserve respect; they are perverted, dirty, unwholesome, undesirable, and attract negative attention. These children's natural bodies are ridiculed as weird and disruptive, and they are ironically told they must actively take steps to alter their appearances to look natural, which comes with the immense unspoken disclaimer, by natural we mean white, cisgendered, male, able-bodied, and heteronormative. This is one of the first steps in dehumanizing bodies as unnatural, regardless of whether they are, with the false guarantee that your body, as long as you conform, is safe from this. Even those who are granted greater rewards for having normalized bodies go through a constant process of becoming that way. No one, in other words, is natural. Everyone is encouraged to become natural.

### **The Abnormal Body in *XXY***

“This is not a story about being born in the wrong body, it's the story of being born in the wrong world.” (Alok Vaid-Menon)

In the film *XXY*, the main character Alex has entered a never-ending puberty until ze picks a gender. Alex's puberty has already been delayed through the use of hormone blockers, and as time passes, anxiety surrounding Alex and pressure on zir to leave this stage of life is multiplied. Puberty in most major films is portrayed as an awkward and uncomfortable time; a common reassurance is that it will not last forever, because in the "end" everyone moves from non-adult to adult. Alex is given the choice of a female body and female life, or a male body and male life. It is painted as impossible for Alex to continue with zir current intersex body because Alex must transition into adulthood, and in order to do so, must have an adult female or adult male body. Alex rejects this notion to the panic of everyone around zir, causing Alex's mother to call upon a specialized doctor to stay with them after Alex fights with zir best friend and the town begins to find out about Alex's body.

Panic surrounding Alex's body relies heavily on the projection of others' expectations onto zir. People's own identities must be questioned if Alex does not fit the mold, causing Alex's body to be a catalyst for violence. Identity is created through Othering, and people know themselves only through difference. This makes Alex's body and identity dangerous to the current construction of society because it does not permit Alex to exist. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler states;

It becomes a question for ethics . . . not only when we ask the personal question, what makes my own life bearable, but when we ask, from a position of power, and from the point of view of distributive justice, what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable? Somewhere in the answer we find ourselves not only committed to a certain view of what life is, and what it should be, but also of what constitutes the human, the distinctively human life . . . There is always a risk of anthropocentrism here if one assumes that the distinctively human life is valuable—or most valuable—or is the only way to think the problem of value.

But perhaps to counter that tendency it is necessary to ask both the question of life and the question of the human, and not to let them fully collapse into one another. (17)

If Alex successfully exists, or even if Alex fails to, others are forced to recognize zir failure to fit within the system, they will be forced to look at how their system has failed and how their own identities no longer make sense because they have been created by such an imperfect structure. Alex holds a mirror to people's ideologies surrounding personhood, human rights, identity, and social structure that is uncomfortable to look at because it returns the gaze to look back at you.

Alex is fifteen and has spent zir life being perceived and treated as female. At an early age, zir parents decided to move to a small fishing town along the ocean in Uruguay in order to escape the pressures of urban Buenos Aires. Alex is the couple's only child, and zir mom deeply wishes to convince Alex to be a girl. Alex's mom thinks it will be easier for Alex if ze become a girl, and she desires a daughter to fawn over. Alex points out to zir mother that she often advises Alex, without much thought as to why she is giving Alex the advice, to be a "better" girl. She pressures Alex with familial love and duty to make her own role as a parent and mother simpler. Rather than reflecting on her own actions as a mother, she believes that Alex being the perfect daughter would make her the perfect mother. Alex not having a binary gender identity calls into question zir mother's beliefs about her own role in Alex's life. Alex's body is considered a questionable physical form, and this plays into the fears and desires of everyone around zir, propelling them into states of anxiety about their own identities and notions of self.

Like zir mother, Alex's father is unsure about what his role as a parent should be in his child's life. He recognizes that the doctor that has come to live with them can give Alex the hormones, hormone blockers, and surgery ze needs to become a male or female and that there is more than one option. While he is in a different position than the mother who has already decided that she wants Alex to be female, he struggles greatly with whether should encourage and how he

should encourage Alex to choose to possess a more stable identity. He later meets with an older transgender man to discuss whether he regretted his decision, how he decided, and how it impacted his life.

Alex's father seems to have more of an understanding of what Alex is going through than others surrounding Alex because he is both empathic and in tune with his child, and because he has studied what he suspects Alex is going through in animals, but he is often unable to communicate because of the lack of vocabulary to talk about what Alex is and what is happening with zir body, preventing him from fully understanding his child and what to do to help zir. While others, like zir mother or the doctor, state in clear terms that they think Alex should be female and what that entails, Alex's father tries to move outside of these bounds, at least in concept. However, he is often stopped in his uncertainty, and while able to think beyond the sole option that Alex is a deformed female, he is unable to fully conceptualize Alex as more than male or female. Like zir father, Alex struggles with language, and they both say very little throughout the film and to each other.

Alex cannot avoid confrontation because zir physical form embodies a liminal space between conflicting social identities. Alex's entire existence is aggressive because zir body is viewed as problematic. There is no break or rest for Alex, or ability to avoid. Alex is often angry or tired throughout the film, and repeatedly runs from situational discomfort. However, Alex can never fully escape, because ze cannot exist outside zir physical body. Wherever Alex runs, the situation is forced to escalate as Alex must interact with other people and deal with their actions, which are charged by the anxiety surrounding Alex's body and identity.

Desire plays a large role in the notion of coming-of-age as it does in Alex's life. Alex starts to experience sexual desire and to be desired, but this is problematized in repeated encounters throughout the film. Alex's lifelong male friend Vando tries to kiss Alex, and Alex responds by

punching him in the face. Vando is not aware of Alex being anything besides the female he desires zir to be. Alex is put in the uncomfortable position of revealing ze is not who Vando thinks ze is and losing the friendship, and opening zirself up to violence and ridicule because of Vando's possible feelings of betrayal. Later on, Vando saves Alex from being assaulted but is unable to comfort zir as Alex struggles with the violence that has just been perpetrated against zir body.

Alex tries to experiment with the doctor's son Alvaro, taking him up into an attic where they begin to make out. Alvaro tries to take the lead, as he perhaps presumes he should, but Alex pushes him down on to his stomach and penetrates him from behind. Alvaro is seen in both a state of shock and confusing sexual arousal. Alex's dad catches them, and they both run off separately into the woods. Alvaro thinks a lot about what this means for his own identity and whether this makes him gay. He is nervous and shy, and Alex puts him into a state of heightened panic. He later finds Alex in the woods and declares his love for zir, saying that he does not care if that makes him gay. Alex now has two boys, one who desires zir as female, and one who desires zir as male, but Alex is exhausted with the conversations and runs off once again.

Alex's body is confrontational, but even as the owner of zir body Alex cannot understand why it is inherently volatile. We see how ze sees zir own body, and how zir body only becomes problematic when put through our lens when Alex stands alone in zir bedroom looking at zir own naked body in a way that seems to suggest ze is trying to figure out what is so complicated about it. Ze does not break down, or cry, or pull at zir skin in ways that would suggest discomfort within zir own skin or dysmorphia, but rather seems confused as to why zir body is such a source of contention. During this moment, the audience through the mirror sees Alex as ze sees zirself, and as the camera pans out, sees Alvaro in the forest looking through the window at Alex. The doctor's son is representative of the audience, who continually tries to discover Alex's true identity and throughout the events of the film is often tempted subconsciously to try and answer the question

whether Alex should choose to become male or female, but the film constantly reminds us through framing, such as the mirror, that Alex already exists, and questions this notion of becoming anything. As Alex says, “what if there is nothing to choose?” (Puenzo 2007).

Vando and Alvaro fighting for Alex’s friendship and romantic affections suggest a typical erotic triangle format, where one suitor should be chosen over another as the clear winner. Vando is jealous of Alvaro’s friendship with Alex, saying somewhat ironically that Alvaro could never understand or handle how complicated Alex is. They all share a moment on the beach drinking, Alex sitting between the two boys, silently looking out over the ocean, trying to figure out how each relates to the other. Silence once again takes on the only shared language Alex can find with other people. This has become further complicated because Alex has been sexually assaulted and both boys feel what they perhaps perceive as a failure on their part as protectors of Alex. In this, the pressure on Alex from the boys only intensifies, as they are frustrated in their inability to care for or comfort Alex.

Alex’s only friend who does not demand things of zir is Roberta. Roberta is a slightly younger girl who does not yet seem to have gone through puberty. She does not need to classify Alex in any other way than as a friend. Despite this, Roberta’s father looks questioningly at Alex when ze comes to sleep over at their house, a reminder that when Roberta grows up, she will likely be encouraged to stop being friends with Alex unless Alex can be classified as a harmless female friend, or a romantic male partner. He says that Roberta must sleep separately on the floor, or Alex must go home. Roberta’s father takes us out of the scene, framing it as a reminder of how Alex is viewed by others. Roberta giggles and tells Alex she has been having sex with her cousin even though she did not plan to and he said they would only “go half-way” while she makes shadow puppets of people having sex. Roberta seems to find sex exciting, fun, and funny, as opposed to horrifying and traumatic the way Alvaro experiences discussing sex. Alex laughs at Roberta’s stories,

but becomes annoyed when she tries to paint zir nails. Alex gets into the shower irritably scrubbing at zir hands and nails. Roberta climbs into the shower to join Alex smiling and handing zir the shampoo bottle. Alex roughly washes Roberta's hair for her, making Roberta laugh when ze tugs. Alex smiles a little and then Roberta turns around to face Alex and wash zir hair once again for zem. Considering Alex has already washed zir hair, it appears to be an act of reciprocity, friendship, and intimacy. Alex stares at Roberta while she stares back, standing in contrast to when Alex stared into zir mirror and Alvaro watched through the window. Here, Roberta and Alex are both aware of one another looking, as the framing also works to remind the audience that we are looking in. Alex eventually takes over and rinses out zir own hair hurriedly and leaves, possibly to avoid the escalation of the scene. Roberta seems to be the only friend Alex feels comfortable around, but as Roberta grows up and becomes interested in everything ranging from nail polish to sex, it is testing the unclear, ungendered boundaries of their friendship.

Ramiro, the doctor who comes to live with Alex's family, uses his position of power as a medical professional to push his own ideas about gender and sex. He views Alex as a very straightforward case: ze is a deformed female, and through surgery and medication this deformity can be corrected. His confidence is comforting to Alex's mom, but rubs both Alex and zir dad the wrong way. His son, Alvaro, seems to fear his dad and his dad's disapproval and disappointment that Alvaro is not more manly, which comes to a head towards the end of the film when Alvaro confronts his dad, asking if his father even likes him. The doctor responds with a lack of emotion that he does not hate Alvaro, and then states that he was worried Alvaro was gay, but is pleased to know he is interested in Alex as that renders Alvaro heterosexual in his eyes. He walks off leaving Alvaro in tears, now more confused than he was before. As a medical professional Ramiro is expected to be impartial and to keep with whatever the wishes and best interests of his patients are. Despite this expectation, we see this is not something he is able to deliver. When Alex's father visits

Esteban, the “woman who became a man,” Ramiro expresses his concern that he would be making the wrong decision by permitting Alex to decide and eschewing the opinions of the professionals. However, Esteban tells Alex’s father that his very first memories were medical examinations. He says, “I thought I was horrible and wrong.” Rather than comfort or “fix” him, doctors and surgery made him afraid of his own body, “making her afraid of her own body is the worst thing you can do to your child.” Esteban expresses his views about “normalization”: “it’s not surgery, it’s castration.” Alex’s father still fears that letting his child decide will mean Alex will have a hard life, but Esteban tells him how he has had the perfect family since he went through his transformation. He adopted a son, and is in the process with his wife of adopting a daughter. He represents the notion that if Alex chooses differently, as long as ze go through surgery, hormones, legal changes etc. ze can become a successful adult by performing the role of a proper male.

This constant confusion, misgendering, anxiety, desire, and fear surrounding and projected onto Alex’s body are all a series of violations against Alex’s agency that culminate in an attack on Alex by a group of boys from town where ze is sexually assaulted. Alex is walking alone on the beach in broad daylight, hunched over and wrapped in a sweatshirt, clearly uncomfortable to be so out in the open when a group of four boys pull up in a small boat and begin to chase after zir, asking a series of probing questions while laughing. This quickly escalates to the leader of this pack of boys forcing Alex down onto the ground and then stripping Alex’s clothes off so that they can see for themselves what Alex is unwilling to answer. They all voice their opinions “it’s ugly,” “it’s weird,” “that’s fucked up,” and finally the leader who says, “no, it’s not, it’s awesome.” The leader then begins to touch Alex’s genitals while the other boys watch, showing the danger of fetishizing abnormal bodies; this “positive” take on Alex’s body still dehumanizes and commodifies zir as a specialty object for others to gawk at or play with. He uses Alex’s body for his own enjoyment

despite zir crying, kicking, begging, and screaming for him to stop, until Vando comes and chases the boys away.

### **Consumerism and the Consumable Narrative**

Alex's last name "Kraken" implies a monstrous nature to Alex's form and a connection to the sea. In mythology krakens are mysterious underwater creatures inspired by giant squids. A large part of their horrific nature is that they are considered unknowable quantities. They live in the depths of the sea where it is dark and difficult to predict where they are, how large they are, and when they will strike. The etymology of their name comes from the Swedish *krake*, meaning unhealthy or something twisted (Bringsvaerd), thus suggesting that Alex is viewed and feared, much like a kraken. Ze possess an unhealthy or twisted physical body that is meant to be corrected.

The mythology connected to Alex's body also suggests a similar method of explaining the unknown in nature as supernatural. Alex's connection to the sea suggests a wildness that horrifies and is unable to be tamed. Alex's body is considered unnatural, and yet the solution to correct Alex's body is through medical procedures that will render it "normal." What Alex and zir surrounding village have been taught is that there are very narrow definitions of male and female, and that if you do not fit into one or the other, then you are viewed as deformed, rather than being something else entirely, in order to uphold the system. However, the film asks us to consider that Alex is not horrifying. Alex is not presented with any alternative narratives, rather Alex is presented to us *as* an alternative. Esteban is the closest to an alternative we see, but in the end Esteban's work to become a heterosexual male is not to present an alternative narrative, but to squeeze and mold to fit within the binary construction of male and female. Esteban's story suggests that while different levels of work may be involved, everyone must constantly work to be male or female and fit within society. Alex's biggest difference may be to possess a physically different body, but the biggest complication

is that Alex refuses to do the work required to fit into a male or female category physically or behaviorally. In Halberstam's terms, Alex chooses to fail.

The Kraken family moves to the sea in hopes of escaping normal societal pressures to exist within a liminal environment while Alex makes a determination about his body. The sea is a powerful amoral force that can swallow boats whole, wash away villages, or provide food for a village. While land is "a stable foundation" the ocean is "a fluid unknown" (Hammond 1). The shoreline is ever-shifting, unquantifiable, and uncontrollable, much like Alex's body. Alex's family and people in the town often characterize Alex as feral, wild, and otherwise animalistic. In many ways Alex causes anxiety, not only by not following the normal pathway to adulthood, but because Alex is perceived as somewhat inhuman. He does not possess a normal physical body, and it is questionable whether Alex is more animal, an oddity of nature, or something else entirely. Without a language for what Alex is, Alex becomes unquantifiable. The film thus toys with the notion of Alex becoming something otherworldly and terrifying because of his identity being unknown.

Yet, it also contradicts this view of Alex as monstrous. As an alternative to the Kraken we see clownfish take on a parallel role to Alex, defying standard classification of sex even by those who specialize in the topic, such as Alex's father, a marine biologist. Within the Kraken household we see books that he has written about homosexuality and gender variance in aquatic creatures, most notably clownfish, a tank of which Alex keeps in his room. We get a close-up show of the clownfish so we are unaware of their tank initially, then the camera zooms out so we can see the tank, and finally we see Alex looking at the clownfish. This framing reminds us once again that we are an audience watching Alex's experience as Alex watches the clownfish. Clownfish possess a type of hermaphroditism known as protandry, which is a sequential hermaphroditism in which they are born male and eventually change to female (Fautin 1). There is a female (the largest) and male (second largest) that are the breeding pair for each group, while the rest of the group are smaller non-

breeders that have no functioning gonads. If the female of the group dies, the male breeder of the group will become the female, and the largest non-breeder will become the breeding male.

Interestingly, the non-breeding fish within the group have no sexual or role differences, yet are labeled male (Fautin 3). This may lend itself as an explanation for why even though Alex's dad and the doctor specialize in sciences surrounding Alex's issues, they have not been given a structure that accommodates for someone operating outside of the male/female binary. Alex's lived experiences are silently mirrored in some sense by nature, others by myths of the supernatural, yet Alex cannot exist within a society that relies on spoken language because there is no language for Alex. Alex's identity and experience must therefore be erased or altered to fit narratives or Alex risks becoming inhuman and unreal. The seemingly impossible task of creating and space and language for zirselves is placed on Alex. Indeed, this explains why Alex is silent for so much of the film: zirselves language is not inclusive of zirselves experience or existence and as a result is in many ways unusable. By being inconsumable Alex is also placed so that it is difficult for zirselves to consume.

The film resists a clean, neatly packaged ending in which Alex decides a gender, or Alvaro triumphs over his father's homophobia, or Vando is able to decide if he is comfortable being Alex's friend rather than romantic partner. It leaves us with more questions than answers, which can be frustrating. As consumers, we are taught how to both produce and consume. In order to contribute to our capitalist society, we must do both. We are therefore used to making ourselves consumable products, and having easily consumable products and experiences marketed to us. We expect to know what we are getting, and for there to be a set price for each item or experience we choose to purchase, which builds our narratives of ourselves. Alex's narrative resists this by not falling into an easily marketable genre in the fashion that *Never Been Kissed* does. It is difficult to summarize without losing essential parts to the story. It is hard to accurately put into a trailer, review, or title in a way that will be appealing to a consumer market.

Even the title of the film, named for a genetic disorder, misrepresents Alex's liminal identity. XXY, also known as Klinefelter syndrome, is classified as "a genetic disorder in which there is at least one extra X chromosome to a standard human male karyotype, for a total of 47 chromosomes rather than the 46 found in genetically typical humans" (Bock 1). Individuals may be male, female, intersex, or otherwise; however, they are typically classified as male and may show no signs at birth, or during the course of their lives. Many people with Klinefelter syndrome may go their entire lives without knowing it, or without it affecting them. Common differences are a tall, lanky frame, weaker muscles, youthful facial features, and the inability to grow a full beard (Bock 5). It is unlikely Alex possesses Klinefelter syndrome in this film, but the film's titling suggests that the producers and marketing team for this film realized the difficulty in marketing it without a catchy title that would make people think about gender. Even in a film that deals with the difficulty of being mislabeled, the film mislabels itself. The director, Lucia Puenzo, spoke about how it was very difficult to cast Alex because she was looking for someone very androgynous. In the final cut, Alex is only raised as a girl and given female pronouns because the actor chosen to play Alex is a cisgendered female. Alex could have taken on male pronouns just as easily (FilmCatcher). Puenzo also expressed that when initially writing and casting the film she was looking for a much younger actor, but as the script materialized she realized the level of sexuality and violence necessary to tell the story, and that a younger actor would be problematic. Puenzo states it was important to the narrative that the chosen actor be able to pass for a teenager. Even though the actor, Ines Efron, was twenty four when XXY was filmed, Puenzo said she was thrilled Efron "looked like a fifteen year old." Puenzo also noted that she found Efron very feminine and not at all like what she thought of when she thought of Alex, but that something about her eyes said "Alex," which was important in a film with very little dialogue.

*XXY* teaches us to move into the liminal space of not knowing, and to embrace the discomfort of being unable to consume. It reflects our own judgments and desires for Alex back on to us and asks why we wish these things, exposing a structure that encourages an arbitrary definition of “natural” that detaches us from our bodies, and demands conformity at the high cost of violence.

## CHAPTER 2

### Sadomasochism: Boring and Unpleasant

“When will you bury me, Debauch? O Death,  
whose pleasures rival hers, when will you come  
to graft your cypress on her gruesome rose?” (Baudelaire 131)

*Aku no Hana* (*Flowers of Evil*) by Shūzō Oshimi is a manga that takes its name from the poems of *Les Fleur du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire. The main character of *Aku no Hana* is a fourteen year old boy named Kasuga who is filled with teenage anxiety and uses Baudelaire’s work to guide him. The storyline of the manga explores the trauma of puberty and middle school while the art captures the state of spiraling panic Kasuga inhabits, similar to the framing, visuals, and music used in the Hitchcock film *Vertigo* to create a similar sensation of false rotational movement and creeping fear. Baudelaire’s sadomasochistic vision of love informs the drive behind both main characters Kasuga and Scottie in *Aku no Hana* and *Vertigo*, respectively.

Charles Baudelaire presents himself as a tortured artistic genius and *Les Fleur du Mal* is his manifesto. Kasuga, a teen boy struggling with feelings of anxiety, lack of purpose, and conflicting feelings of elitism and low self-esteem, is drawn to Baudelaire’s work which views personal suffering as tragic and noble. Kasuga believes he suffers like Baudelaire because he is too good for this world: “The Poet is a kinsman in the clouds, Who scoffs at archers, loves a stormy day; But on the ground, among the hooting crowds, He cannot walk, his wings are in the way” (Albatross 13-16). Kasuga admits to not fully feeling like he understands the poems; however, he believes he understands them more than anyone in his town ever could, proving that his real intellect is above testing or grades. While he despises school, and his parents scold him for his anti-social behavior and low grades, Kasuga looks to Baudelaire to teach him what “true” beauty and intelligence is. Baudelaire’s work captures something no one else understands about his life. Kasuga is comforted by the feeling of finally finding someone who he can relate to, even if it is a dead French poet. In fact, to Kasuga it is

better that it is a dead French poet, as he does not wish to relate to people in his town. He looks down on them and sees them as “bugs” (8).

Kasuga begins to try and shape his daily practices around the aesthetics of Baudelaire’s work, and what he lacks in comprehension of the text, he makes up for in religious devotion. Kasuga builds an altar for his copy of the book where he talks to the book alone in his room, prays to a framed portrait of Baudelaire for guidance, and lays the book to rest at night. During the day, Kasuga carries the text wherever he goes as proof to himself that he is better than the rest of his classmates because he is the kind of person who owns a copy of *Les Fleur du Mal*. He views the torture he goes through of being made fun by classmates, teachers embarrassing him because of his low grades, and the boring monotony of his life as necessary to his ideal as a suffering artist.

Kasuga also believes his suffering makes his love for classmate Saeki more pure. He views her as his muse, but he can never attain her because a physical relationship would sully her and pervert his desires. As someone who is intelligent, he views himself as unable to engage in innocent romantic love. He knows too much of the world, and therefore his physical and mental status of suffering must match through denial and perversion. Baudelaire compares love to the pleasure and destruction of wine and opium in his poem “Poison” concluding, “None of which rivals the taste/ of your bitter saliva/ which like a pestilence infects/ my soul until it sink/ unconscious on the shores of death!” (54). He calls women whores and beasts that eat the hearts of men, and yet he is addicted to them and their terrible, wonderful beauty. He finds women repulsive, disgusting, and entirely separate from man, but covets the pain, and pleasure through pain, they bring him.

*Vertigo* assists us as a midpoint in portraying masochism between Baudelaire and *Aku no Hana*. Here I would like to explore the use of the spirals to represent panic, cruel/strange women, and the relationship between power and eyes in Hitchcock’s films, specifically focusing on *Vertigo*, and how it aids us in viewing *Aku no Hana*. Elements of one of the most popular psycho thrillers in

history are deliberately used in a manga about middle schoolers to show the level of trauma associated with the process of puberty. *Aku no Hana* reveals to us interesting extensions from Baudelaire and Hitchcock on interpersonal gender relations, and sadomasochism, by adding the female perspective through the inclusion of a main female sadist.

### **Vertigo: Kim Novak as Two Women, Both of Whom Must Die**

*Vertigo* is a movie about detective Scottie who develops a fear of heights and the sensation of spirals, falling, loss of control, etc. when he is unable to save his police partner during a rooftop chase. Scottie watches the death of his friend while helplessly hanging from the gutter of the roof, which becomes the moment of his symbolic castration. Later on we will see this connection to *Aku no Hana* where Kasuga's entire experience of puberty causes him to feel the same helplessness, and subsequent anxiety that Scottie does. Paul Verhaeghe refers to the effects of castration anxiety by stating, "as long as the neurotic subject remains fascinated by the lack of the Other, both by trying to answer it and by fleeing from it at the same time, he will remain immobile, reminding us of the rabbit captivated by the headlights of a car"(7). Acting out of this place of fear, both characters' relationships to women and sadomasochism are driven by a desire to regain structure, and subconscious and conscious projections onto women as the Other.

*Vertigo* follows detective San Francisco detective Scottie Ferguson beginning with a rooftop chase in which Scottie witnesses the death of a policeman who tries to help him back onto the roof after he falls and is forced to hang helpless from the gutter of the building. Scottie retires but is determined to conquer his fear one step at a time. He tells his friend and ex-fiancée from college, Midge, his plan, but is unable to step higher than a step-stool without fainting into her arms. She suggest that only an emotional shock or psychological break could possibly cure him and that he should not get his hopes up or push himself too hard. It is also important to note that Midge is a single woman living alone who designs underwear for a living, and that she teases Scottie for

wearing a medical corset. This sets up Midge as an unusual female character in that her desire to control is portrayed by the film as an attempt at masculinity, while Scottie's fear of heights is shown as feminine.

An old college acquaintance, Galvin Elster, hires Scottie as a private investigator to follow his wife, Madeleine, claiming she is possessed by the past women of her family. Scottie watches Madeleine in a restaurant, as she brings flowers to the grave of Carlotta Valdes, visits Carlotta's portrait, which strikingly resembles her, in an art museum and to a hotel into which he sees her enter, but not come out. With the help of Midge, a local historian tells Midge and Scottie the story of Carlotta Valdes who committed suicide. Scottie relentlessly questions Madeleine and claims he can cure her. Scottie locates Madeleine's nightmare as Mission San Juan Bautista and drives her there despite her protests. They declare their love from one another, but Madeleine begs Scottie to let her go because of her demons. Madeleine runs up the church bell tower and Scottie is unable to follow as his vertigo takes over. He watches again helpless as Madeleine throws herself to her death. Scottie has a psychotic break is placed in a mental hospital where he barely moves or talks at all. Time is fast forwarded to his release where Scottie starts to obsessively visit the places he followed Madeleine, imagining that he sees her. Eventually, he spots a woman who looks similar to Madeleine and demands entry to her hotel room as well as identification that her name is Judy, and not Madeleine.

A flashback shows Judy writing a letter in which she reveals she was paid actress hired to impersonate Madeleine, and that Scottie never met or saw the real Madeleine. The real Madeleine was murdered by her husband as Elster planned to take advantage of Scottie's vertigo, throwing her body from the bell tower knowing Scottie would never be able to reach the top. Judy tears up the letter and decides she is willing to do anything or live with any sin, because she loves and needs to be with Scottie now. Scottie begins changing things about Judy's appearance to make her appear like "Madeleine," and struggle between the two as Judy begs Scottie to let it go and love her not

“Madeleine.” Scottie’s fetishistic desire to recreate “Madeleine” cannot be stopped, and Judy makes constant concessions in the hopes that it will at least allow them to be together.

Finally, Scottie notices Judy putting on a necklace for their date that he recognizes from the painting of Carlotta. He drives Judy back to the mission against her will and drags her up the bell tower to recreate the event, explaining each step of the plot now that he has figured it out, and forcing Judy to listen to what she has done as she pleads with him to stop. At the top, Judy confesses her guilt, and Scottie has conquered his vertigo. Judy grovels for forgiveness, but a nun rises from a trap door scaring her backwards and Judy falls to her death.

The cinematography itself is the backdrop for the events of the film. *Vertigo* opens on tight, closely cropped angles of a woman’s features breaking her down into parts. In the style of film noir, the male gaze is directed to the incriminating details that come with the ability to observe a woman up close. First, her mouth, twitching as anticipatory music plays. Next, her nose, at an almost grotesque angle, and finally her eyes. It starts with her eyebrows, which are raised in a fearful and nervous expression, but then zooms even closer to just her left eye. The eye widens in fear as the music swells, and her pupil dilates. Spirals begin to form and circle inside of the pupil, then to surround the whole eye, and finally colorful spirals take over the screen as the opening credits play and the eye fades. As the opening credits end, the spirals begin to become eye-like, as many things throughout the movie and manga will, suggesting that anything could, in fact, be a hidden eye, or that eyes could be everywhere. A heightened sense of tension is present during the course of the whole film, as in the manga. Many critics have spoken to this, as David Sterritt says after fifty years from the film’s release, *Vertigo* skillfully:

Works the concept of vertiginous instability—mental, physical, romantic, moral—into almost every shot. It begins during the opening credits, accompanied by swirling spirals that transfix the viewer much as Scottie is transfixed by his false lover’s dark allure; and it extends

to such a small particular as Madeleine's hairstyle, pinned back in a twisting coil that echoes the film's motif of descent into mystery and madness.

Though there are peaks and valleys to the tension, a defining feature of movie and manga is that start to finish neither the audience nor the characters are given a chance to relax; they are always aware that they are under a state of surveillance.

With eyes everywhere, there is always a possibility of being caught doing something one should not be doing, as well as of the discipline and punishment to follow. Scottie's role as a private investigator is very literally to watch and look at Madeline. By observing her, he can uncover and punish her for her secrets. While it is Scottie's job to watch her, it is also important he not be caught looking at her. He exhibits a kind of shame or embarrassment from looking at Madeleine that exceeds not wanting to blow his cover. The film places the audience in a state that permits them to identify with Scottie, as is typical of film noir, but also focuses a new kind of eye or mirror back at the viewers to feel as if they are peeking at something they should not, rather than having the right to observe.

When Madeleine is first seen, she is framed like a portrait. Scottie openly gapes at her beauty as she is slowly revealed; first her left shoulder, framed by her dress, and the back of her head. Then, as she rises and turns, her face, and form. She walks slowly through the restaurant as the viewers are guided by the camera to see what Scottie is seeing, and the viewer takes on the role of the active male gaze, while Madeleine, like her dead great-grandmother's portrait, is an object that is to be looked at. The audience is forced to recognize their voyeurism as Madeleine turns to look at the camera and almost catches Scottie's eyes on her. Scottie turns away embarrassed, reminding the viewers that they are peeking, and need to avoid being caught. Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" states that in *Vertigo*, "the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination . . . the power to subject another person to the will sadistically

or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as the object of both” (1178). Scottie’s thinly veiled perversion is backed by his status as being on the right side of the law. His goal is to “break her down and force her *to tell* by persistent cross-questioning” (1179). Judy’s willingness to be watched and to torture herself as she conforms to Scottie’s fetish by physically embodying Madeleine’s appearance allows her to keep Scottie, though he does not care for her as “she knows her part is to perform, and only by playing it through and then replaying it can she keep Scottie’s interest” (1179).

### **I Saw You: The Perverted Power of Observation**

*Vertigo* introduces a female gaze as a perversion of the male gaze in Midge. She helps Scottie learn information about the history of Carlotta, the woman supposedly haunting Madeline, and she is able to figure out pieces of the story despite Scottie’s attempts to avoid answering any of her questions. Midge’s observational skills are quickly transformed from useful to destructive, however, as she becomes jealous of the feelings between Scottie and Madeline. Once Scottie begins following Madeline around, Midge starts to crave his attention and leaves him phone calls, notes, and demands for him to share more information with her and spend more time with her. She eventually paints a picture of herself as Carlotta. The picture immediately comes across as comical because of the nature of her modern haircut and glasses with a nineteenth-century ball gown, but her desperation to get a reaction out of Scottie turns it sour. Scottie, in the midst of his obsession with Madeleine, fears for her life as he knows her great-grandmother Carlotta and her grandmother both committed suicide. Midge’s painting is her way of taunting him by revealing that she knows about the legend that Madeleine, like the other women in her family, will commit suicide. Scottie runs out of the room disturbed at Midge’s perversion of her knowledge. He is disgusted at the idea of Midge having watched him as he watched Madeleine. Midge’s normal light-heartedness completely disappears once

Scottie is out of the room, shouting at herself “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!,” tearing at her hair and ruining the painting (1:08:00).

Midge’s creepiness in her desire to control Scottie through exertion of a disciplinary gaze continues after Scottie has a psychotic break and is admitted to a mental hospital. As he sits wordlessly, without seeming to see or hear anything around him, she plays him music and begs him to return to her. She embraces him and says, “You’re not lost . . . Mother’s here” (1:26:00). Midge tells the doctor with a sad smugness that she knows that Scottie is suffering because he was and is still in love with Madeleine. Midge’s glasses very literally represent her ability to look, and though she has very little screen time, it is devoted to shots of her watching, observing, and either gleaning information from these things, or putting them into pictures with her art. Midge’s looking is punished with her inability to connect with Scottie. Though she is originally valuable to him because of information she holds, quickly she resorts to holding information over him, and he pushes her away in disgust. At the opening of the film Midge teases Scottie for his medical corset placing him as weak, vulnerable, and feminine. He even swoons when he tries to step to high on a chair and his vertigo kicks in. Midge displays intense desire throughout the film to help Scottie and take care of him, but only so she can control him. Much like an overprotective mother, she does not encourage Scottie to get better, but instead pushes with a disturbing ferocity for him to accept himself as weak and in need of her care.

Disappointingly for viewers, Midge’s storyline ends when she tells the doctor what she knows, and slowly walks down the corridor of the mental hospital away from the camera. Foreboding music plays as her heels click away, but we never see her again in Hitchcock’s originally released version, leaving unsatisfying loose ends as to what happens to her. Hitchcock’s original release of the film leaves Midge’s storyline open-ended or unfinished. We do not know why Hitchcock would have dropped Midge’s storyline given his obsession with women looking such as

in *Rear Window*. Considering that the movie did not do well at the box office or with critics during its release, perhaps because the female gaze was too perverse for Hitchcock to further pursue depicting in a film at the time.

### ***Aku no Hana***

*Aku no Hana* expands on the concept of the perverse female gaze within the first few pages. The manga centers around fourteen year-old Kasuga, a middle school boy who one day steals his crush Saeki's gym clothes. Fellow classmate Nakamura catches Kasuga and they enter into a sadomasochistic "contract" under threat of Kasuga's secret being revealed. Kasuga wishes like his idol Baudelaire to be a *flâneur*. He wants to be able to see and observe his classmates without being one of them, and to go unnoticed himself, as the *flâneur* is part of yet separate from the crowd and therefore not controlled by it. He quickly fails at this when Nakamura takes notice of him. The story opens with the main character Kasuga looking uneasy as he waits for his name to be called during role. The second and third page open to a double spread of Nakamura sitting behind Kasuga, watching him through her glasses without him knowing he is being watched. Much like Hitchcock used music and camera angles to draw attention to certain aspects of the characters and build tension, Oshimi uses perspective and lines to draw attention to Nakamura's glasses. When she is far away often the only detail we can really see about her is her glasses; no facial features are drawn in. She is seen looking up through her bangs surrounded by dark clouds and sometimes she is standing up and we know her to be looking down, but the drawing cuts off right below her eyes. Much like Midge, glasses and power through disciplinary observation become defining features of Nakamura.

Like Scottie watches Madeline, Kasuga watches Saeki without her knowledge, projecting onto her his image of the perfect girl. He views Saeki as perfect, pure, and unattainable. However, when this illusion is shattered and subsequently Saeki become attainable, Kasuga no longer wants her. In fact, he is repulsed. Slavoj Žižek writes about the sadism and masochism in courtly love, such

as the relationship between Kasuga and Saeki, “the Lady in courtly love has nothing to do with actual women, how she stands for the man’s narcissistic projection which involves the mortification of the flesh-and-blood woman” (1182). It is important for the image to persist, that Kasuga not be confronted by the actual “flesh-and-blood” Saeki, as she shatters the illusion of herself that Kasuga holds.

This courtly love as described by Žižek perhaps could have continued along between Kasuga and Saeki indefinitely; however, Nakamura’s desire to control the relationship between Kasuga and Saeki disrupts the dynamic. Though Nakamura does not become romantically involved with either character, she introduces herself into the relationship deriving pleasure from the ability to watch and control the interactions between Kasuga and Saeki. Just as Midge emasculates Scottie we see Nakamura use Kasuga stealing Saeki’s gym clothes as information to control him. She forces Kasuga to wear Saeki’s gym clothes, and to write his innermost thoughts for her to comb through. In the first book we see her take off her glasses as her eyes distort and she smiles cruelly at Kasuga, commanding him to do her bidding saying, “I saw you” (I:50). Kasuga runs away and is convinced Nakamura will now tell the school, and plans to confess before she can out him. He goes through the entire school day in a panic, but takes no action until Nakamura slips him a note from behind that says to meet her in the library. He again makes the decision not to return the gym clothes and instead goes to meet with her. She tells him once again that she will not tell, but “in return, you’ll make a contract with me” (I: 70). Saeki then appears, and Kasuga is given the chance again to return the gym clothes, but freezes with fear. Nakamura shoves him from behind and he falls into Saeki while staring at her chest and Saeki runs away embarrassed. Nakamura displays pleasure at the other’s humiliation and demands Kasuga now write an essay on how he feels and turn it into her tomorrow, reminding him they have a contract. The focus is once again brought to her glasses as a rotting flower resembling the cover art of *Les Fleur du Mal* twisted around her, a giant eye within the

center. This places Nakamura as a character with the powers of a *flâneur*.<sup>2</sup> In “*The Painter of Modern Life*” Baudelaire’s concept of the *flâneur* is described as, “his passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world” (1). Nakamura perverts this role as a female who uses this power against Kasuga, undermining Kasuga’s masculinity and destroying his fantasy as detached observer as she quickly takes over his desired role.

Kasuga never explicitly agrees to the contract that Nakamura continues to reference, and often disobeys her. However, he continues to meet with her as he has nightmares about many sets of eyes in the dark watching him. Nakamura tells Kasuga that he is pathetic for having dirty thoughts about his crush Saeki, but he insists that Saeki is his muse and calls her his “*femme fatale*” (I: 99). Nakamura is aware of Saeki’s image being separate from Saeki, and therefore seeks to control it. She purposefully controls and monitors every interaction with Saeki that Kasuga has, and when the illusion of Saeki is eventually shattered, Kasuga realizes that despite his previous protests, all of his time and energy has been spent satisfying Nakamura. Instead of looking for another Saeki as a muse, he begs Nakamura to continue controlling him, insisting that this is what he really wanted all along. He craves the structure of pain Nakamura inflicts upon him, rather than the free-floating anxiety that surrounded his ideal girl in Saeki.

---

<sup>2</sup> I use *flâneur* in its unaltered masculine form because Nakamura does not represent a feminine version of the term here, but rather the term in its original meaning.

### **Repetition: The Comfort and Cruelty of Everything Being the Same**

Kasuga feels full of guilt and regret for his continuous sins. We know that each time he promises to never engage with Nakamura again, he will. A recognizable pattern forms: Nakamura will summon him; Kasuga will feel anxious but decide he does not have a choice and will go; he will be disgusted and outraged when Nakamura tells him her next command; he will protest; she will belittle him and tell him he does not have a choice; he will feebly say that he trusted her; Nakamura will make a final threat and leave him to do her bidding; he will be filled with anxiety about how he cannot complete his task. Eventually he will fulfill the demand, and feel slight relief his task is over. He will promise himself to never sin again, only to be summoned by Nakamura for the cycle to restart. At the end of the first book Nakamura's final threat to Kasuga is that she will reveal him: "I've decided now. I'll peel it off. All the skin you're hiding behind" (I: 198). Kasuga repeats the lines to himself, saying they "swirled" in his head, as his panic continues to spiral, a call back to *Vertigo*.

Kasuga understands what Nakamura meant when she first says this. However, the more he dwells upon her statement the less familiar it becomes, while remaining the same statement. A sense of the uncanny beings to overtake her words. What he thought he knew he is no longer sure of. Frequently, Kasuga becomes queasy with the thoughts of what he does and does not know. On the one hand he is bored by things he has become inured to, by being exposed to them over and over again, for instance, his school. On the other hand, he is grasped by fear of what he thought he knew taking on new and frightening forms. Nakamura offers Kasuga what he has been hoping for through the image of Saeki as something to take him outside of his small repetitive town. Ironically, this is through the repetition of masochism of which Deleuze says, "at most, the masochist gets a preliminary pleasure from punishment or discomfort; his real pleasure is obtained subsequently, in that which is made possible by the punishment" (45). Manga as a narrative form lends itself well to this repetitive structure, often coming in weekly or monthly installments that can span years. *Aku no*

*Hana* takes place over eleven volumes, many of the chapters repeating similar images from previous ones.

Kasuga and Nakamura use sadomasochism to try and escape the small repetitiveness of their town. However, because of sadomasochism's repetitive nature, this catches up with them. They must continually raise the extremes of the exchange, until there is nothing more to be exchanged. They are horrified to find that what they have been doing has been no different from what they were doing before. They commit themselves to moving physically to escape instead of simply mentally, but are naturally faced with the reality of the other side of the mountain being the same as the one they are trying to escape from. Kasuga is seen in one of the wide fields in town, both in his dreams and in real life, panicking about how he is nowhere, and that everything is the same. The field seems endless and unchanging, and he feels exposed by his inability to place himself in the world.

In the final volume, Kasuga calls after Nakamura as she tries to leave him once more, this time on a beach. Nakamura tells him that it is good "you have chosen the path everyone walks," but Kasuga physically knocks her to the ground several times in front of his current girlfriend to try and prevent Nakamura from leaving, shouting "I can't get a hold of anything. When I think I've reached you, you go away. Even if I think I've made it, it'll start all over again" (XI: 9–27). They fight in the ocean, and Kasuga's girlfriend is pulled in, but eventually they all end up exhausted, laughing on the sand, and Nakamura tells Kasuga not to come back, that he is too normal of a person. A montage of pictures shows Kasuga getting married, having a kid, working, and then anxiety creeps back into him. He sweats in bed and has nightmares. He sees Nakamura's eyes and hair in other objects. However, he deals with his anxiety through writing, and bonds with his wife and child. He does not return to Nakamura, or Saeki, and manages to avoid overt projection onto his wife. The final chapter repeats the first chapter of the series, this time with the color red added and from

Nakamura's perspective. It ends where Nakamura catches Kasuga and asks him "what are you doing?" (XI: 36).

### **New Female Desire: The Female Sadist**

Dangerous woman-demoralizing days!  
Will I adore your killing frost as much, and in that implacable winter, when it comes,  
discover pleasures sharper than iron and ice? (Baudelaire, *Overcast* 55)

Repetition is at the core of sadomasochism. Freud's term "repetition compulsion" encapsulates the common human desire to seek the comfort of that which is familiar. Leonard Shengold, author of *Haunted by Parents*, says, "sadomasochism, both as a perverse part of sexuality and as sadomasochistic character structure, can provide gratification and reassurance as well as anxiety" (59). According to Shengold, sadomasochism takes place as a power exchange between the sadist, who seeks to demonstrate power, and the victim "left in a trap of conflicting emotions, craving and fearing, seeking and avoiding change at the hands of the parent" (59). Each repetition holds the possibility of a happy resolution that never occurs. With each iteration that the cycle does not break, it simply spirals further down, the pull of both fear and hope gaining a stronger hold. What *Aku no Hana* showcases is that not only is repetition at the core of sadomasochism, but that this repetition never offers narrative resolution.

In both *Vertigo* and *Aku no Hana*, the relationships between the main male characters and the female characters are dependent on the projected image of desire each male has. Scottie and Judy cannot function without the image of Madeleine. Even after Madeleine is declared dead, Scottie's image of her persists, but once he realizes it was Judy impersonating Madeleine, his illusion of her is shattered and his relationship with Judy ends in her death. Scottie's revelation of what Judy has done is not to a jury or third party of any kind, but rather is a demonstration for Judy. Deleuze says that a sadist is not interested in convincing, persuading, or educating, as those would lessen the pleasure received from the demonstration (18). Scottie has been given the role from the start of private

investigator, his very job is that of sadistic voyeurism. In his final demonstration of violently dragging Judy up the bell tower it is not just the physical violence that is a display of power, but “to demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence, and that he is on the side of violence, however calm and logical he may be. He is not even attempting to prove anything to anyone, but to perform a demonstration related essentially to the solitude and omnipotence of its author. The point of the exercise is to show that the demonstration is identical to violence” (19). Scottie seeks to expose and humiliate Judy; he need not convince her or tell her what she has already done. As she fights back she tries to explain, reason, and apologize to Scottie, but there is nothing for her to do other than be forced to listen to what she has done, and face the horror of her actions.

*Aku no Hana* furthers the exploration of the narrative of sadism through the cruel female, in a divergence from past narratives about sadism such as Scottie’s, in the second part of its storyline, which takes place three years after Nakamura and Kasuga try to commit joint suicide because they realize they cannot escape ever-looping reality. Nakamura pushes Kasuga off the stage right before their attempt, causing them to fail. Nakamura does not become cured or put back in her place by meeting her match in a male, or even in a romantic partner. She mends her relationship with her mother and goes to work in her mother’s restaurant by the seaside, and we are unsure of what happens to her beyond that, though Kasuga wishes to know for the sake of closure. Nakamura only tells him to move on. Kasuga does not become an abuser, and despite still having anxiety, no longer engages in self-destructive or masochistic behaviors because of it. He goes on to fulfill the heteronormative life Nakamura claims he was destined to live, and that he feared he would become trapped in, but despite his continued struggles, when Saeki confronts him with his past he is able to cope.

Kasuga’s new girlfriend Tokiwa is a writer who is afraid to write. Kasuga promises to help her defeat her ghosts, and encourages her to write her first novel, which describes a “town

surrounded by mountains, the countryside with nowhere to go” (he proclaims, “It’s about me!”) (VIII: 28). Tokiwa’s presence inspires Kasuga to confront his past instead of running away from it, and after he is finally able to let Nakamura go, Kasuga begins his own cathartic journey as a manga artist. Though they seem to have a mutually beneficial and healthy relationship from the start, Kasuga worries that he will use Tokiwa as a crutch as he did his images of Saeki and Nakamura. When Saeki runs into Kasuga, she is dating a boy who shares similar features to Kasuga. She fakes being happy with him until they are alone, when she shows contempt, indicating she is only with him in hopes of molding him into Kasuga and reclaiming the relationship she feels she was cheated out of. She convinces Kasuga to meet her for a lunch during which she berates him for living a hypocritical life. She remarks, “seeing you two fail to die and live on so ugly, was quite the laugh for me. If you two had really died there I might have gone crazy from frustration” (IX: 8-9). Kasuga responds to her accusations, saying that Saeki was right when she said everything was grey. That everything is the same. Although he has moved towns, everything is still grey, “But... but I don’t have a dying wish right now though” (VIII: 10). Saeki tells Kasuga his new girlfriend “looks like Nakamura. Are you sure she isn’t just a substitute?” without acknowledging that this is what she has done with her new boyfriend (VIII: 8). She taunts Kasuga, saying that all of his life he is only going to be running away and trying to relive the past, haunted by Nakamura’s ghost. That he himself has become a ghost.

Kasuga leads a heteronormative lifestyle, and he still may be haunted at times by his anxiety. However, it seems he is able to manage the ghosts of his past by writing about them rather than running away, or allowing himself to fall into a downward spiral because of them. Saeki, on the other hand, becomes trapped in her own world of greyness. But what of our female sadist? If Kasuga is cured by entering a romantic relationship and subsequently dominant culture, how does Nakamura continue without the context of a romantic relationship in which to fit? Nakamura labels Kasuga as

common and therefore able to engage in the norms of society when he feels ready, but indicates that she will never be able to do the same. The last place she is seen is living by the ocean, which alludes to the concept of Nakamura inhabiting liminal space. Nakamura will never fit, or settle down, but rather is volatile, in part because she is always in transition. Kasuga manages to move from one side of puberty to the other, literally from one side of the mountain to the other in terms of physical space, and though his experiences were traumatic, he emerges from them relatively well-adjusted. He cannot put his finger on what has changed, and he admits he still struggles, but the pressing drive he felt before that led to his suicide attempt is simply no longer there. As he wished earlier in the story, saying “I just want to be normal!” (I: 13).

In his final confrontation with Nakamura, Kasuga asks why she pushed him off of the stage so they could not commit suicide together. She responds with a bored look to the question he has held onto for three years, “I don’t know. I forgot” (XI: 34). Her answer, as always, does not satisfy the person questioning her. Just as when Saeki demanded to know the nature of Nakamura and Kasuga’s relationship, people are unable to fit Nakamura into their understanding. Nakamura only responds that she has a contract, for which Saeki has no point of reference. Nakamura’s character inhabits a liminal space. We might call her, in the spirit of Baudelaire, a profane virgin. We do not find out if Nakamura has ever had or shown interest in a romantic relationship. She is particularly puzzling to characters who cannot understand her inability to connect with others, and more so, her lack of desire to. Unlike Kasuga, who deep down wishes to have interpersonal relationships, and when he grows up successfully does, Nakamura continues to embody that of a *flâneur*. She symbolically moves to the ever-changing seaside, but does not possess any one home. As the *flâneur*, she has no home and is therefore at home wherever she goes.

Thus, Nakamura offers a compelling (if narratively unsatisfying) alternative to past narratives such as Midge’s non-plot. She is not driven by romantic bonds, and does not pass from one phase to

the next, instead inhabiting a fear-inducing endless puberty. Unlike Alex of *XXY*, this is not because of Nakamura's physical form, but because of her relationships and unwillingness to relate to others. Nakamura is only able to relate to Kasuga when she is the driving force behind his relationship with Saeki, the image projected in front of him. He cannot continue his relationship with Saeki or Nakamura once one is removed. The narrative not only centers on Nakamura's sadism, but also shifts to repeat through her eyes in the final chapter. This leaves her in a position of power and makes her sadistically relatable to the reader, and reinforces the narrative as a never ending process rather than a neatly packaged piece. Nakamura's presence is like that of standing in a doorway; there is never a space in which she is meant to inhabit, as her role is that of the watcher, the observer, the manipulator.

## CONCLUSION

### Imagining Utopian Liminal Spaces

Contemporary society structures the narratives of our lives around productivity and progress. We are taught through media how to consume, and actively become consumable, viewing ourselves, our lives, and our stories as products of consumption. This model transforms every aspect of our world into quantifiable pieces by placing arbitrary values, but nonetheless powerful ones, that construct a lived reality that painfully cuts that which does not fit. By not allowing space or the creation of space for those with inconsumable identities, a dangerous and disconnected climate is formed from the exploitation of fear and anxiety, which creates a destructive cycle of isolation, blame, consumption, and violence. Queer rebellion is prevented through assimilation techniques such as homonationalism. When our lives become commodities they are valued at how ready they are to be consumed, and community-building traits such as empathy and compassion are unlearned and replaced by objectification and *schadenfreude*. With an expanded sense of global community resulting from a tremendous growth in telecommunications and networking comes the expectation that information and goods should be readily available to the individual. Yet for many, the “good life,” as Berlant calls it, remains out of reach.

While individual pressure and responsibility increases, there is not a corresponding reward. The pressure to “show your work” encourages a climate where we must all prove we are always working and producing acceptable content. Messages to “be yourself” or “embrace yourself” flood us, the interpellation of self-help constructs fooling us into thinking that we would have many options if we only took advantage of them. The reality reflects that “being yourself” is heavily shaped by shame, guilt, and produced by media and advertising that teaches a very flimsy and commodity-centric version of selfhood. Subjected to an incessant battery of advertisements, rehashed narratives, and social pressures, the individual is distracted from how few “real” choices

they are offered. A thousand romantic comedies that reinforce patriarchal views are no more diversified than three.

In order to create a new world a tremendous amount of ideology must be unlearned. Deeply ingrained in contemporary global society are ideas of colonialism, imperialism, misogyny, and racism. Our language is a part of the fabric of oppression and capitalism that dictates our world for which a new translation or dialect is an insufficient panacea; rather a new language must be formed. Junot Diaz in his talk “Art, Race, and Capitalism” at the Americas Latino Festival in 2013 said:

There are trillions of dollars out there demotivating people from imagining that a better tomorrow is possible. Utopian impulses and utopian horizons have been completely disfigured and everybody now is fluent in dystopia, you know. My young people’s vocabulary... their fluency is in dystopic futures. When young people think about the future, they don’t think about a better tomorrow, they think about horrors and end of the worlds and things or worse. Well, do you really think the lack of utopic imagination doesn’t play into demotivating people from imagining a transformation in the society? (Diaz)

This might make social transformation sound overwhelming. It is easy to become discouraged when layer after layer is peeled back, only to find that revealing oppressive structures is very small part of the long and difficult process of dismantling and replacing them. However, as we change our language, our forms of communicating, relating, and connecting, we will be actively engaged in changing the social structures which surround us as well. Alok Vaid-Menon of the trans South Asian artist collaboration Darkmatter has said, “art is where we go when language fails us” (Vaid-Menon).

*XXY* and *Aku no Hana* further the past narratives of queer characters by presenting us with Alex, who refuses to choose a gender, and Nakamura, who refuses to seek a romantic relationship or traditional family structure. They create their own spaces to inhabit the liminality between childhood and adulthood by resisting gender conventions and relationship norms. *XXY* and *Aku no Hana*

challenge us as consumers because their narratives are not easy to define, market, or objectify. By learning to embrace that which might be uncomfortable or difficult to understand instead of fearing it, we can move towards a more compassionate society that allows space for the existence of queer identities. Allowing failure, or at least rethinking success, can help us to move towards the loss of anxiety, and gaining the space to exist as fuck-ups, failures, and in-betweeners. When we remove the demand of monetary value on our lives and narratives we remove the limitations capitalism places on our identities. Looking forward, we might look for narratives that move beyond this critique to ones that embody the “utopic imagination” that Diaz describes. By helping create a language and a discourse for new identities we create space for them to exist. While no one piece can do this on its own or expect to be perfect and relevant across decades, this morphing allows for us to move closer towards the utopian ideals we can imagine. We might think of this as an addition to or further rethinking of Halberstam’s move from optimism “at all costs” to “a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other” (5). I argue that shade is not the opposite of light, and that we do not need to rely on definitions only coming from the opposition of the meaning of another. By moving beyond binary thinking we begin to create more space for identities that we cannot easily compare and contrast against our own, because it is no longer a compulsory goal.

Animation, graphic novels, videogames and, in particular, young adult and children’s media allow for more experimental reforming of narratives and are among the best vehicles for creating new space and timelines that reimagine what personhood is, what is natural, what is desirable, and what is possible. Halberstam says, “I would be bold enough to argue that it is *only* in the realm of animation that we actually find the alternative hiding” (23). Shows like *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* push boundaries that attract large audiences of all ages with subject matter avoided in media exclusively targeted towards adults. *Steven Universe*, which first aired November 2013, is an ongoing

animated show that is available free online; created in the collaboration between a U.S. and a Korean studio, airing as eleven-minute stand-alone episodes that together offer a continuous storyline, it can be watched episodically or serially. The crystal gems of *Steven Universe* are described by creator Rebecca Sugar as not male or female, though they use female pronouns, “Steven is the first and only male gem because he is half human. Technically, there are no female gems! Gems are gems!” (AMA). Steven can also “fuse” with other gems, or his best human friend Connie to create Stevonnie. When asked Stevonnie’s gender Sugar replied:

Stevonnie is an experience! The living relationship between Steven and Connie. What I love about Stevonnie is that we are working with a metaphor that is so complex and so specific but also really, really relatable, in the form of a character. Stevonnie challenges gender norms as an individual, but also serves as a metaphor for all the terrifying firsts in a first relationship, and what it feels like to hit puberty and suddenly find yourself with the body of an adult, how quickly that happens, how it feels to have a new power over people, or to suddenly find yourself objectified, all for seemingly no reason since you’re still just you.

(*Steven Universe* Guidebook)

We can directly see how different Alex’s story in the context of the world of *Steven Universe* would have been. The beach where Steven lives provides a space created by love and protection of the tight-knit community for character like Stevonnie to exist. Even though Steven and Connie take on the physical form of what looks like an adult, they are not adults, and they struggle with this experience, but are able to regain their separate forms as children, and re-fuse as Stevonnie at will, playing with the line between child and adult, what it means to be a boy or girl, and what kind of relationship they have as they relate to each other differently in two separate forms than they do as one physical form. Though initially taken aback because a human and gem have never fused before, Steven’s dad and the crystal gems stay loving, supportive, and compassionate towards Stevonnie and

do not demand answers about this experience or what it means. Stevonnie is in many ways a character embodying liminal space and a redefinition of personhood and desire between Steven and Connie.

Steven is raised by his dad and three aliens, the crystal gems Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, in a non-traditional family structure. This is addressed repeatedly throughout the show, as Steven is asked to do things like bring his mom and dad to dinner, but he explains he does not have a mom and dad, and is not willing to pick one of the gems to pretend to be his mom because they are all a valuable part of his family. When discussing the core of the show, which focuses on love and support, Sugar said:

I don't believe that those themes are exclusive to traditional families or heteronormative characters, and I'm very uninterested in trading on genericisms, or talking about what is or isn't "normal." I think so much entertainment deals in those terms that almost everyone is left feeling abnormal if there's anything specific about their life at all. I hope to represent people who have felt a lack of representation, but I hope to also show people who have felt represented that they can also relate to characters that are not heteronormative, and to families that are not traditional, maybe even more so than the more generic characters and families that they've been seeing on TV. (*Steven Universe* Guidebook)

By creating a space that is welcoming and inclusive *Steven Universe* helps us see and experience a world in which generic tropes and conformity are not needed to form connected relationships.

Fusion also brings an interesting element of relationship structures and desire to the program, as multiple people can fuse. Fusion can only be done properly with consent, and goes horribly wrong when forced. Fusions are originally introduced as they would be in a fighting anime, where two powerful fighters combine to become an even more powerful fighter. In *Steven Universe* however, fusions occur through dancing and we see characters fuse to fight, to protect, to love, and

for fun. We also learn that the character Garnet is a full-time fusion. Because both people fusing must be “in-synch” fusion is often very difficult and even harder to maintain for long periods of time. Garnet, however, is composed of Ruby and Sapphire, two characters who love and care about each other and balance one another’s traits so well they cannot stand to be apart. In the season one finale of the show when this is revealed, Garnet sings a song described by Rebecca Sugar as “a fight song, and a love song, and a victory song” (*Steven Universe Guidebook*). While fusion represents a certain level of intimacy, it would be reductive to call fusion the gem equivalent to human sex. Fusion demonstrates a rethinking of desire and relationships, giving us examples beyond that of typical friendship, familial, or romantic love.

*Adventure Time*, on which Rebecca Sugar got her start, is an animated show that also airs in eleven-minute episodes on Cartoon Network, although it is not available for free online. It also brings us a different family structure with Beemo the game console, Jake the dog, and Finn the human who was previously adopted and raised by Jake’s family. Finn has never met another human, and often struggles with this throughout the show. All of the characters face dilemmas surrounding perceptions of reality, love, grief, and their views of themselves. Even in fantasy cartoons such as *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* characters must deal with many harsh occurrences, but through mechanisms of forgetting and the queer art of failure, are able to navigate their magical and terrifying worlds. Beemo the game console is referred to interchangeably with male and female pronouns and in one episode falls in love with a genderless bubble. Overlapping timelines reveal endless different possibilities and suggest that the characters do not have core selves, encouraging them to validate the experiences of others and realize that all perceptions are skewed. By focusing only on what they can control instead of fearing the immense amount of unknown and unpredictable world around them, they are able to exist and move through time and space without the anxiety that normally accompanies such liminality.

Texts such as *XXY* and *Aku no Hana* challenge their audience to be uncomfortable. There is value to feeling uncomfortable, but there is also a value to seeing and imagining a world in which we do not have to do that. With the accessibility digital media can bring, stories that might have had trouble finding their audiences can now grow. In reaction to the bigger and bigger corporations and mass production of products and narratives, people in resistance can focus on local and community based stories that shift how we view ourselves, each other, and our world. Ideally, digital media has the potential to offer us an out-of-body collective experience that carves out spaces for the marginalized and disenfranchised. Halberstam states, “the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (187). From *XXY* and *Aku no Hana*, to *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*, these narratives fail to be easily marketable, to offer us comfortable closure, to always make sense, but what they offer us is the valuable new language of failure reimagined.



## REFERENCES

- Baudelaire, Charles. "Albatross." Trans. Richard Howard. *Les Fleurs Du Mal*. New York: New Directions, 1982. 13-14. Print.
- . "Poison." Trans. Richard Howard. *Les Fleurs Du Mal*. New York: New Directions, 1982. 13-14. Print.
- Baudelaire, Charles, and Jonathan Mayne. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon, 1964. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Crisp, Quentin. "Embrace Queer Failure." *Jack Halberstam*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.jackhalberstam.com/11/>>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. New York: Zone, 1991. Print.
- Diaz, Junot. "Art, Race and Capitalism." Americas Latino Festival. Colorado, Denver. 17 Nov. 2013. Web. Dec. 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQH-nVX8hT4>>.
- Duggan, Lisa. *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. Print.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York, NY: Basic, 2000. Print.
- FilmCatcher TV. "FilmCatcher: XXY Interview- Director Lucia Puenzo." *YouTube* 11 Apr. 2008. Web. 15 May 2015.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP, 2005. Print.
- . *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.

Jarvis, Cosmo. *Gay Pirates*. Cosmo Jarvis. 2010. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dysG12QCdTA>>.

Kincaid, James R. *Child-loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Print.

----. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998. Print.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. The Critical Tradition*. Ed. David H. Richter. 3rd

ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 1172-1180. Print

Oshimi, Shūzō. *Aku no Hana [Flowers of Evil]*. 1-11 vols. New York: Vertical, 2009–2014. Print.

Plan C. “We Are All Very Anxious.” *We Are Plan C*. Plan C, 4 Apr. 2014. Web. 21 Jan. 2015.

Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

2011. Print.

Sterritt, David. “At 50, Hitchcock’s Timeless *Vertigo* Still Offers a Dizzying Array of Gifts.”

*Chronicle of Higher Education* 54 (2008): n. pag. Print.

*The Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender*. By Alok Vaid-Menon. StyleLikeU, 22 June

2015. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7Gh2n9kPuA>>.

Sugar, Rebecca. “Rebecca Sugar AMA.” Interview by Reddit. Reddit. N.p., Sept. 2015. Web. 1 May 2015.

<[http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2e4gmx/i\\_am\\_rebecca\\_sugar\\_creator\\_of\\_steven\\_universe\\_and](http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2e4gmx/i_am_rebecca_sugar_creator_of_steven_universe_and)>.

Sugar, Rebecca. “Steven Universe Guidebook Spills The Secrets Of The Crystal Gems.” Interview

by Meredith Woerner. *io9*. N.p., 14 May 2015. Web. 14 May 2015. <<http://io9.com/steven-universe-guidebook-spills-the-secrets-of-the-cry-1704470546>>.

Verhaeghe P., "The Riddle of Castration Anxiety: Lacan beyond Freud" 6, Spring 1996, pp. 44-54.

Paper originally presented at the second annual congress of the APPI: "Anxiety and Its Coordinates" Dublin, Nov. 95.

*Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Kim Novak, James Stewart. Paramount Picture, 1958. DVD.

*XXY*. Dir. Lucía Puenzo. Perf. Valeria Bertuccelli, Ricardo Darín, Inés Efron. Distribution Company, 2007. DVD.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Courty Love, Or, Woman as Thing. The Critical Tradition*. Ed. David H. Richter. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 1181-1197. Print