



Hand grenade film: Review and conversation with Richard C. Ledes on *Adieu Lacan*

**Adieu Lacan [Film] Richard C. Ledes (Director), Ismenia Mendes
and David Patrick Kelly (Lead actors), *Good Soup Media*, 2022**

Chris Vanderwees¹ 

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Abstract Chris Vanderwees provides a brief review of Richard C. Ledes's film, *Adieu Lacan*, the story of a young woman's struggle to understand and come to terms with her origins through psychoanalysis. Following this review, Vanderwees interviews Ledes about the making of the film, the depiction of Lacan's clinical practice, and some of the decisions regarding representation.

Keywords Betty Milan · film studies · interview · Jacques Lacan · psychoanalysis · Richard Ledes

Richard C. Ledes is a producer, writer, and director who is known for his films *The Caller* (2008) and *Fred Won't Move Out* (2012) both starring Elliott Gould. His first feature film *A Hole in One* (2004), set in 1953, starring Michelle Williams, about a woman who wants a lobotomy, evolved out of a piece of performance art that Ledes based on the psychiatric records of his maternal uncle. He made *A Hole in One* after completing a doctorate in comparative literature at New York University. Much of his inspiration for the film derived from the research he undertook for his dissertation, which was about the cultural traces of the rise of mental healthcare in the United States around treating veterans after the Second World War. During his research as a graduate student, Ledes volunteered at an outpatient center for severely mentally ill people, assistant-directing the center's theater program and leading groups where patients read aloud short stories, including the works of Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne. This personal connection to a film's theme combined with meticulous research into its broader significance remains an important dimension of Ledes's work.

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His most recent film, *Adieu Lacan* (2022), starring David Patrick Kelly (as Jacques Lacan) and Ismenia Mendes (as Seriema), is also a foray into the field of psychological maladies and their treatment. The film is based on the stage play *Goodbye, Doctor* (2008) and the novel *Lacan's Parrot* (1991/1997), both written by Betty Milan, a Brazilian psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and author who underwent an analysis with Lacan in the 1970s. She was also one of the first to translate Lacan's work into Portuguese. *Adieu Lacan* is the story of a young woman's struggle to understand and come to terms with her origins throughout a psychoanalytic treatment with Lacan. She enters analytic treatment to explore why her own path to motherhood has reached an unbearable impasse, but discovers significantly more about herself in the process.

Known for her role as antagonist Tali Grapes in the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013–2019), Mendes plays Seriema brilliantly, the analysand, alongside Kelly who delivers a fascinating portrait of Lacan, the analyst, and his clinical technique. Of course, closely capturing the doctor's style and performativity would be an impossible task for anyone to achieve, but Ledes, Mendes, and Kelly have extended Milan's stage play to bring out incredible characters and an especially delightful and surreal version of Lacan for psychoanalytic lore. Drawing inspiration from Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), Ledes has found creative ways to emphasize important details during exchanges of dialogue through highly nuanced and artful camerawork: focus, framing, angles, closeups, and compositions. In many scenes within the consulting room, for instance, cinematographer Valentina Caniglia provides closeups of Seriema's facial expressions or frames Lacan at upward angles to create a sense of affective intensity. Ledes has rendered a riveting psychoanalytic drama, one which carries itself as an elegant homage to the silent era, German Expressionist cinematography, and film noir.

The film retains the spirit of Milan's stage play in doing so much with so little in terms of production and budget as the entirety of the action mainly takes place in one room. The narrative unfurls in the psychoanalytic consulting office, variable-length session after variable-length session, through intense interchanges of discourse between Seriema and Lacan. Audiences interested in the practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis are given a rare—and possibly the only—fictional portrayal of the variable-length session, a technique that is meant to punctuate the words of the analysand's discourse in the act of ending the session. To this day, the variable-length session is a controversial technique, where the analyst ends the appointment at the moment when the analysand has just said something very important. Elsewhere, Milan's own literary work has attempted to express how the Lacanian psychoanalytic session does not follow the logic of chronological time, but rather relies upon the moment of opportunity (or decisive moment) that arises in the analysand's speech. It is a technique that is meant to encourage the analysand to rely on their own interpretation of what has been said during free association rather than look to the analyst as the arbiter of meaning. Of course, this technique famously led to Lacan's expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1963, but it is portrayed here in the many ways that it might beneficially serve the analysand to help produce further associations and transference material



that can be worked through in the course of the treatment. This “cut” of the session inevitably draws attention to the cinematic cut of the scene, a parallel that Ledes speaks more about in the interview that follows.

Part of this story is told through the inner monologues of the analyst and the analysand—that is, what the characters think, but do not speak—which provides the audience a greater sense of the dynamics at stake in the transference relation over time. The film is also possibly the first ever attempt to portray the complex trajectory of a patient’s long-term psychoanalytic treatment in such a way. Ledes has achieved this with the utmost care and respect for subject matter that deals with a process of healing from psychological suffering. What particularly becomes clear in the trajectory of this story, however, is that Lacan is not the protagonist. Seriema’s story gradually emerges along with her desire until she is finally able to find her own sense of agency and tell the doctor, *adieu*.

Ledes’s film indirectly highlights the various difficulties of portraying or transmitting the experience of psychoanalysis insofar as each analysis is its own unique experience that cannot be recreated, generalized, or universalized. *Adieu Lacan* depicts the open-ended complexity of the analytic relationship, the experience of psychoanalysis for the analyst as well as for the analysand. The experience of working through one’s own transference in the consulting room is not something that can be explained through university discourse as Lacan called it, nor through supervision (or control analysis), but only through a personal analysis. This film will be of great interest to psychoanalysts and clinicians, but also to scholars who are interested in cinematic technique and film theory. Ultimately, *Adieu Lacan* serves as a wonderful cinematic introduction to the legend of Lacan for a broader uninitiated audience.

I had the opportunity to discuss the film, the depiction of Lacan’s clinical practice, and some of the decisions regarding representation with director Richard Ledes via Zoom on 10 May 2022. In the interview that follows, Ledes speaks about his cinematic influences, his motivations for making the film, his own affinity for Lacan’s psychoanalytic thinking, and the ways in which psychoanalysis and film might share common ground.

Interview

Chris Vanderwees (CV): Do you recall when you first heard about or learned about psychoanalysis? And what was your first impression of Lacan?

Richard Ledes (RL): I’m not sure when I first heard about psychoanalysis, but I recall specifically when I learned of Lacan’s work. I had been asked to write a version of Sophocles’s *Antigone*. I was in Paris and read the same day an obituary in *Le Monde* for Laurence Bataille, the stepdaughter of Jacques Lacan.¹ The obituary

¹ Laurence Bataille (1930–1986) was the only daughter of writer Georges Batailles (1897–1962) and actor Sylvia Bataille (1908–1993) who married Jacques Lacan in 1953. Laurence Bataille was a writer and psychoanalyst. She was a member of the *École freudienne de Paris* then, after its dissolution, she joined the *École de la cause freudienne*, which she left after the death of Jacques Lacan. From 1976 to



mentioned that, when she was in prison for her support of the efforts to end the colonial occupation of Algeria by the French, Lacan had brought her a part of his seminar on *Antigone* [later published in Book VII of the Seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*]. I took this as a sign that I should go and find this text by Lacan and read it. I knew the play well and had read it in Greek, but my French was rudimentary. The seminar was not published yet. It was at the *École de la cause freudienne* in typescript. I went there every day for as long as it took me to slowly read through it. I used my knowledge of the Greek as a crutch to get through Lacan. In some ways, my work with Betty Milan and directing *Adieu Lacan* brought me back to this first experience.

For one thing, there was this initial association between Lacan and reading Greek. Since Betty's play *Goodbye, Doctor* is about a young woman whose path to motherhood has become for her an impossible one, this brought to my mind the proposition by Socrates that he could only act as a midwife. He knew nothing, but could only help someone give birth to the truth that was in them. Lacan liked this analogy very much and thought it was applicable to his approach to psychoanalysis. In making the film, I was thinking of how the character of Seriema has to give birth to her own subjectivity or her own desire before she could give birth to a child. In relation to this first encounter with the work of Lacan, there is also the topic of colonialism in Brazil. Seriema says that her father "worked like a slave" and says the nanny she had was Black. I was aware of the history of slavery in Brazil. When I reflect on it now, I have many associations to *Antigone* and colonialism that were at work and connected me to this first encounter I had with Lacan's work.

CV: Your wonderful film *Adieu Lacan* is inspired by the experience and works of Brazilian psychoanalyst, Betty Milan, who undertook a psychoanalytic treatment with Lacan in Paris in the 1970s. From what I understand, she also became his assistant and a translator of his work from French to Portuguese. The film particularly draws upon Milan's play *Goodbye, Doctor* and her novel *Lacan's Parrot*, which as you were just mentioning, delve into themes of family origins, immigration, sexuality, and motherhood. What attracted you to Milan's story and what inspired you to make the film?

RL: I was invited by the *Après-Coup Psychoanalytic Association*, a Lacanian association in New York, of which I have been a member for some thirty years, to do a staged reading of Betty's play for the membership. I was immediately struck that it was very accessible and at the same time passed muster with an audience mainly comprised of clinicians. I thought that I might be able to make a film that could reach a broad audience and would transmit a truth about psychoanalysis. I started to show the film to groups who requested a viewing. Mainly these have been groups of Lacanian psychoanalysts, but not exclusively. The reception has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. It still remains to be seen if it can reach the broader

Footnote 1 continued

1978, she was the editor of the journal *Ornicar?* where she published several articles and reviews. The obituary in *Le Monde* was written by Élisabeth Roudinesco and published on 26 May 1986.



audience that I hoped. One of the reasons it is so accessible is that the film is so focused on practice. Betty's play really showed Lacan's work from the standpoint of clinical practice.

When I first became a member of *Après-Coup*, it was when I was a doctoral student in comparative literature. I was completing a dissertation on the rise of the concept of mental health after the Second World War around the treatment of veterans. I wanted to look at how mental health care and related concepts of madness—particularly schizophrenia—after the war had become a major part of American culture. The National Mental Health Act was passed in 1946, which called for the creation of the National Institute of Mental Health [that was then established] in 1949. The initial momentum for both of these was a national consensus around assisting veterans who were what sometimes is referred to a “non-stigmatized patient population.” One of the people with whom I was working on my dissertation was an anthropologist named Michael Taussig. I brought a pile of books to him and he said, “Richard, it's so great you are reading all of these books, but you really should spend some time with people who do this work. You will get a completely different feel for all of the material if you actually get to know people who work in this area.” I followed his advice. One of the groups I contacted was the Lacanian Psychoanalytic Association *Après Coup*, which I eventually joined and of which I have remained a member.

The Lacan of my film is not the Lacan of Élisabeth Roudinesco's (1993/1997) biography. I have a great amount of respect for Roudinesco, but she makes Lacan out to be kind of a cold fish. I knew Lacan through other people who had been analyzed by him, particularly my late friend, Alain Didier-Weill.² He published *Quartier Lacan* (Didier-Weill et al., 2001), which is a collection of interviews with people who were analyzed by Lacan and which served as an important source of additional information. I think David Patrick Kelly gives an extraordinary performance as Lacan.

CV: This question of the broader audience is an interesting one. Lacan is known to be very difficult to read and perhaps we could say that he is also very French. Outside of academic circles in the United States, the acceptance of Lacan is not so broad. His clinical influence is relatively small when compared to other psychoanalytic approaches. I actually think of your film as probably one of the first potentially “mainstream” introductory representations of Lacan and his work for people who are outside of this Lacanian world. As you have said, the film seems to run counter to more simplistic characterizations of Lacan as a celebrity analyst, as an outcast, as an impenetrable writer who was engaged in an excessive intellectualization of psychoanalysis. The film presents Lacan as quite a sympathetic, human, and fallible character especially as we are dealing with his pending death in the context of the film. In retrospect, are there aspects of Lacan's life or work that inspired you to shape his character in this more complex and nuanced sense?

² Alain Didier-Weill (1939–2018) was a French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who wrote many important works on psychoanalysis including *The Three Times of the Law*, which Andrew Weller has translated into English (Agincourt Press, 2017).



RL: David Patrick Kelly fell in love with playing Lacan. Some people who have seen the film are just beginning training or have a passing interest in Lacan. They have been so enthusiastic about the film. It really does serve as an introduction to Lacan. I really was not aware of that necessarily, but I did think it was very accessible. One interpretation I have heard of the difficulty of Lacan's work is that after the Second World War, the Americans had such power in psychoanalysis as they had in other areas at the time with Europe being in ruins. The International Psychoanalytic Association threw Lacan out of the organization. He developed this style of opaque French to push the emphasis onto language. The materiality of language is so in your face in Lacan's work. This was a way to show opposition to a positivist model as what he saw the Americans pushing.

You can't get more American than David Patrick Kelly, but he gives such a beautiful voice to the role of Lacan. A film like this is what they call in the business "a hand grenade film," which is to say that it could so easily go off. Everything has to go right. We filmed in ten days. There was a horrible flu. Yet it really gelled and I am so happy about how it worked out.

CV: David Patrick Kelly plays Lacan and Ismenia Mendes plays Seriema, who is undergoing the analysis. Both actors are absolutely incredible in these roles. How did you go about casting for the film? It is such a big decision to select who will play these characters.

RL: On the one hand, casting an accomplished actor like David Patrick Kelly doesn't take much brains, but on the other hand when you are casting someone who is at the beginning of their career and they are as wonderful as Ismenia Mendes is in the role, you really feel good about having chosen this line of work. She is so extraordinary in the role. Both actors worked so well together. I also want to mention Antu Yacob who does a great job with the role of Gloria, the assistant to Lacan. In casting, you look at the work they have done and then have a conversation with the actor. This conversation is very important. It is hard to say what takes place in the conversations, but you spend not that much in measured time and yet ask so much. Through these conversations, you get some connection with the person and then there is tremendous pressure when making the film. You do not have time to have deep philosophical discussions, but having the one-on-one time in the beginning is very important. I loved the examples of Ismenia's work. She also has a Portuguese background. Her family immigrated when she was very young. She had qualities I felt were great for Seriema. David Patrick Kelly had been familiar with Lacan's work going back twenty years when he worked with Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater in New York.³ One of the things that David Patrick Kelly and I bonded over is that we both had studied mime in Paris. He spoke French.

³ Richard Foreman is a playwright who founded the Ontological-Hysteric Theater (OHT) in 1968 with the aim of leaving the theatre extremely minimal and bare to emphasize the impulses and tensions of interpersonal relations in the space.



This connection to language is important. Both Ismenia and David Patrick Kelly had a connection to their characters through language. I think this really helped. I think the film contributes to thinking about who Lacan was in relation to his work. It brings out aspects of his work. It is always said that film and psychoanalysis share the same birthdate at the end of the nineteenth century as if they were a match made in heaven, but usually the relationship between film and psychoanalysis has never worked at all. Now, we are in a world that is saturated with images all the time. Paradoxically, film can now be a place where images are structured and timed with rhythm and scansion. This makes it analogous to a psychoanalytic session. I wouldn't push this too far, but it is an interesting moment to be making a film about psychoanalysis.

CV: You mention the question of language. At the beginning of the film, Seriema says to Lacan, "Here I am always translating..." and with this the film raises the inevitable question of language difficulties and translation and the complexities that might occur with a Brazilian analyst in analysis with a French analyst and now depicted in English. What are your thoughts in regards to the work of translation you are doing as a filmmaker? And were there difficulties along the way working between Portuguese, French, and English materials?

RL: I had to make little tweaks to bring it into English. I was thinking about things like Portuguese versus Brazilian Portuguese. This space between languages brings up qualities about language even when one is speaking one's own language. My other languages are mainly French and Greek. I have experience with a smattering of other languages. You end up hearing and feeling words differently. Even when we speak the same language, there is a resonance with other languages that are associated with the traditions of our families and other life experiences we have had. There are some filmmakers who think that film was best when it was silent, but there are other filmmakers like Orson Welles who love language and find this mixture of speech, language, and film to be a very special one. I am more drawn to the latter. I was approaching film as a fourth language. I think poetry, for instance, plays a strong role in *Adieu Lacan* where we could talk about the poetry of the image and the scansion of the image. Language becomes part of the pleasure of the experience of the film.

CV: The film appears to draw inspiration from historical cinema such as the film noir genre. You mentioned this earlier, but I also couldn't help but think about how psychoanalysis and the cinema arose at roughly the same time at the turn of the twentieth century. You decided to film in 4:3 ratio and almost entirely in black and white, but I was also reminded, for instance, of the work of Saul Bass when I first saw the typography of the title for the film. Are there particular filmmaking influences you could speak about that went into your composing of the aesthetic or style of the film?

RL: I really started by looking at different things and saying to myself "oh, that's not what I want to do." There is an HBO television series called *In Treatment*



(Garcia, 2008–2021), which I think is a very good series. The character of the therapist listens and gives useful and insightful suggestions to the character of the patient. This is not a criticism of the show, but the camera is always parallel to the ground and conveys a certain kind of relationship where the character of the therapist has a knowledge and the character of the patient does not. What I wanted to do was to show transference. As we see in Betty Milan’s story, Serima is overwhelmed with culpability and shame.

The model I found was in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer.⁴ Of course, this film was shot in black and white with the oldest standard aspect ratio (4:3). I knew shooting in this way would bring up the history and temporality of film. I was very interested in this aspect of time. Time is part of the story because of Lacan’s variable-length sessions. The aspect ratio of 4:3 is also a great way to emphasize the human form especially with close-ups and extreme angles, which helped to give a sense of the transference at stake between the characters.

I also had in mind the work of Paul Joseph Schrader, an American filmmaker who is probably best known for the screenplay of *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976). When he was still a student in college, Schrader wrote a book called *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972), which he has recently reissued. In this book, he talks about how most films try to grab you by the throat and never let you go. The film just takes over. He says that there is an other kind of film, however, that leans back and has a slower, more stately pacing. There are filmmakers who specialize in this style. Schrader mentions Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, and Chantal Akerman.⁵ Elsewhere, Schrader gives one example of this style from *Umberto D.* (1952) by Vittorio De Sica, an Italian filmmaker. In the film, there is a young woman trying to light a match for the stove. She fails multiple times. Schrader says, “there is no way that you would ever see that in a Hollywood film.”

The cinematographer for *Adieu Lacan*, Valentina Caniglia, did such a great job. We said from the beginning, “don’t rush it” and “let this take time.” This was important. The example of the match that Schrader gives reminds me of dream analysis. It may not be the big story, but rather the little detail that is the most important part of the dream. We were determined to let this story breathe and let the film have its own time. As you know, the whole film basically takes place in two rooms, mainly in one room. There are not a lot of fancy fireworks with the camera, but we were emphasizing scansion, timing, and the materiality of the image.

There is an expression that I take from a small book called *Cinema* (Godard & Ishaghpour, 2000/2005), which is a conversation between Jean-Luc Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour, an Iranian writer. They talk about the “image of reality” and

⁴ Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889–1968) was a Danish film director who is famous for making numerous movies in addition to *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) including *Michael* (1924), *Vampyr* (1932), *Day of Wrath* (1943), *Ordet* (1955), and *Gertrud* (1964).

⁵ Yasujiro Ozu (1903–1963) was a Japanese film director and screenwriter who began his career in silent films and transitioned into making color films during the early 1960s. Robert Bresson (1901–1999) was a French film director who is famous for his contributions to the art of filmmaking. Chantal Akerman (1950–2015) was a Belgian film director, screenwriter, and professor of film studies at the City College of New York and the European Graduate School.



the “reality of the image.” Like the materiality of language, there are times when the image is out of focus or our attention is not necessarily strictly on the story.

I was also drawing on the poetic verse form in Greek tragedy called *stichomythia* where two speakers are in dialogue, alternating strictly metered lines and responses to each other. At one point, we moved the camera in an analogous way. What I thought about us doing was offering a scansion of the story, bringing it somewhere else. We are not just telling a story, but doing something outside or beyond that and moving towards something analogous to an analytical relationship where someone recounts their experience.

CV: The film offers an incredible depiction of the trajectory of a psychoanalytic treatment over several years and includes voice-overs or inner-monologues from both Seriema and Lacan, which give us an impression of the unspoken thoughts that are taking place between analyst and analysand. It perhaps gives us an impression of the transference dynamics at stake, but also the detective work that the analysand and analyst are participating in throughout the course of an analysis. How did you arrive at the decision to incorporate the thoughts of the characters into the film in this way?

RL: In Betty’s play, these voice-overs are soliloquies. I made some changes from Betty’s play, which she supported. Betty was a wonderful support through the whole process. She allowed me to take license and do what I needed to do. Her play is entitled *Goodbye, Doctor* and I identified the doctor as Lacan. In the play, the doctor is concerned with the death of his mother. I also knew that Lacan was concerned with his own death at the time. This is the biggest change that I made. One bit of writing that I did was Lacan addressing his own death. I think one of the great things about the voice-over where Lacan is concerned with his own mortality is that it heightens this sense that he does not always know what he is doing. He is self-correcting. He swears at one point and says, “why did I say that?” He comes across as a mortal and as a sympathetic character. When we think of someone who has left a body of work like Lacan has done, we carry it around in our computers and books as if it will always be there, but in the film there is a sense of ending. He has rough edges and is sometimes tough with Seriema, putting out his hand for the money. Yet he is a sympathetic character and there is method to his madness. You realize there is a purpose for his behavior in the clinical setting.

CV: Several analysts have told me that what they find most incredible about the film is your careful depiction of Lacan’s practice. The film portrays Lacan’s way of working as a psychoanalyst in practice in a very refined, careful, and delicate way. What went into the process of representing his clinical work so beautifully? How were you able to achieve this?

RL: I was fortunate to have Betty’s work to begin. She is a wonderful writer, was analyzed by Lacan, and has been on both sides as an analysand and analyst. I have been interested in psychoanalysis and known Lacanian analysts as friends for many years. I have always been interested in clinical practice. There is a lot of film theory



that comes out of Lacan's work, which I have read passionately, but going back to what Mick Taussig told me: I really had to meet people who did this work and who wrestle with human frailty, symptoms, and suffering. This has been deeply fascinating to me. I also think David Patrick Kelly really listened well to the material. There was this wonderful dynamic between him and Ismenia like two musicians who created a composition together through their work. When David Patrick Kelly does the Borromean knot, it is the one moment where he speaks the voice-over out loud. It is a really perfect moment that speaks to Lacan's passion in trying to figure out what is going on.

One comment that several people have made after seeing the film is that Lacan seems to be in the back at the end of the film. It is as if all the power and energy has gone to Seriema. This is true to the model that Lacan had insofar as the analyst fades away at the end of an analysis. It is not a heroic victory for the analyst, but rather a disappearance, a fading out. This makes me think of the midwife. It is the mother who has the child and is the victorious one. As a protagonist, it is really Seriema's story.

CV: You mentioned the money a moment ago. Lacan is notorious for leaving piles of money all over his desk during sessions with his patients. Roudinesco writes about this in her biography about him. He believed that the analysis had to cost something and that money functioned symbolically as an exchange whereby the patient would have to give up or lose something in the process, but also as a kind of boundary to the relation between analyst and analysand. In the film, Lacan is shown pulling money out of different pockets of his clothes at one point. What went into the decision to depict the exchanges of money between Seriema and Lacan in the film?

RL: It was originally in Betty's play, but it also reminds me of Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). Jordan Lockhart, who made the trailer for *Adieu Lacan*, did a great job. You see the characters exchanging money and Seriema is crying in the background. The whole thing initially appears very underhanded. The film brings the money out on the table. When we think of our own culture now, money is disappearing. When I buy coffee in the morning, I can just use the phone. There is no material exchange. Lacan makes you think about money. There is a vulgarity to it. In pornography, for instance, we use the expression of the "money shot." It is off-putting and yet so central to society. The exchange of money is fascinating and has visual interest. At one point, Seriema says to Lacan something like, "I really wish that we didn't treat the money like this." And he replies, "that is because you want to be loved." If the money wasn't there, it would be about love. Money undercuts this aspect of love so that the analysis can drive forward. It serves this symbolic function in the clinic, but Lacan was also kind of flippant about money. It was important, but also didn't matter that much. David Patrick Kelly and I were talking about the character of Molloy from the Samuel Beckett novel. The character is sucking on stones and is trying to figure out into which pocket to put various stones so that he is never sucking on the same one twice in a row. We thought that



maybe we could do that with the money. It created this wonderful moment that gave a richness to the character.

CV: The film also importantly portrays the controversial aspect of Lacan's way of working with "punctuation" or the variable-length session. There is also some overlap perhaps between the cut that a director might make with a scene and the cut the analyst might make to end the session. What are your thoughts about the representation of the cut and its place in the film in these respects?

RL: We shot the film in sequence, which you hardly ever get to do. Usually, if you have three different scenes in a bar, you would shoot them all at once because it is not financially possible to go back to the same bar three times. It is much more efficient to shoot all the scenes there at one time. Since we were shooting in one location, we were able to do all of the scenes sequentially. Very few filmmakers have done this regularly. One was Michelangelo Antonioni and another was Robert Altman.⁶ I am particularly close to Altman's work because I have worked with actor Elliott Gould who has done a number of famous films with Altman including *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973), which were both shot in sequence. Shooting in sequence is a wonderful way to work for actors, but the cinematographer and the director really get to feel the timing, the scansion of the story, and how you are building the film.

I want to also reflect on what you asked about in terms of the Lacanian cut and the cut of cinema. In the classic Hollywood film, you hide the cut so the audience is not aware there has been a cut. Of course, you could also cut to make sure that the audience sees it. You could say then that if you hold every session for forty-five minutes and cut on action, it could make the cut disappear. Yet the cut can also make time emerge and appear through disruption. Freud also realized this. In psychoanalysis and in film, time reemerges and you can intervene on time. Disruptions to our time have become so constant and monetized now that time disappears or has no corporeality or physicality. *Adieu Lacan* has a very marked relationship to its own sense of time through the cut of the session and the cut of the film.

CV: You mentioned that you wrote the portion of the film where Lacan reflects upon his own death. There is a remarkable contrast in the film between Seriema being able to follow her own desire to pursue motherhood and Lacan fading away into death into the background. It is a beginning for Seriema and an ending for Lacan. As you mentioned, this could be described as the trajectory of a Lacanian treatment. At the end of analysis, the analyst is sometimes said to "fade" or "fall away" once the analysand is able to do without the treatment, which is different from other variations of psychoanalysis. What are your thoughts about the contrast between the two characters in this respect?

⁶ Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007) was an Italian film director and screenwriter who is known for his English films *Blowup* (1966) and *The Passenger* (1975). Robert Altman (1925–2006) was an American filmmaker who was nominated five times for the Academy Award for Best Director.



RL: I can't say I was conscious of this. The actors really brought it out. It was interesting to speak to Ismenia about the scene of the fetish object. She has lost her fetish and Lacan has an unexpected response, telling her to get another one, and then does his capoeira dance. That is the only scene that was handheld. We were very economical with what we did with the camera, which is very different from the saturation of images that we live with now. There is a measured way of dealing with images. Ismenia said that is really where it changes for Seriemia and where she begins to think differently about Lacan and the psychoanalytic process. She is spot on.

I have had an extraordinary experience in showing the film and being able to speak with audiences and analysts in the United States, Canada, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, France, and elsewhere for a long period of time. I am much more conscious of the choices that I made now after many years of work. There are many conferences, readings, discussions over dinners and drinks that go into any project, but in the moment it is intuitive. Only afterwards do I see the reason in my own madness. We were strapped for time and I really had to push for the way I wanted to do that last scene. It works really well. Lacan was fond of an ancient Greek word, *tuche*, which is he relates to the real or chance or roll of the dice. This kind of filmmaking really is a roll of the dice, which appeals to me.

CV: There is a whole outgrowth of the clinic devoted to Lacanian film theory and Lacanian cinema studies. I immediately think of scholars like Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan, but also Laura Mulvey and Joan Copjec. Does this area of Lacanian theory and thinking inspire your filmmaking process?

RL: It absolutely has influenced me. It influences how I think about the relation of life and filmmaking, but also about politics and philosophy. I am an avid reader of Joan Copjec, Žižek, and Todd McGowan. I am not exactly aware of how it influences my work, but the relations that they draw between film and psychoanalysis are really important. I think one of the ways I am a fish out of water in the clinical work is that clinicians do not necessarily have the same embrace of culture that these theorists have. This might be a bridging since their work brings a lot to me. Their work influences maybe less how I go about technically making a film and more about how I make sense of life and think about the world in which we live.

CV: You mentioned your dissertation on the rise of health care in the United States and the treatment of veterans. Earlier today, I was reading about some of the other films you have made including *A Hole in One* (2004), which is about a woman who is seeking a lobotomy. You also made a film called *Fred Won't Move Out* (2012) about a character suffering with Alzheimer's disease. And now you have made a film about a person's experience in psychoanalysis. Do you have thoughts about the reoccurring theme of mental health in your work?

RL: Yes. During my doctoral dissertation, I was writing on performance art for *Artforum*. I had come back to New York and got a call from *Artforum* who said, "we hear you are an expert on performance art." I said, "yes I am." I had to run to the



library to look it up. I realized that I knew what performance art was, but I had never heard it called in this way. I began to write reviews in the back of *Artforum* about performance art and also began to do some of my own.

One of the pieces I did was based on the records of my mother's brother who was a Second World War veteran. He had a psychotic break after returning from Germany and going to Princeton. He spent ten years in the hospital where he either intentionally tried to escape or wandered off because he was so drugged up with medications and out of it with all of the different treatments and was hit by a train. His name was Richard Chapman. I am Richard Chapman Ledes. When I was growing up, it was always emphasized by my mother that I was "not" named after her brother, but after her father. I was always fascinated by the other Richard, the one who disappeared. When I got ahold of these records, it really struck a chord with me. I think it did for the audience, too. People were really fascinated by it.

I was so struck how the records that were supposed to tell a story about the patient also told a story about the storytellers of that time. With just a bit of research, I learned that it had been a pivotal moment in health care. The first *DSM* [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*] emerged as a nosology for soldiers under a committee led by psychiatrist Brigadier General William C. Menninger (1899–1966). I began to research and volunteered at an outpatient center for severely chronically mentally ill people in New York. I led a group where we read short stories aloud with patients. We read Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville. I got to know different clinical groups who didn't necessarily see eye to eye at DeWitt Wallace Institute of Psychiatry. They looked at the same phenomena in very different ways. There were men and women of all stripes who were hypnotists, psychologists, behaviorists, and psychoanalysts. The historian, Peter Swales, would come and give talks about how Freud was a giant fraud. It was a tremendously eclectic group. I began to go every Wednesday to their meetings at the institute. I became fascinated with the history of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. It is a rich vein for me.

One of the reasons I gravitated to Lacan is that he is deeply enriched in culture. Freud had some trepidations towards lay analysis, but he worried that analysis could be monopolized by physicians. After the Second World War, there was an effort to take control of psychoanalysis for clinicians. In contrast, Lacan draws upon Edgar Allen Poe and James Joyce with a rich cultural connection. During my undergraduate years, I was studying poetry and ancient Greek and found this piece on the *Antigone*, I felt I had found a fellow soul.

CV: You mentioned performance art. In many ways, Lacan's seminars were a kind of performance art...

RL: Absolutely! David Patrick Kelly had said this to me as well when we were talking about the seminar: "This guy is performing!" He reads the room and there is something very theatrical about Lacan. This aspect really comes across in the film and contributes to my understanding of Lacan and psychoanalysis. In this time of Zoom and the pandemic, you really have to appreciate what it would have meant to have him in the room with you.



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