Following Her on Instagram: Shifting Paradigms in Hollywood Film Aesthetics

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“Traditional forms of moving image involve the gradual contamination of vulnerable minds by the ideologies of the state (capitalism). This process was understood to be aided and abetted by the fixed, seated, regimented and muted positions we adopt when indulging in these dangerous forms of cinematic pleasure. Since then, a new radicality for moving image installations has been claimed based on the liberation of the viewer from the restrictions of sedentary spectatorship.”

Everyone can become famous. The access to mobile devices and social media has managed to catapult everyday folks into the worldwide spotlight through the use of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Where Hollywood was once an elite and inclusionary group, internet personalities are becoming their contemporaries by way of the function of likes and comments on so many online platforms. The proliferation of new faces across a variety of image-making technology and moving-image works has managed to usher in a new kind of normal, wherein the armchairs of talk shows and the narratives of films house the online personality, turning the Hollywood paradigm away from the star system and toward equal representation of bodies across media. ‘Places’ like Instagram and YouTube are the sites for the creation of a new body, hovering somewhere between a fabricated holograph and the extension of the real, physical body moving through the digital interface. The virtual and physical body come together to create a representative presence of the online personality, a reality that the viewer cannot wholly parse out, blurring lines between the ways in which the body is altered in real time and online. What this means is that beyond the use of makeup, tattoos, fashion, and the like, the Internet creates a further set of obfuscations by introducing filters, recolouring, cropping and zooming. With all these tools available, the internet personality transforms their physical flesh into a highly curated body that is

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available for consumption, but also marks the new ‘normal’ class who have easy access to the internet. This phenomenon resounds especially in the film industry as directors and producers supplement superstar Hollywood actors for a more ‘true’ representation of the film’s characters, turning toward unconventional casting methods to usher in a new kind of actor: an everyday Internet user with a large number of followers who will appeal to an audience of young folks who recognize their online presence. The most salient example is Sean Baker’s 2017 film *The Florida Project*, which was recognized not only at the Academy Awards, but at various awards shows throughout the world. The film is set just outside of Disneyworld, a collection of sleazy tourist motels act as homes for some of Florida’s most disenfranchised population who pay weekly rents until they either leave or are kicked out. Halley, a young twenty-something, and her seven-year-old daughter Moonee are residents of the Magic Castle Inn, where Moonee spends her days troublemaking with other kids from adjacent rooms while Halley spends most of her time online, smoking marijuana, and turning tricks to make her rent. By the end of the film, Moonee is taken away from her Mother, kicking and screaming, while Halley is forced to confront a future without her child. Although Baker employs acclaimed actor Willem Dafoe, he turned to Instagram to find his leading lady Halley. Bria Vinaite (@chronicflowers) was spotted on Instagram with a whopping 94,000 followers, her feed littered with flashy outfits, graphic tattoos, outlandish makeup and smoking selfies, acting (potentially) as a marker for the middle-class American kid who grabs hold of their identity online and markets it well. The aesthetic collection of her photos, coupled by the ‘n’importe quoi’ attitude of her outfit ensembles and blatant smoking make her the perfect candidate for the big screen: her confidence can convince, and her look will entice audiences. It is no surprise that Baker employs a setting of highly saturated purple and pink motels, shots of crystal-blue skies, trips to vintage fast-food restaurants and shopping trips at the
(particularly shiny) dollar store to render his star ‘at home’. While the narrative unfolds, the illegal and illicit acts of Halley are overshadowed by the colourful filtering of the film, akin to the Instagram feed of the star. With this, I will seek to prove how Instagram aesthetics have become privileged over cinematic narratives, enticing audiences with popular image-making trends as a way to render disenfranchised characters more relatable. I will first discuss Instagram as a platform for image-making and the complicity with which its users relentlessly scroll through, like and comment on the material at their fingertips. This is followed by an analysis of unconventional casting methods as a way to usher in a new group of actors who fulfill the criteria of more ‘real’ performances. Finally, I will use the star system to discuss the ways in which directors and producers use a variety of bodies to appeal to various audiences, rooting their films somewhere between respectable Hollywood production and ‘real-life’ docudrama. I specifically consider the ways in which we are steeped in images that perpetuate the rising autonomy of celebrity status across a variety of media, as well as the contemporary social politics that currently surround representation in Hollywood. This approach will begin to build a framework for the inclusion of a variety of bodies in popular moving-image media and raise questions about the body’s visibility on social media platforms.

Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has become an image making platform that has transformed the way we receive information online. Like most technologies, the interface has expanded in an array of functions: photographs posted to feeds, stories that are available for 24 hours, favourite or saved photographs from other feeds, videos, likes, comments and messages. By way of so many possibilities, Instagram creates a community where the user has autonomy to post, to comment, to share, and create their own persona, as well as accrue a diverse range of
followers, sometimes bound to an aesthetic or inspiration that defines their online profile. I draw upon my own Instagram handle (@supersupersecret) to discuss the tools that people use to manage the way they are perceived/received via curating, distancing and aesthetic. My profile contains 20 pictures, mostly revealing cream coloured linen and raw wood as a textural through line, juxtaposed by pictures in nature, sprawling shorelines and abundant summer vines. Peppered throughout are selfies that deny the viewer of the entirety of my identity: eyes closed, face covered in glitter, a hand over my face. I make these deliberate choices as a means to separate my real self from an online body, one that can exist beyond me, bound to a specific set of aesthetic codes, that protects me from a comment or a like (or lack thereof) that will directly affect my self-worth. Social media has managed to solidify these anxieties by way of the online celebrity, wherein 100 likes of a photograph pales greatly in comparison to the millions that users like Kim Kardashian and Rihanna receive. Why then do the average users continue to participate in this online community when they have reduced visibility beside so many mega-stars? Bria Vinaite’s profile manages to locate the spaces where the average user can extend their presence beyond their friends and acquaintances and find resonance with the likes of Hollywood filmmakers. Catherine Elwes suggests that the subject and her body are more than inert, passive objects on which ideology inscribes its meaning, but rather is an agential reality with its own causal role in making meaning. Vinaite uses the tools that are available to her to create a highly visible online body, presented as an aesthetic experience for the online user, and accrues a high number of likes, comments and followers because she is rendering her profile a whole experience. What this means is that while we scroll through the multitude of photos and videos posted by our friends, Vinaite’s pictures remind us of the function of the platform in the first place: a space to curate and present a body

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1 Elwes, 144.
through an aesthetic rendering. Suddenly, we are drawn toward her as if she were some divine
being, impressed by the ways in which she presents herself, inspired to collect and display
moments in the same visually complex way. Jaron Lanier explains that in a fashionable, digitally-
networked, hyper-efficient market, the winner-take-all curve is the most likely, wherein the global
sorting within a single framework allows only a small margin of people to become wealthy and
visible.3 There is a space that is carved out for the middle-class American to reach stardom (albeit
very slim) next to the likes of the film star because the hope that we too can become overly popular
is suddenly very real: if she can do it, I can do it. In The Florida Project, Halley and Moonee get
gearied up to take ‘bikini selfies’ in their motel room. Both mother and daughter pose provocatively
in front of an iPhone, snapping shot after shot for presumably social media. Baker reinforces his
casting choice by putting Vinaite in front of an iPhone to locate the character not so far from the
actor herself, reminding us not only of our own fascination with social media, but the potential
with which these selfies could entice an audience to relate.

Currently there is a call to Hollywood filmmakers to consider the ways in which actors are
cast in order to diversify and accurately represent characters on the screen. Certain structures like
the Academy Awards have been responsible for praising actors for portraying the disabled, the
low-class, the racialized, the homosexual, despite not only their economic status as elite celebrities,
but also against their white skin that has rendered them privileged from the beginning. Charlize
Theron’s recognition for her role in Monster is the prime example. In the film, she plays Aileen
Wuornos, a prolific serial killer, prostitute, lesbian and low-class American who is subsequently
cought and reprimanded for her dubious crimes. Theron’s performance is a stunning, multi-layered

3 Jaron Lanier, Who owns the future? (Simon and Schuster, 2014), 34.
portrait, rife with all the ‘chops’ to convince audiences that she is a good actor, deserving an award for extending her body beyond its container and ‘becoming’ a new person entirely. However, does this paradigm of rewarding actors for their ability to portray difference allow for fair and equal representation? How does Theron account for her financial status, her sexual identity, her lack of experience of Wuornos’ truth? Guy Austin explains that the French auteur film offers a challenge to conventional modes of representation, and in particular to the idealised embodiments of masculinity and femininity traditionally presented by film stars. In 1999, the Cannes Film Festival rewarded three amateur actors the awards for best performances, subsequently causing a rift between the star system and the unconventionally sourced actors. What Cannes manages to locate is the ability for the ‘normal’ body to enter the screen and move us nonetheless, problematizing the succinct group of actors who have made their profession as movie stars. This is apparent with the appearance of Vinaite in The Florida Project, akin to Harmony Korine’s Kids and Gus Van Sant’s Paranoid Park. Both Korine and Van Sant were prolific for casting their eighties and nineties films with folks from the street, found at skate parks or shopping malls, and inviting them to audition for the film. These ‘actors’, unprepared for their spot in the limelight, were expected to fizzle out into the background, many of them ending up on the street or committing suicide. Instagram, however, has changed this expectation completely, with followers and likes a sort of trial run for the potential brilliance of a ‘raw’ performance. We cognitively preserve the separateness of the screen world whether encountered in the cinema or online, a privilege that was not so prevalent in the era of Kids. Furthermore, what are the implications of casting so many ‘regular’ folk to play the roles of crooks and cons? American Honey, directed by Andrea Arnold, is the perfect place to nestle this investigation. In 2016, Arnold

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4 Guy Austin, “The amateur actors of Cannes 1999” (French Cultural Studies, 2004), 251.
5 Elwes, 147.
cast a large group of twenty-something Americans to play a band of hoodlums who travel from motel to motel in a large van, selling magazine subscriptions to passersby with the aim of committing fraud. With the exception of Riley Keough (Elvis’s granddaughter) and Shia LaBoeuf, the kids are unknown to the Hollywood film circuit and, in turn, add a subversive nuance to the film. Because we recognize these actors as ‘everyday people’, we forgive their illegal acts because they present as someone who follows us on Instagram, who we go to school with, who we work with. Instead of gripping to Hollywood standards of recognizing the brilliance of playing a crook, Arnold normalizes their actions and, through the aesthetic conglomeration of the unconventional bodies and highly saturated colour tones, privileges the aesthetics over the narrative. Baker does this too when he puts Vinaite in a tiny dress and sets her loose at the fair; we see snippets of her eating a corndog, complaining about her lack of money, and flirting with men who drive by in large pick-up trucks. We are no longer focusing on the Hollywood star who is really ‘acting’ but instead believing more wholeheartedly that this is truly happening beyond the film’s frame. Our voyeurism strengthens the believability of the film.

If unconventional casting methods allow for a more believable portrayal of characters, why cast a star at all? Amateur actors may be conceived as a blow against the star system but can at times be the agents of their own entry into the star system itself. Take for instance Willem Dafoe’s inclusion in The Florida Project as the compassionate motel concierge Bobby. This role could seemingly be played by most: a sad, smoking, middle-aged American who is torn between his loyalty to the guests of the motel and the business of keeping the motel up-and-running. Of all the stellar performances in the film, his is the only one up for an Academy Award for Best Supporting

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6 Austin, 261.
actor. Dafoe is especially important for Baker as a tool to align his film with the seriousness of Hollywood. We see this time and time again in a variety of movies: Chloe Sevigny in *Kids*, Shia LaBeouf in *American Honey*; directors are deliberately using star system actors to enter their films into a category of hybrid filmmaking, surprising us not only with a fresh face, but reminding us that this film is one to be taken seriously, to be considered for awards. But, where Dafoe and LaBeouf’s performances differ from their late nineties counterparts is the compliance with which their presence activates the performances of the Instagram stars they are cast alongside. It is a common practice (since the invention of the digital camera) to snap a photo with a celebrity as a means to measure some sort of cultural capital. Instagram has proliferated this phenomenon further with the inclusion of selfies of so many star encounters or, if your profile is flashy enough, even a follow back from one of your favourite celebs. This way, Baker weaves together the online platform with Hollywood in an almost dystopian turn, wherein Halley is reliant on Bobby for a room at the motel, Vinaite needs Dafoe in order to locate her performance somewhere respectable. Both Vinaite and Dafoe have selfies with each other on their Instagram profiles: red carpet shenanigans, backstage moments, comments expressing their love for working with one another. This aesthetic paradigm feeds right back into the filmic frame, as both characters find themselves in a highly saturated, multi-coloured setting in Florida’s hot summer, each shot perfectly staged for an Instagram photo. What the internet has done to the moving image is where there was once only room for the Hollywood star, there now is the inclusion of a multitude of bodies across a variety of media. Not only do the followers of @chronicflowers want to see the film, they want to be reminded of the platform the actor has been found on. This is similar to the ways Academy Award winners and nominees are prefaced by their acclaims on film posters and advertisements. Filmmakers are then presented with an opportunity to render their films more aesthetic, to align
their Instagram celebrities with their ‘natural habitat’; to disguise their lack of acting chops and remind the viewer that indeed, this person was found on the Internet. Because, in a way, hasn’t the Internet ushered in an age of highly curated and visually pleasing interfaces? The neat arrangements of the Instagram feed and the collections of pixels so crisply present are what Hito Steyerl describes as snapshots of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction. Where the historically accurate Elizabethan story has been replaced by the sleek and shiny world of *Stranger Things* and *Black Mirror*, the stories of everyday Americans are the restaging of an Instagram profile through actor choices, the presence of a star or two, highly saturated colour tones and long, tantalizing shots beckoning for the click of an iPhone.

With recent allegations against Harvey Weinstein, it seems as though there is more of an impetus to recognize the problem with Hollywood films. As women stand in solidarity against the producer, so do other groups wish to have their voices heard. As a classically trained actor, I am aware of the transformative and beautiful artistry that goes into an array of stage and film productions and this should not be negated. However, it is an appropriate time to ask more questions about which bodies are visible and who has the right to tell stories. The ability with which Instagram locates virtual bodies and allows representational opportunity seems like a step in the right direction. However, when the Kardashians have become a marker of that kind of fame, how do you parse out the productive from the presumptuous? I would argue that to approach film through an aesthetic angle may help reinforce the multiplicity of voices across moving image media. By employing unconventional casting methods and turning to Instagram for inspiration,

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there is an undoing of the elitist message that films send when they’re billed as a Blockbuster phenomenon. Taking into consideration the multilayered production methods of the Instagram post gives the user autonomy to create their own images that do not subscribe to the models of Hollywood films. Rather, we all become our own filmmakers and recognize our inspirations by following them and liking their pictures, reinforcing the politics of representation in productive, autonomous ways. That is not to say we should throw the baby out with the bath water, as Hollywood reminds us of the problematic past of primarily white actors rising to fame and wealth when questions of representation barely made it to the table. However, it is now our responsibility to use social media in a productive, investigative way to change the story. Who knows: maybe a carefully curated Instagram might just catapult your voice into the big leagues.
Works Cited


