



# Wasteland

issue #21  
DECEMBER  
exquisite debuts  
DUEL  
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE  
TO LEARN TO  
PLOW BY  
READING  
BOOKS  
SMALL  
DEATHS  
VIVA

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*DECEMBER*  
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DUEL  
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Jessica Moore

Perhaps no one would have predicted the “monstrous automobile” to bear such gravity in the last fifty years. Technophobia seems typically reserved for tools of surveillance, robotics, data-harvesting and cybernetics. And yet, it is the automobile — the mundane, almost ordinary object, at least in the context of those aforementioned — that crops up most dramatically in cinema: *The Car*, *Christine*, *Crash*, *Death Proof*, and Julia Ducournau’s latest instalment, *Titane*. *Titane* is a highly conceptual fable of fetishisation, impersonation, gender collapse, all narratively related to what can only be described as “automobile erotica” (sex and impregnation with an autonomous car). With *Titane*, Ducournau depicts the allure of discomfort, a hyper-awareness of one’s body; the act of relishing the physical sensation of disturbance, of flesh against steel. A phenomenological feast, and a favourite among critics, it earned this year’s Palme d’Or.

Of course, the invention of the modern autonomous car is

difficult to decontextualise from Elon Musk, Tesla, and the surrounding spirit of innovation that enables such unrestricted scientific endeavours. Machinery — oily, metallic — is “old” compared to the holographic shimmer that collects like space dust across so much of modern tech. Electric cars, like intuitive homeware, are increasingly minimalist, a string of silent exoskeletons that retain their own autonomy. And yet, cars, no matter how autonomous, remain markedly tangible, awkward, physical.

Notwithstanding the uncanniness of increasingly autonomous cars and technology, it remains timelessly thrilling to watch a film devoted to wrestling with the question: what disembodied malevolence can lurk beneath flickering headlights and a croaking engine? Or, in Ducournau’s *Titane*, what horrifying entanglements are possible between man and machine?

Departing from others of the “automobile horror” genre, Stephen Spielberg’s debut feature, *Duel*, is conceptually simple: a driver named

David Mann, his red Plymouth Valiant, a gas truck, a cat and mouse chase, scarce dialogue, few peripheral characters, allusions to a failing marriage. What begins slowly as a gnawing, discordant cycle of overtaking and passing another driver, a choreographic dialogue of mutual irritation and frustration, turns into a furious, irrational pursuit, a murderous rampage from a faceless opportunist, one who, unable to be reasoned with, must simply be obliterated.

*Duel* crystallises many of Spielberg’s idiosyncrasies as a director, most important of all, the ways in which he carves something horrifying, and worse yet, imaginable, out of circumstantial banality. Indeed, it is not the likelihood of his narratives that frightens audiences, in fact, one is very unlikely to encounter such an irrationally predatory driver, but rather what could happen if such a situation occurred.

Of course, this same idea is echoed in his sophomore film, *Jaws*. It is not the (highly improbable) reality of a shark encounter that frightens

audiences, Spielberg's logic of horror is not designed to obscure our everyday sense of security. If one did encounter such an unlikely monster — compared to devils and spirits, perhaps encountering a homicidal trucker or great white is somewhat likely, or at least possible — they now have an idea of what that could look like. A new fear, however irrational, is born; sculpted into the imagination. Indeed, Spielberg is a master of cultivating unforeseen horrors, horrors that are just distant enough from mundanity to provoke uncharted fears. Prior to *Duel*, who would have thought to fear being pushed into an oncoming train by a tanker truck?

As per Spielberg's perceptivity for the most horrifying of outcomes, what psychologists would name a sort of morbid catastrophising, he sees the worst outcome of situations and accentuates their atrocity. His camerawork attests to this; a menacing pastiche of mirror and bumper shots. He transforms the sunbaked Californian roadside into something richly, hellishly cinematic.

Coated in flumes of black smoke, sweat and dust, *Duel* twists a simplistic plot into an aesthetic marvel; a tense and unlikely triumph over a sadistic, faceless driver, whom we can only identify as the groaning atrium of a gas tank, at odds with his unfortunate, utterly arbitrary, victim.

Fifty years after its release, as we occupy a world so technologically sophisticated, the premise of a greasy, smoking tanker truck remains rather unsettling; but why? Beyond its sensorial unpleasantness, experiencing such an anthropomorphised monster-machine provokes our basest instincts: our fear of the uncanny. Like looking into the lifeless eyes of a shark, the robotic shell of an AI, or a wax figurine, the psychological distress of encountering a "robotic" entity is precisely due to its reminiscence. Our confrontations with such familiar, though ultimately unknowable, objects are limited to the vulnerability of the irrational senses. Uncertain of the recipient of our gaze, we become all the more tempted to look. We stare into the

watchful headlights of a truck in a dark tunnel — into a pool of oil.



IT'S  
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BOOKS  
words by  
Jonny Rogers



Near the beginning of *Before Sunrise*, Jesse describes an idea for a TV show: a year long project featuring 365 people recording every detail of their lives for 24 hours, "capturing life as it's lived." While Linklater has yet to realise such an idea, his little-known feature debut offers an insight into what this might have looked like: *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* was first shown on public-access television in 1988, offering residents of Austin an 86-minute minimalist journey across America through the eyes of a young man, played by Linklater himself.

Like many of his films, *Plow* is as aimless and meandering as its protagonist, though whether or not such is a virtue or weakness is down to the viewer's discretion. His goals and ambitions are opaque, if existent at all, and he appears to respond to all events and encounters with the same inexpressive apathy. He hardly speaks a word, and even then his most intelligible lines are simply quotations from literature. At one point, he holds a gun up against a

window, but the film reassures us that he is not a violent man.

Perhaps the film's sparse emotional stimulation stems from Linklater's lack of experience in filmmaking (his later films, assuredly, boast considerable technical improvement); or perhaps he simply wanted to capture a sense of disease and alienation familiar to post-war generations. While the rise of globalisation has enabled people to traverse the world in ever shorter periods of time, it has also meant that more time is spent in transit, inhabiting the anonymous non-places of airports and train stations. As we see throughout the film, many forms of human interaction have been supplanted by technology, even prior to the widespread domestication of the internet: customers interact with transportation conglomerates through ticket machines, and staff rehearse pre-written scripts to unseen audiences through a network of speaker phones.

Who can fault the inarticulate when speech has become optional; when text supersedes language?

Why piece together your own ideas when countless books already possess a precision and clarity you could never achieve?

This protagonist - a symbol, presumably, of all those who feel lost and dejected - appears more comfortable in the company of strangers than his own family. As Linklater travelled across the country with a vague plan for what this project might become, he weaved in the real stories of those he encountered along the way: a hairdresser staying overnight in an airport lobby, a McDonald's employee handing out tapes to customers he found interesting, and so forth. Like its successor, *Slacker*, *Plow* is an ode to those who fall between the gaps. Why should films only focus on lives which neatly fit into some dramatic trajectory when so few of us, if any, experience such certainty day-by-day?

Where many filmmakers preach that you should be confident, determined, uncompromising, and relentlessly self-assured, Linklater quietly mumbles, 'You're okay as you

are.’ To those who resist categorisation, or who stand in defiance of the secular virtues - wealth, success, ambition, progress - Plow insists, ‘It’s okay not to know who you are.’

This valorisation of the nobody, however, is not contingent on the iconoclasm of stardom; the film even lingers on the obituary of Sterling Hayden, a leading star of western and noir films in the 1950s and 60s. Throughout his career, Linklater has worked with unknown actors and household names alike, even kickstarting a few prolific careers in the process. Linklater clearly loves cinema in all its variety, drawing inspiration from both classic Hollywood and arthouse alike; but he is also aware that melodrama and action fall short in their veneration of certain emotions and experiences over others. After all, life is all far richer than the moments we remember.

In a certain sense, Linklater’s entire filmography has continued to

dismantle the presupposition that only certain experiences or lifestyles are valuable, instead creating a space to present the ordinary as worthy of wonder and appreciation; to give the ‘extras’ of the world a moment in the spotlight. While Linklater would take this adulation of the mundane to new heights in *Waking Life*, *Boyhood* and the *Before* trilogy, *Plow* shows that this idea is present at the very beginning of his career. As he explains in the director’s commentary:

“If you can find some joy or some poetry or something kind of beautiful about the banal things and everything else, then you’re much more set just to see the world. What I strive for is to be excited about brushing your teeth or all the crap you have to do in life, because that is your life.”





SMALL  
DEATHS  
words by  
Jessica Moore

*ma and da*; *holy cow*; *joke*. These inter-titles weave together Lynne Ramsay's graduate project *Small Deaths*. The short film is a triptych: three moments in the life of Anne Marie, bound together through a series of "deaths". *ma and da* is a flicker of domesticity: a kitchen, a mother and father, a metaphoric "death" of their marriage. *holy cow* is a flicker of childhood: a bucolic countryside, sororal affection, an encounter with a dead cow. *joke* is a flicker of adolescence: a party, a crowded room, a faked overdose — death as a cruel façade. The "small" in *Small Deaths* reveals itself to be a flexible descriptor; its meaning is malleable, it shifts throughout each vignette. In each, death is elusive, difficult to grasp.

Ramsay's 2002 *Morvern Callar* echoes this ambiguity. The film begins in medias res, with Morvern discovering that her writer-boyfriend has committed suicide; he left a note instructing Morvern to send his unpublished novel to a publisher; she erases his name and assigns her own. Death, author, life, rebirth.

A continual theme throughout Ramsay's work, death and its affective potential is crystallised in her debut, *Small Deaths*, in particular, *holy cow*. Situated in a sunny *Le Bonheur*-esque meadow, Anne Marie and her sister bicker and play amidst overgrown flora before chancing upon the corpse of a cow. Predicated by their gaiety, the girls are dignified by Ramsay's camera; their slow and contemplative reaction to such a macabre sight is interspersed with close-ups of the cow's decomposition. It is presumably here that the girls for the first time see death up close. Miniatures of death are spliced with images of life. Innocence is relished before it's degraded; Anne Marie's confrontation with death is a reckoning with her own fragility.

And yet, Anne Marie is more curious than disturbed. With a meditative focus on curvature, texture and flesh, the corpses of Ramsay's filmography are discernibly photographic. In *holy cow*, Ramsay's anatomical gaze is childlike, it moves with unguarded fascination and

asceticism.

Indeed, death — of the author, of childhood, of innocence — remains a curious shadow in Ramsay's corpus. In *Small Deaths*, the image of death is an affronting jolt, a temptatious spectacle. It snakes through tall grass, stalking and circling Anne Marie's maturation, slipping in and out of sight.



Has any cultural figure been as celebrated within the female gaze as the witch? She is the ultimate feminine monster. Hair typically long. Sometimes clad in black or variably in dainty lace, eighteenth century Puritan garb, decadent gowns, jeans and a leather jacket, or, à la *Suspiria*, a dancer's leotard in the heat of ritualistic performance. Cunning and precocious, no matter her style the witch is a sex symbol to reflect women's own desires and perceptions of beauty. Men, after all, tend to fear her.

In the 2010s, the witch ignited the cultural zeitgeist as a figure of political rebirth, of women reclaiming power that had been stolen from them for centuries (so strong was this image that the popular protest slogan, "We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn," has by 2021 become an internet meme). In 2016, Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* caught a bit of this lightning in its technicolour bottle. Its addition to the witch canon was Elaine, a beautiful man-killer cruising down an oceanside highway: a touch Giallo, a sprinkle of pulp.

The film's lusciously curated aesthetic aligned perfectly with the thriving modern feminist movement, much of it unravelling online, where instagrammable visuals were as necessary to the charge as gender politics. With *The Love Witch*, Biller created a big screen dream for feminist pop culture, a mirror through which young women could project their cultural interests, aesthetic sensibilities, and political imaginations all at once.

The witch, then, is an alter ego of sorts. She is someone who can be summoned from a hidden interior place, a place not often excavated in young women. You might feel powerless in your regular life, but through an alternate persona you can find a voice. In "The Uncanny", Freud posits the "double" as a visual representation of the darker parts of one's psyche. This double can take many forms: alter ego, online persona, a Mr. Hyde creature, a witch. Thus the witch is a psychological manifestation as well as a political character or popular monster. She is an alluring figure, coaxing us to indulge in the

darkness we so easily repress. The witch in her current imagination is sexy, intelligent and destructive. She typifies a brand of beauty that appeals to the female gaze, to a desire to embody femininity without sacrificing power.

The witch is a compelling female alter ego, though not alone. In 2007, Biller released her debut feature, *Viva*, a film that is also interested in women's hidden doubles. The protagonist is Barbie, a dutiful housewife in the early 1970s who embarks on a journey of sexual exploration after she splits from her husband, and whose rebirth comes not in the form of a witch but in "Viva", a femme fatale who exists in stark contrast to the deferential, devoted Barbie. When Barbie transforms into Viva, she is able to live her life with newfound confidence. Her rejection of male desire (or at least the male desire of her husband) is what creates her succubus. "I turn you on? I turn everybody on," Viva tells a pursuer at an orgy towards the end of the film.

Biller has stated that her mission as a filmmaker is to create a

“cinema of visual pleasure for women”. This thesis runs contra to much of her critical reception. Although largely positive, when writing about *Viva* many critics highlighted the film’s riff on exploitation pictures popular in the 60s and 70s, such as the movies of Russ Meyer (*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and *Vixen!* to name a couple). Lauding it both as an ode to these films and a satirical subversion of them, these criticisms tend to bely Biller’s “visual pleasure for women” principle. In *Viva*, each scene is impeccably curated, the clothing custom-made specifically to reflect the beauty of the era, each object of mise-en-scène forming an altar to the aesthetic. Within this world of aesthetic adoration, the duality of Barbie/Viva is explored. Barbie reads “Decorating with Crochet” and wears dainty blush teddies around the house. Viva reads “The Sensuous Woman” and drapes her body in sheer gold cloth, aware of her effect on the men around her. In all her sensual splendour, her sartorial choices are straight out of a young girl’s dream of what it means to be

luxurious; her sexuality comes not from a straight man’s imagination, but decidedly a woman’s.

Biller’s debut is located in something familiar yet unfamiliar. Viewers will probably recognise the retro aesthetics and recall vintage Playboy magazines, yet the lens is feminine and idolatrous of a specific aura, not objectifying as one would expect from the exploitation genre. This is because Biller is an expert at exploring the hidden crevices of female desire; she unearths them to create something beautiful.

Biller’s debut introduced two things to the world: a commitment to visual pleasure for the female gaze, and a desire to explore the doubles that haunt modern femininity. Lovingly, her work animates these alter egos: femme fatales and vixens in *Viva*, and later witches in *The Love Witch*. Culture in 2016 was receptive to these explorations, with political trends spawning interest in the figure of the witch and her connection to the darker side of women’s power. But it was *Viva* that laid the groundwork, asking viewers: who is your Viva? What are her interests?

Whom does she desire? What does she wear?



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