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Flatness, Nostalgia, and the Digital Uncanny in Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla* (2023)

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Abstract

This article contends that Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla* (2023) uses digital filmmaking to re-animate the commodified image of Priscilla Presley, privileging surface and affect over historical realism. Though Coppola predominantly shoots on film, her decision to film Priscilla digitally—an adaptation of Presley's memoir—marks a formal shift in her filmography aligned with her ongoing exploration of feminine interiority and aesthetic control. The film traces Priscilla's life from her first encounter with Elvis Presley to their separation, presenting a visually stylized narrative that immerses viewers in what Walter Benjamin terms a phantasmagoria: a spectacle of commodification divorced from historical consciousness (The Arcades Project). Rather than striving for veracity, Coppola evokes a nostalgic atmosphere that re-members Priscilla through pre-circulated cultural images. This article examines Coppola's often-criticized "flat" visual style in relation to the Freudian uncanny, i.e., the estrangement of the familiar through temporal and affective distortion. Coppola manipulates digital temporality—looping and flattening time—to produce an oneiric repetition that heightens the artifice of Presley's image while emotionally distancing viewers. These formal strategies dissipate emotional depth but intensify aesthetic control. Finally, this article considers the political valences of Coppola's digital aesthetics in a media landscape that both enables visibility and enacts erasure.

Keywords: aesthetic; affect; digital cinema; phenomenology



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> The world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density.
>
> —Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991, p. 34

1. Introduction

Prequels, sequels, live-action remakes, text-to-film adaptations: a longing desire of the past seemingly confronts American audiences with each new film release. However, one genre has been welcomed more warmly than others: the biopic. In her most recent film *Priscilla* (2023), Sofia Coppola depicts the marriage of the eponymous character to rock legend Elvis Presley. While Elvis remains a significant driver of her film's plot, he is not the main character. The cinematic world of *Priscilla* draws largely upon a memoir published by Priscilla Presley in 1985 entitled *Elvis and Me: The True Story of the Love Between Priscilla Presley and the King of Rock N' Roll*. Despite working from this primary source material, Coppola further solidifies the fetishized remembrance of the Presleys in public memory. *Priscilla* distorts Presley's life into "broken-down matter," a commodity that succeeds in

effacing her distinctness as a character; Priscilla Presley, as construed by Coppola, becomes an allegorical figure of Coppola's oeuvre (Benjamin 2002, p. 207).

This article analyzes "flatness"—an aesthetic overdevelopment that favors stasis and rejects diegetic interiority—as a formal mark of the uncanny that blurs "the distinction between imagination and reality" through visual and affective qualities, particularly in Coppola's portrayal of the Presleys as mediated figures within public memory (Freud 1955, p. 244). Here, I conduct a close reading buttressed by the addition of media-archeological attention to digital circulation. Caught between fact and fiction, Priscilla's dazzling public persona, as she reflects in her memoir, eventually eclipsed her sense of self—reducing her to a mask which would come to be emulated by generations of young women in her wake. My argument likens this process to a phantasmagoria, as defined by Walter Benjamin, by first considering Priscilla's role in the image economy and then reassessing it with respect to Coppola's target audience and from a perspective of gendered subjectivity. The specificity of her aesthetic approach hinges upon spectators' self-identification with the creation of Priscilla-as-icon—a commodifying process by which Coppola reanimates Presley's various emanations throughout popular culture. Indeed, *Priscilla* can be viewed through a Freudian study of celebrity wherein viewers must confront their continued willingness to resuscitate the commercialized form of Presley modeled in Coppola's film (Freud 1955, p. 15). The desire to unearth Presley, alive though she may be, from the depths of fame recalls an uncanny sensation of her being buried alive; as Freud indicates, "[the] terrifying phantasy" that Coppola presents to viewers "is only a transformation of another phantasy"—stardom's original conception of Presley as America's sweetheart—"which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all" (Freud 1955, p. 244). It is only upon such resurrections that it becomes clear *Priscilla* is as much a depiction of the American mid-century as it is of today's increasingly digital age.

My reference to the term of flatness draws from E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, wherein he defines a flat character as one "constructed round a single idea or quality" (Forster 1927, p. 103): from a narratological perspective, a "flat" character has no depth; it is merely a function of the overall plot and of the richer ("round") characters' development. I adapt this concept of leveling, in what follows, to qualify the aesthetic veneer Coppola superposes upon a character which forecloses the ability to depict this character's "roundness" in *Priscilla*'s plot. Coppola does not flatten Priscilla Presley herself as she is known in real life.[1] The film critically analyzes the construction of "Priscilla," though Coppola proceeds to progressively compact her by aesthetic and affective means. In doing so, spectators question what this new modelling of a well-established chronology brings to the fore. Coppola's shift from analog to digital severs Priscilla from the temporal texture of Polaroid photos and tabloid images; distilled into pixels, she no longer appears as a character but as a repackaged advertisement. This elicits a disconcerting realization: the spectator, too, can lose dimension by reducing his or her own social projection of self to a commodified product. The reduction in characters to reproduce and commodify is central to Coppola's filmography, while the film's matte affective register speaks more broadly to a sense of "uneasiness or discontent" in their consumerist malaise (Freud 1961, p. 135); *Priscilla* most clearly depicts unease by experimenting with the interplay between her viewership's unconscious and the development of affective qualities present in digital media.[2]

"Priscilla" is Coppola's tongue-in-cheek response to criticism of her directorial aesthetic for lacking in substance.[3] Because of this recurrent feedback, Coppola uses *Priscilla* to parody her own cinematographic oeuvre. Priscilla Presley's story becomes phantasmagoric in its retelling as Coppola reduces the film's protagonist into a veneer. Her projection of Priscilla enamors viewers, luring them in with a spectacle. Ultimately, the film yields nothing beyond pure surface. In the first section of this paper, I address the critical discourse

surrounding her films, one that I measure by lack of dimensionality. The second section assesses the importance of the digital uncanny, as defined by Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, in crafting a pervasive aesthetic of flatness that speaks to commodity fetishism, from Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud to Fredric Jameson.

2. Coppola's Canniness: A Return of Cinematic Flatness

Priscilla exposes the gaps between Priscilla and Elvis in terms of age and celebrity, and how they often lead to physical and emotional distance. Elvis, twenty-four and already widely famous, falls in love during his deployment with fourteen-year-old Priscilla Beaulieu, who resides in military housing with her parents. When Elvis leaves just six months after their first encounter, she insists that she must also return to the U.S. Early scenes follow Priscilla as she struggles with adjusting to life in Graceland, Elvis's estate in Memphis, Tennessee. To her surprise, Priscilla bides much of her time without companionship, whereas Elvis decides to pursue his career instead of her. Viewers anticipate the King of Rock's death, though we are never permitted to see Priscilla move beyond his orbit within the film's chronology.

Priscilla, like many of its predecessors in Coppola's filmography, concerns a forlorn female protagonist: young, white, and wistful. By focusing her lens upon privileged female characters, she often avoids directly addressing social inequities within the cinematic worlds she constructs. Her choice to focus on such a narrow population feels deliberate upon assessing *Priscilla* among Coppola's earlier works. Dominant criticism of Coppola, as explained by Georgie Carr, focuses on the lack of intersectional representation which "raises the spectre of feminist politics only to dodge any real engagement with it" (Carr 2020). Along with existing criticism, I contend that such surface-level inclusion denies any underlying commitment to feminist solidarity. Further, her directorial emphasis of the two-dimensional flirts with subversion before ultimately yielding to established and limited tropes and results in further propagation of them. One must consider what films that engage with "white alienation and aimlessness" reveal in their myriad configurations within Coppola's body of work (Marston 2018, p. 169). Of particular interest, how might the format speak to underlying motives or a deeper political unconscious? As Jameson indicates, "It is in. . . restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" that we can understand cultural products, thereby revealing much about the origin of such a work (Jameson 1981, p. 20).

Coppola's politics and aesthetics have been praised as much as they have been contested. Marston categorizes her "brand of authorship" as "a commercialised melancholic aesthetic" that traps viewers in a state of suspension (Marston 2018, p. 162). The suggestion is that her films often capitalize on an unconscious collective desire to be distracted by an aestheticized past—what Benjamin might call a phantasmagoria—driving viewers to engage emotionally in spectacles of commodity such as the worlds of her protagonists (Benjamin 2002, p. 7). Coppola's repetitive themes and aesthetics center upon dreamlike environments, something that has gained her films a cult-like following. Spectators return to suspend themselves, to be absorbed in the splendor of Coppola's aesthetics. Her films frame stasis in a way that reveals the inability of her characters to escape from their gilded prisons—mirroring her fans who willingly absorb themselves into Coppola's cinematic phantasmagoria. A helplessness emanates from the women Coppola depicts that is at odds with the feminist-coded marketing of her movies (female-driven casts, themes of girlhood and becoming). Martine Beugnet and Laura Mulvey agree that "her female characters are trapped in an oppressive world of objects and male gazes that progressively hollows them out, reducing them to ghostly emanations, scattered, clichéd visions" (Beugnet and Mulvey 2015, p. 199). Her protagonists progressively become interchangeable; together they form a

collage of coquettish aesthetics. Viewers unwittingly embrace such familiarity, though the homogeneity registers yet another repetition of "unfulfilled but possible [future] to which we still like to cling in phantasy" (Freud 1955, p. 236). The spectatorial reaction to Coppola's archetypes is to embrace her dizzying masquerade by clinging onto that which exists at surface-level. Time and again, Coppola develops female characters based upon melancholic experiences of girlhood—residuals of early 2010s social media aesthetics inspired by Lana Del Rey/Americana and *Lolita*, rampant among teenage users.[4] With beautiful exteriors, decorated and disguised; her films entice spectators by way of resurrection. Coppola's cinema of surface synthesizes memories (lived and experienced or imaged, alike) into a residue that seeps into the present; however, this uncanny, familiar appeal to girlhood conceals the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

The visually attractive mise en scène seeks to reinforce the depthless restrictions of the commercialized worlds Coppola's films imagine. Wendy Ide asserts in her review of *Priscilla* for *The Guardian* that Coppola "evokes the loneliness and isolation experienced by women who simultaneously have everything and nothing," such as in *Marie Antoinette*'s "ribbon-bedecked prison of privilege" or *Lost in Translation*'s "five-star hotel of ennui" (Ide 2023). The films ultimately depict troubling inaction encased within a delicate and elegant shell. "Priscilla," is a return of characters such as the Lisbon sisters[5] who navigate melancholic adolescence or Charlotte[6] from *Lost in Translation* as she contemplates her marriage in a foreign country. The indulgent aesthetic and lifestyle of Coppola's characters is in direct opposition to their stunted development. They exist within a "phantasmagoria of happiness," or grand illusion, where viewers and characters alike affront "the mutually contradictory tendencies of desire: that of repetition and that of eternity" (Benjamin 2002, pp. 116–17). I propose that it is in this phantasmagorical gap that viewers, specifically (pre-)adolescent and young adult women, penetrate her films. Indeed, the pastel charm of Priscilla's life in 1960s America conceals the reality of the power imbalances in the Presleys' relationship, nor does it, on the other hand, truly decry them. Coppola's distanced aesthetic is one of limbo, juxtaposing the gleam of privilege against a state of stasis and confinement. She catches viewers in carefully curated "conditional worlds" (Rodowick 2007, p. 106). In *Priscilla*, digital images entrance audiences by animating mechanized, idealized versions of who Presley was—versions further shaped by digital technologies such as e-commerce platforms and social media algorithms "that trace the traces" of aesthetic trends among young women (Ravetto-Biagioli 2019, p. 4).

Coppola balances *Priscilla* between a fictive, nostalgic space and the familiarities of a contemporary audience. Her choice to manipulate digital footage to make it appear like analog film undergirds the contradictory desires of commodity fetishism. This aesthetic practice joins "remote locales"—such as the current moment—"and memories of the past" derived from Presley's memoir (Benjamin 2002, p. 19). The digital, in this sense becomes phantasmagorical; it acts as an intermediary for stylistic prescriptions binding spectators "to the inorganic world" of distraction wherein the uncanny thrives (Benjamin 2002, p. 8). The imitative effect of digital passing as analog ultimately diminishes the viewing experience of *Priscilla* by distancing itself from analog and digital forms. The digital aesthetic collides nostalgia for the human-error, haptic qualities of analog with the hypermodern smoothness of today's digital recording. The ability to replicate the aesthetic of 1960s and '70s film recording condenses analog processes into a mere filter. The commodity fetishism conveys the look of nostalgia without any depth or historical realism.

Coppola projects familiarity with Presley through the repetition of her iconic style, lending her film an unstable affective quality. She herself recognizes the continuous presence of a melancholic aesthetic throughout her work, as well. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* journalist Brian Hiatt, she mused, "Yeah, sometimes I just feel like I'm doing

the same thing over and over again, but then I think about artists I admire, and they do the same" (Hiatt 2023). Among them, she mentions photographers Bill Owens, Larry Sultan, Helmut Newton, and most notably, William Eggleston (Gefter 2018). His manipulation of color has inspired Coppola since her debut as a filmmaker when emulating his style in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999):

> I thought about going back to *The Virgin Suicides* with this kind of faded, gauzy blending, these girls all blending together, which reminds me of a very feminine, pastel world. I'm trying to think about actual photographs. . . For *The Beguiled*, there's an Eggleston picture of two girls talking on a sofa, in color. . . we designed the shot from there (Gefter 2018).

Priscilla also incorporates the eerie pastel sheen typical of Eggleston's style, with photos from his Graceland series dotting Coppola's mood boards. The photos of his 1983 visit to the mansion defied numerous reports of the mansion's décor being "tacky, garish, tasteless" (Marcus 2023). He transformed Graceland's unnatural varnish, with ample care and lots of color, into a space of remembrance for Elvis's legacy. Like her predecessor and source of inspiration, Coppola meticulously depicts scenes from Presley's memoir. She, nonetheless, maintains a haunting superficiality: amphetamine-driven schoolgirl by day, a sequined accessory in Elvis's holster by night. "Priscilla" becomes a vacuous mass that fragments and refracts throughout the film.

A thread of exclusivity runs through the particular experience of girlhood in Coppola's movies. Laura Mulvey, noting similarities existing between Coppola's protagonists, attributes the effect to the capacity of digital cinema to "[bring] back to life, in perfect fossil form, anyone it has ever recorded" (Mulvey 2006, p. 18). Almost redundantly, Coppola resurrects girls across her cinematic universe to rehash the dangers of privileging surface over substance. The thematic and aesthetic repetition on behalf of Coppola signals a compression of temporalities, in accordance with André Bazin's concept of time becoming "embalmed" as reprised by D. N. Rodowick and Mulvey to further emphasize its destabilizing effects (Mulvey 2006, p. 56).[7] Rodowick posits that the digital greatly shifts viewers' relationship to time on screen, "Here, the sense of time as *la durée* gives way to simple duration or to the 'real time' of a continuous present" (Rodowick 2007, p. 171). A past action does not lay still in the archive of time. This includes imagined time, as well; past imaginations seem to lay dormant until they are uncannily resuscitated. Freud explains that such an instance can occur when reality and imagination become muddled.[8] *Priscilla* taps into algorithmically inspired and fossilized memories in which viewers see themselves replicated through a sense of *déjà vu* (Ravetto-Biagioli 2019, p. 7). The movie feels familiar because viewers have seen it before; while Priscilla is a reiteration of a Coppola heroine, she is less of a character and more of an archetype. Coppola renders her into a product being sold. In this sense, spectators invest in Priscilla to watch her reach her ultimate "Priscilla" form, to corroborate their initial interest in the film. The Coppola archetype is a means of accessing multiple temporalities within and beyond her cinematic universe.

What does it mean to recreate and, thus, promote a model of consumerism in which young women are prepped to be an appealing commodity? *Priscilla* is a distant product of an ideological apparatus particular to mid-century American culture.[9] Coppola's attention to that which rests on the surface materializes the rampant expansion of consumer culture and institutionalization of stardom during the 1960s, making Presley the perfect figurehead for this doubly parodic film. It should be noted, however, that Priscilla is not a "pastiche" or "blank parody" of Coppola's previous films. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson differentiates these terms from "parody" because the former two lack any sharp reflexive qualities: they do not presuppose knowledge or criticism of their underlying references, while parody does (Jameson 1991, p. 17). In *Priscilla*, Coppola

visibly echoes her previous works—she shoots a movie à la Coppola (abundance of pastels, conventionally attractive actresses, attention to adornment. . .). "Priscilla" can therefore be read as a parody of previous Coppola protagonists, but this iteration is reinforced by the context of consumer culture and unattainable stardom during the American 1960s. She assumes the trends that Elvis dictates for her: voluminous hair shellacked with hairspray, heavy makeup, and blue and figure-defining clothes. Elvis manipulates her public image through seduction and coercion to configure a picture-perfect partner. Later in the film, Priscilla gazes upon her caricatural reflection in a full-length mirror, her hands cradling her abdomen. Coppola emphasizes the parodic here through Lisa Marie's nascent and predetermined existence as propagated by Priscilla. "Priscilla" speaks to "the increasing unavailability of the personal style" typical of postmodernism, as described by Jameson (1991, p. 16). The film demonstrates the dangers of absorbing an ideological imposition so deeply that it must be repressed, thus penetrating one's unconscious. Coppola parodies her own work to address criticism that her aesthetic production platforms such ideals. She draws from similar aesthetic inspirations to recount comparable narratives; thus, Priscilla is a critical exercise in fitting a memoir into her regime of images. She promotes a two-dimensional effect to make a larger statement about herself as a commercially attractive filmmaker, rendering *Priscilla* a meta-critique *of* Coppola *by* Coppola.

3. Fashioning the Phantasmagoria: The Construction of Nostalgia

Priscilla falls in line with Coppola's larger project: female protagonists engaging in what affect theorist Lauren Berlant understands to be "cruel optimism," which she defines as "maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object," (Berlant 2011, p. 24). The film makes explicit the character's refusal to exist on her own terms insofar as Priscilla's denial becomes a method of self-erosion. The practice of sapping herself ultimately leads to an unhealthy tie bonding "Priscilla" as a two-dimensional image to the character's diminished autonomy, accomplished by her total embrace of a cruel optimism. She tirelessly demonstrates "a relationship of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (Berlant 2011, p. 24). The only way Presley's character can assimilate, for both Elvis and viewers of the film, is if she first loses herself. What Priscilla "desire[s] is actually an obstacle to [her] flourishing," and Coppola accordingly represents this by rendering her an iconic image (Berlant 2011, p. 1).

Priscilla begins from the moment when the protagonist presumably steps out of bed. A close-up follows her, one step at a time, as her feet—freshly manicured—sink into thick pink shag carpeting. This introductory vignette is not chronologically placed within the film's narrative. The inaugural scene takes place in Graceland, where viewers first meet the idea of "Priscilla," before returning to earlier moments of her life.[10]

Coppola opens the film by having viewers conjure images of "Priscilla" as she is remembered in media culture. An extreme close-up fragments the protagonist's body, this time focusing upon her eye. Viewers do not see Priscilla stumble out of bed barefaced; instead, the first frame of her face shows mascara and some eyeliner already applied. As her glassy blue eyes open for the first time on screen, viewers watch her trace a thick wing, extending her eyeliner into Presley's iconic cat-eye look. Each short sequence reveals only a disembodied sliver when she puts on her disguise: false lashes, lipstick, a healthy spritz of Aquanet hairspray, and glossy red nails. In fact, Priscilla never appears completely during these vignettes. Mere glimpses of her fade into flashes of Graceland's interior. These intimate moments of Priscilla getting ready are "meaningful not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the 'carnal thoughts' that ground and inform more conscious analysis" (Sobchack 2004, p. 60). As Priscilla assembles the public image, known as "Priscilla," the fragmented and haptic

montage makes the viewer imagine the makeup heavy on their face, the acrid scent of hairspray heavy in the air, their nails tacky with wet polish. Paradoxically, this seemingly intimate moment pushes viewers away from the film's namesake. The image presented is highly manipulated, giving the illusion of granting familiarity, yet ultimately yielding to a dulled persona.

When Priscilla moves into Graceland with Elvis, he, along with his entourage, takes her on a shopping spree. An uncomfortable Priscilla, shrinking under a floor-length teal and gold lamé gown, worries that the clothes she tries on are too sophisticated for her. At her beau's request, she timidly returns, wearing a strapless floor-length sheath, easter egg blue and garnished with a bow at the waist and rows of tasseled beaded trim at the neckline. A medium long shot frames Elvis, crying out that blue is indeed her color. Strutting out with newfound confidence, Priscilla dons a camel and gold lamé sleeveless sheath. Priscilla waits for him to grant his approval, but Elvis instead declares, "Prints take away from your looks." He stands firm when Priscilla shyly protests, insisting, "Solids suit you better." The contrast between full-body frames of Priscilla and medium shots of Elvis imply that the new clothing is less of a gift than a form of forced assimilation; she becomes a one-dimensional representation of Elvis's desires. She cannot even distinguish herself via the facsimile of depth afforded by patterned clothing. In the final look—a powder blue sleeveless cocktail dress, dotted with a velvet bow at the neckline and underbust—, a tense shot-reverse shot between Elvis and Priscilla establishes an unspoken agreement between the couple (and the spectators) that Priscilla will lean into her leveled phantasmagorical double. Benjamin recounts, "Fashion prescribes the ritual according to the which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped" (Benjamin 2002, p. 8). It matters not what pleases her as an individual, or even what looks best on screen. Her likeness becomes a homogenization of pixels in psychedelic colors. It may appear as a colorful nod to the trends of decades past, but digital color-grading and pixelation depersonalize the character into "a palimpsestic combination of data layers" (Rodowick 2007, p. 169). Priscilla is merely an advertisement for "Priscilla," only echoing the marketable aspects of Presley's stardom.

The "Priscilla" seen in the opening scene of the film is born. Showcasing fragmentation, the shots that follow parallel the opening vignette. The lush department store displaying its velvet furniture and Rococo art lining the walls suddenly cuts to a close-up of hair, saturated with black dye, being rinsed in a white porcelain sink. A manicured hand guides damp hair into rollers for a voluminous wet set. The same hand smooths a layer of hair over her meticulously teased crown. For seven seconds, hairspray douses the anonymous coiffure. As the can hisses, sticky beads form a protective shield over the bouffant. The new creation named "Priscilla" swivels into view wearing the powder blue dress, complete with thick winged eyeliner.

Tension progressively forms behind the character's glossy exterior. Priscilla returns to Graceland, toting an array of shopping bags lining each arm, visually recalling the earlier scene where Elvis conceives the image of "Priscilla." She sports an orange and violet knee-length dress, an empire waist silhouette with long sleeves. Instantly, Elvis' continued insults pummel Priscilla upon her enthusiastic entrance: "All you see is a goddamn dress... You gotta keep away from the prints baby!" The contentious dress marks a brief moment of rebellion against the simplified, lifeless persona Priscilla has assumed. She ultimately yields to Elvis, but not before slamming the door and screaming, "Okay, I'll return the fucking dress!" Viewers sense a visceral schism between these phantasmagorical versions of Priscilla, leaving the character in a space of liminality. The film acts as a threshold somewhere between advertisement and memoir, where the spectator's unconscious need to reanimate her timelessly—from one biopic to another— forever imprisoning her within popular culture.

In her disintegrating marriage, Priscilla peels away from Elvis and zipping along a picturesque California highway in a chic convertible. Her car, her hair, her sleek watch and accessories all point toward the driver's glamour. As soon as the camera pans across the scene, she is suddenly depicted gracefully diving into a swimming pool. Throughout this sequence, viewers only see an obscured profile. What we presume to be Priscilla is a faceless, nameless body assimilated into celebrity culture, representing prosperity in tandem with alienation. In fact, the actress depicted is not Cailee Spaeny embodying Priscilla. Coppola counts on the cognitive continuity of her viewers to believe that we are seeing the same actress and character, relying on a sleight of hand through montage. The footage in question, however, was repurposed from Coppola's 2018 Cartier Panthère watch commercial.[11] For the film, she reverses the order of the clips; the same woman dives into a pool and is no sooner launched into the driver's seat of a convertible. Her hand drapes over the steering wheel, a gold Cartier Panthère circling her wrist.

The similarity between Priscilla and the commercial's protagonist is no coincidence; both women are copies of previous Coppola figures, which in themselves are ultimately copies of false promises of prosperity perpetuated via affect. Coppola interjects her advertisement into the film.[12] The independence and joy that Priscilla seems to experience during this scene prove to be but further instances of "Priscilla" as a marketed object of desire. The replicated image makes it possible to blend seamlessly into advertisement, "outlining a field which evokes another field" (Oudart 1977, p. 43).

The suturing of the commercial signals an intentional embrace of artificiality on Coppola's behalf: it positions surface above all else. This privileging is reminiscent of theorizations of digitality, *Priscilla* notably being Coppola's second digital feature following *The Bling Ring* (2013)—a fictionalized retelling of the teenagers who burgled celebrity homes for internet clout. The digital modality offers Coppola a way to further parody *Priscilla*'s purported lack of dimensionality. I contend that viewer identification with a Coppola heroine reflects an uncanny recognition of a prior digital self, akin to Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli's analysis of the anxieties one might experience upon self-identifying with deceptive copies (Ravetto-Biagioli 2019, p. 144). Coppola admits, "digital can do the same thing as film, but to me it's like the difference between acrylic and oil" (Gefter 2018). Her comparison is fruitful in thinking about richness visually and tangibly; a painter can layer acrylic paint, but it lacks the dimension of oil paints in thickness and in color. On an unconscious level of perception, viewers intuit the affective difference between the two yet simultaneously acknowledge a mutual interchangeability. Seeing a digital film emulating analog aesthetics is much like "primal history enter[ing] the scene in ultramodern get-up" (Benjamin 2002, p. 116). Watching a movie is akin to entering a phantasmagorical state: the spectator knows that they can be transported through space and time. The use of the digital, however, removes layers of wonder and disbelief by producing something too perfect and too homogenous.

Additionally, Coppola can simulate the grain or color-grading of film in post-production, though the affective qualities of her digital material still register as unidimensional. Following Coppola's analogy, oil paints (like analog film) can be manipulated physically, thus contributing to viewer's perception of depth. Such filmic texture, in addition to diegetic elements, implicates phenomenologically embodied viewers. This "interjection of bodies into film spaces qualifies how the space feels," notes Lucy Donaldson in her monograph dedicated to filmic texture (Donaldson 2014, p. 208). On one level, the repurposed Cartier commercial footage acts as the interjection of a foreign body into *Priscilla*'s filmic space. Coppola's montage camouflages this move, joining scenes of her movie with the scenes of her commercial. Coppola's matte rendering of Priscilla allows her image to be transposed across forms, blurring the lines between commercial

and cinematic images, engulfing the viewer by its absorption—a process that works by diffusion instead of suspension. Recalling Jameson, the image projected by Coppola, mired in consumerism, slyly muddles the viewer's distinction between aestheticized subject and chimeric product. The insertion of a foreign body is absorbed into the larger monolith of the film and suppresses any urge to distinguish it as other. The digital medium renders out any imperfections, rising to the surface only to be forcibly removed by editing.

Digital cinema accounts for time in a much less dimensional and physical way than its analog counterpart. Returning to Rodowick helps in understanding the affective implications of this differentiated unfolding of time in analog and digital. He describes that we can sense differences between analog and digital: "[A]rtists. . . and spectators, too, make strong intuitive aesthetic judgements about the difference" (Rodowick 2007, p. 40). Digital film problematizes how viewers feel time because "nothing *moves*, nothing endures in a digitally composed world" (Rodowick 2007, p. 171) because the digital consists of an arrangement of pixels (not a sequence of pictures). This homogenous by-product fits the parodic tone of *Priscilla* even though Coppola claims to typically prefer film. *Priscilla* does little to render the life of Priscilla Presley plotted upon a serial timeline. What the film demonstrates is actually a leveled, atemporal replication of a glossy construct. "Priscilla" encapsulates the whole of Coppola's filmography from the perspective of negative critics. There is no lasting mark of Priscilla, which is demonstrated by Coppola's one-to-one substitution of her in a seamlessly incorporated commercial; viewers do not break Coppola's suture. The character, based upon Presley's memoir, morphs into an ambient image of wealth and stardom. The difference is that, while referencing other Coppola characters, the referentiality of original stardom diminishes. *Priscilla* is no longer the story of Priscilla but that of the contemporary animation of her archetype. This is the juncture at which the *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*. Something eerily familiar erupts from the past: unprotected and perceptible to all around.

Echoing Coppola's critics, *Priscilla* presents itself through the guise of a nostalgia film—one that reflects the moment of its release to viewers by remembering a particular codification of popular memory (Foucault 1974, p. 13). *Priscilla* appeals to spectators with the promise of replicating Presley's Graceland experience, and they, in turn, are absorbed by the sheen of surface-level opulence. One must ask what such a desire to be swept away might cost. In a recent article entitled "Sofia Coppola Is Forever That Girl," Steff Yotka boldly claims, "Before Sofia Coppola, movies were about men. If it wasn't men it was boys, and if it wasn't boys it was women directed by men in tragedy or hot pursuit. Few movies were made about girls" (Yotka 2025). The article immediately divided users across social media. For in many ways, *Priscilla* is still a film about men. Losing oneself to fit in or appease others is a constant theme in *Priscilla*, and Coppola traps viewers in Priscilla's material world as she fashions herself for Elvis. Neither Coppola nor Presley are truly "That Girl"; like "Priscilla," *Priscilla* uncannily reflects a collective acceptance of the manufactured trends surrounding girlhood. Any warm feelings of nostalgia come at the cost of Coppola's heroines. Digitality is only a novel manner of stripping their interiority and agency.

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Notes

1 In what follows, I will use three different spellings ((Priscilla) Presley, Priscilla, and "Priscilla") to refer to three different realities when it comes to Elvis Presley's wife. Presley will signify the real person, Priscilla Beaulieu Presley, who married Elvis and co-produced Coppola's film. Priscilla, sans last name, will refer to the character in the film. However, "Priscilla" is a flat version of the protagonist whereby she is reduced to a persona.

2 The unconscious qualities being "instinctual impulses, emotions and feelings" (Freud 1963, p. 127).

3 See Rosalind Galt's *Pretty* for the longstanding debate on Coppola's superfluous style.

4 Primarily on sites such as Tumblr, Instagram, and YouTube. This recalls Benjamin's thoughts on commodity fetishism in the collective unconscious: "This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent" (Benjamin 2002, p. 11).

5 *The Virgin Suicides*, directed by Sofia Coppola (1999; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Vantage).

6 *Lost in Translation*, directed by Sofia Coppola (2003; Universal City, CA: Focus Features).

7 It should be noted that Bazin describes analog cinema. Rodowick and Mulvey reprise his theorization to explain the temporal phenomena unique to digital cinema.

8 "[A]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the foil functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on" (Freud 1955, p. 244).

9 "[A]n ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material…"; "ideology = an imaginary relation to real relations" (Althusser et al. 2001, pp. 112–13).

10 Vivian Sobchack indicates that those watching a film can share "a material equivalence" between their own world and that which is presented on screen (Sobchack 1992, p. 133).

11 I have confirmed this through a frame-by-frame analysis of the commercial alongside the film. Social media users and fan accounts (like @CoppolaUpdates) have noted the similarity of the advertisement, available on YouTube, to this sequence in *Priscilla*.

12 See Oudart's suture theory.

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