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She says "Hello" in the playful tone of someone who has slept well and awakened in a good mood; or of someone who prefers not to show what she is thinking about — if anything — and always flashes the same smile, on principle; the same smile, which can be interpreted as derision just as well as affection, or the total absence of any feeling whatever.

Jealousy, Alain Robbe-Grillet

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Hello.

Where to begin?

(On the cheek? Or, if you're more continentally inclined: each cheek? In the air each side of the face? On the lips? Or perhaps a handshake instead? Or no handshake: hands firmly rooted by one's sides, maybe just a stiff smile?)

By stepping into each other's personal space, we learn something at a chemical level. If we kissed on the lips we would know even more. But not necessarily articulately so. So they say.[1] But do we want to know more this way? Not of the vast majority of people, I'd wager. And, well, as we know, one thing leads to another. Which is perhaps why we do or we don't, but we dress it up in all manner of societal codes and rules of behaviour.

Culturally (particularly Western, first world etc.), there could be said to be an obsession with kissing; or rather, the idea of the kiss. Despite the inherent strangeness in the act of two people putting their mouths on each other's and the even stranger act of seeing happen right in front of you. Maybe it is something to do with viewing the performance of a private act in public and what that appears to signify.

[1] Kirshenbaum explains the deeper biological significance of the kiss:'Because a kiss brings two individuals together in an exchange of sensory information by way of taste, smell, touch, and possibly even silent chemical messengers called pheromones (odorless airborne signals), it has the potential to provide all kinds of insight into another person. So even when our conscious minds may not recognize it, the act can reveal clues about a partner's level of commitment and possibly his or her genetic suitability for producing children.' Kirshenbaum (2011), p.11.

Popular music and mainstream cinema still channel the grand narrative of love, and with that comes kissing (although the two are not necessarily inextricably linked it is a rare situation to be intimate without it). Kissing in films is commonly portrayed as a romantic gesture. It often signifies a climactic moment, or a tipping point in a film: a point of change.

Psychoanalysis is not an avenue that will be widely explored here (even though, to an extent, it does support just how bizarre the act of kissing is) but it is interesting to consider Freud's opinion of kissing in theatrical performances as a suggestion towards sex: a 'softened hint at the sexual act',[2] which allows the kiss to be thought of as a symbol, particularly with reference to popular culture.

Even before, but especially since Thomas Edison recorded the first kiss on film in 1896, kissing has been a source of curiosity and censure in the popular imagination.[3] Despite his film being described in a sensationalist way, 'They get ready to kiss, begin to kiss, and kiss and kiss and kiss in a way that brings the house down every time',[4] by today's tastes that kiss appears light-hearted at best. The actors are seen to perform the motions of a kiss, but it seems somewhat of a caricature: a performative kiss for an audience, rather than a private act in public.[5] Yet, as Danesi points out, it was enough to excite Victorian-era audiences who perceived it as shocking and subversive, made at a time when attitudes forbade such public displays of affection.[6] The audience of the time couldn't get enough of it though, and it became the most popular of Edison's Vitascope films in 1896, a sign of things to come with regard to the explosion of private acts on screen.

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[2] Phillips (1993), p.104.
[3] Known by various names, the Library of Congress refers to Edison's film as *May Irwin kiss*, after the actress who appears in the film. The film can be watched online: http://www.loc.gov/item/00694131/ [Accessed 15 May 2014].
[4] Quote from *The History of the Kiss: The Birth of Popular Culture* (Danesi, 2013, p.118).
[5] I will come back to the idea of performance later in the 'Exhausted' section.
[6] Danesi (2013), p.118.

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Watch this space

When the act of kissing is mediated, for example by putting a screen in front of it, it becomes something else. For one thing it transforms into an activity that more people can be involved with, and the barrier makes it decidedly easier to watch. The Edison film is a case-in point. Screens create distance and blur our relationship with the private in public, making voyeurs out of viewers, and none more so than through cinema. As Denzin states,

> In displacing the naked eye with its own scientific lens, the camera (and the cinematic apparatus) created a spectorial gaze that made the spectator… an invisible presence in what was seen.[7]

This notion of an 'invisible presence' permits the gaze to linger in places that it wouldn't usually be able to without raising questions of appropriateness. We live in an age where screens surround us, making voyeurs of us all, to differing degrees and effects. As Philips points out, 'we can now see anything, virtually, if we take the time to find it.'[8]

Andy Warhol's 54 minute silent film *Kiss* (1963) picks up where Edison left off, but without the sweet anticipation of the moment before the kiss. Twelve couples are filmed close-up kissing in a variety of ways, usually for several minutes at a time; each kiss is already in full flow when the viewer sees it.[9] The camera moves like as a restless viewer, sometimes mirroring the movement of the kissers. Without a narrative structure, the audience is denied anticipation or context; the tipping point has already passed. Instead the focus falls on movement and gestures, where faces become moving objects, and the familiar becomes strange as the actions seem

[7] Denzin (1995), p.26.

[8] Phillips (2010) p.59.

[9] *Kiss* (1963), by Andy Warhol, 54 minutes duration, can be viewed online here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmzqNUaCGQU [Accessed 15 May 2014]

mechanical. It is only when the repetitious motion is interrupted by the intrusion of an occasional hand touching a face that the sensuality of the moment carries through and prevents it from seeming like a bizarre anthropological study, from which the viewer/voyeur is at a remove from the action.

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To touch gently or lightly

Lost in Translation (2003) uses the significance of the kiss as cinematic device to hint at the unspoken. MacGowan states that the film 'locates enjoyment in absence rather than in plenitude'[10] as the two main characters share in the void they are experiencing, rather than excess, despite being surrounded by it in the full glare of Tokyo's consumer landscape. Their relationship, while framed within the romantic setup of the film (two dissatisfied strangers meet and connect etc.), is expressed through an absence, of which the kiss is part.

Towards the end of the film, in rare facial contact, an awkward good night kiss half-on-cheek-half-on-lips in the liminal space of an elevator becomes the first of several anticlimactic farewells. It is only in the final scene that a 'successful' kiss occurs in the middle of a busy street; a frank gesture towards their connection and the intimacy they have developed. MacGowan describes the ending in the context of the anti-climactic, 'with an image of absence and failure'[11] because Bob's whisper into Charlotte's ear is inaudible to the film audience. However, the scene is significant because of the symbolism of the kiss, as a necessary (within the context of the film), unspoken connection between two people. Edgar Morin says the kiss in cinema, 'symbolises a communication or symbiosis of souls',[12] which in this context, gives the characters and the audience a recognisable symbol of closure on the relationship that has unfolded, which ends there within the confines of the film.

[10] MacGowan (2007), p.54.

[11] Ibid, p.62.

[12] Edgar Morin quoted in *Stars* by Richard Dyer (1998), p.45.

Now you see me, now you don't

Another film that deals with an intense relationship over a short period of time, yet more overtly played out in a romantic context, is *Brief Encounter.* Unlike in *Lost in Translation*, the opportunity for one last final kiss at the end of *Brief Encounter* (1945 & 1974) is lost, to the obvious frustration of the two main characters involved. In their final scene together they are drawn out of the world they have created, and are made visible as Dolly Messiter, an overbearing, gossipy acquaintance of Laura's, breaks their veil of invisibility meaning the kiss as closure is denied them as they part.

The differences between the 1974 TV movie *Brief Encounter* starring Richard Burton and Sophia Loren, and the original 1945 film by David Lean are acute. Without getting into discussion about the merits of remakes, there are stark differences between the two films that appear as signs of the time but fundamentally affect the mood of each film, particularly with reference to the visibility of the main characters. In Lean's 1945 version Celia Johnson's Laura Jesson and Trevor Howard's Dr Alec Harvey manage, in the main, to maintain anonymity amidst the daily throng. They are not seen in the sense of being identified or singled out by strangers passing by or the minor characters at the station. Their anonymity gives them a false sense of freedom in which they cultivate their relationship without articulating in words how they are feeling. This un-articulation allows their delusion to linger for longer, making the threat of exposure by someone who does know them more intense and palpable as time passes. It is only once they verbalise their feelings that they are unable to ignore the wider impact of their situation, and so the descent towards their parting begins ('We're not free to love each other, there's too much in the way').

To be seen is to be rendered unable to act. It finally pulls Laura out of her fantasy world, usually reserved for her weekly romantic novel or afternoon matinee, but which over the course of the film she has wrapped herself up in, blurring the boundaries between her inner and outer fantasy life. Even her daydreams about herself and Alec involve imagining a younger impossible version of themselves, rather than who they are now. The audience have privileged access: the camera's lens is Laura's mind's eye with accompanying voiceover, as she imagines telling her husband about her affair while painfully understanding the impossibility of that. Her story remains inside her head, invisible and hidden.

In the 1974 TV movie, the background crowds are multitudinous and much more present, frequently intruding into the foreground of the picture – the space inhabited by the main couple. There is a palpable sense that strangers in the background notice the couple and 'know what they are up to', so to speak. There are so many other people inadvertently intruding and encroaching that Burton and Loren's characters' attempts to blend in with, or out of, the crowd are continually confounded. Whether they are sharing a table with an elderly lady in the refreshment room of a train station or having their conversation interrupted by a child while sitting on a park bench, there is a near constant invasion of their time and space together. Strangers in the background are in close proximity and can see and hear what they are doing. The film is set in the present day 1970s, long after the end of prohibitive UK film censorship laws, and with it, there seems to be a sense of expectation in the film, or even a 'pressure to perform'.[13]

Cinematically, the idea of an extra-marital affair in 1974 was more recognisable and less shocking than in 1945, and as a result the later film doesn't hold the same tension because of the visibility of their actions, and also what is at stake. The terms with which Burton's Dr Alec Harvey describes a possible exit from the situation

[13] Verwoert (2010), p.13.

– a job offer on the other side of the world, but with the request that Laura go with him through a marriage proposal – verbalises his thoughts and denies some of the subtleties of Noel Coward's original screenplay. In the 1945 version there was never an option for them to exist outside Milford Junction, and therefore any kind of proposal is barely hinted at and very much remains unarticulated and hidden on the periphery of their being together.

Noel Coward adapted the 1945 film from his 1936 one act play, *Still Life* in which the issue of physical infidelity is left more ambiguous and open to interpretation. The time span between scenes in *Still Life* (through stage direction) cover a much longer period, and one could read into this gap the possibility of repeated visits to the borrowed flat in the intervening time, a reading that is not possible in the 1945 or 1974 film versions, because of the privileged position of the camera as all-seeing eye.

Being caught in the act, or found out, or exposed and misunderstood is almost too much reality for Laura, and signals the beginning of the end of their relationship. They maintain the illusion of freedom when they don't speak of their situation. Laura knows that there is no future for them but struggles to finish the relationship, finding it easier to harbour thoughts of her own death, 'I want to die' than face the reality of parting.

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Hiding in plain sight

In 1962 Marcello Geppetti photographed a couple sunbathing on a boat in the Bay of Naples.

Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton weren't just sunbathing.

Fellini coined the term 'paparazzo', meaning 'buzzing insect' while making *La Dolce Vita* (1960) in Rome. The kiss that was captured on camera spawned a whole new world for the paparazzo and how audiences saw the lives of celebrities.[14] This reached a deadly climax but has not necessarily abated since the death of Princess Diana and Dodi Al Fayad in a car crash while being pursued by paparazzi in Paris in 1997.

Photographs of the rich and famous were nothing new at this point in the 1960s, rather these particular images signalled a heightened level of intrusion into the realm of what had previously remained private in the lives of celebrities. This metamorphosis seemed to come full circle when Geppetti's photograph was reproduced in *The Richard Burton Diaries* (2012). Burton did not keep his diary at the beginning of his relationship with Elizabeth Taylor, so the photograph acts as a record of authenticity for their relationship in a way that no other means seems able to provide.

[14] Geppetti's long-lens photographs of Taylor and Burton sunbathing and kissing pinpoints a change: where paparazzi photography heralded a different relationship and understanding between mass media, mass celebrity and the viewing public, where, as Squires points out, it "began its long metastasis into today's ruthless, global business" (Squires, in *Exposed,* (2010), p.227).

Taylor and Burton were exposed; the photograph captures a tipping point – the revelation of an intimate, private moment - which presented confirmation to a global public about the private lives of two people, even though the couple had been 'hiding in plain sight' for a long time.[15]

The photographer's lens, and more so the paparazzi's telescopic lens, attempts to expose with a penetrative gaze the barrier between public and private. The now familiar conceit of the grainy, long lens composition signifying paparazzi photography also signifies intrusion into a private moment. Richard Dyer talks about publicity circumnavigating official systems, such as Hollywood in particular, in order to tell a 'truth' that is supposedly less constructed.[16] Whether it is still regarded as 'truth', as Geppetti's images were of Taylor and Burton, is less likely now as people are more familiar with the idea that the camera lies and sensationalism in the media rules.

Cultural obsession with celebrity continues. Barely a week passes even now in the media without mention of Elizabeth Taylor, or Taylor and Richard Burton. Immortalised in Andy Warhol's screen prints, Elizabeth Taylor represents the quintessential Hollywood star. She became so much an archetype of the Hollywood actress that she appears as a character on the periphery, but very much the focus of obsession, stalked and photographed, in *Crash* (1973) by JG Ballard.[17]

She is the ultimate star; more than an actress, Elizabeth Taylor is an icon. Famous since childhood, glamorous, sometimes vulgar but

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[15] Kashner (2011), p.34.

[16] 'The importance of publicity is that, in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more 'authentic'. It is thus often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star.' (Dyer, 1999, p.61)

[17] *Crash* explores the extreme end of the spectrum of the invisible photographer as stalker, voyeur: 'The walls of his apartment near the film studios at Shepperton were covered with the photographs he had taken through his zoom lens each morning as she left her hotel in London.' (Ballard, 2011, p.1)

always out of reach; her aura of jewels and security personnel accompanied the rest of her entourage and created a physical distance that echoed the actual distance of whether we really know someone in the public eye. She was highly visible but ultimately hidden and unknowable, despite millions talking about and discussing her life and choices as though they did and still do (mea culpa). Even when speaking of Burton many years after his death Taylor refused to share certain details, halting the intrusion with 'Those are *my* memories'.[18]

[18] Kashner (2011), p.99.

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Give up

Where Elizabeth Taylor refused to give all of herself away, Felix Gonzalez-Torres made a point of it. Whether it was a pile of sweets corresponding to the ideal body weight of his deceased lover consumed by visitors and disseminated beyond the confines of the gallery, or a monochrome billboard poster of a slept-in double bed, Gonzalez-Torres exposed the private tenderness of his love and loss in public through achingly slight means.

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Here I am

Forced visibility and incumbent vulnerability, while not necessarily the prime focus of her practice, is a recurring trope in Ruth Proctor's work.[19] Despite, or even because of, being quite shy (at her own admission), Proctor's works often incorporate performance and spectacle and explore deliberate acts of exposure. Whether it is requesting to have her passport stamped by reluctant immigration officials whenever she enters or leaves a country,[20] or undertaking a performance that involved walking down Brick Lane holding aloft a blue flare,[21] Proctor's practice continually exposes her to public attention and scrutiny.

While on a residency in Colombia, Proctor dressed up in a black wig in an attempt to blend in with the crowd; the fact that she was so obviously wearing a cheap wig and also a brightly coloured sun umbrella as a cape (in an allusion to a quasi-super-hero figure) only served to make her stand out more.[22] It's not surprising that the artist also uses masks as a recurring motif in her work, and is interested in failure; which she makes quite a success of.[23]

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[19] Most of this information about Ruth Proctor came from a talk she gave in March 2014, as part of the Level 3 UWE Art & Visual Culture lectures.
[20] An example of Ruth Proctor's work with passport stamps: *I am here but I am also there (Passport stamps) #3 in continuous series* can be viewed here: https://www.facebook.com/RuthProctor/photos/pcb.550590988370831/550446801718583/?type=1&relevant_count=3&ref=nf [Accessed 15 May 2014].
[21] *If the Sky Falls* (2012), performance by Ruth Proctor during the London Open 2012 at Whitechapel. http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/shop/product/category_id/197/product_id/1236?session_id=14002329559bb8d5d0154f13c2db9f27a14b03d973 [Accessed: 15/05/14].
[22] *Super Ruda*, 2010, by Ruth Proctor. http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/ruth-proctor-luck-and-protection [Accessed 15 May 2014]
[23] I mean that in the nicest possible way. Proctor's ice skating film, *Falling or Jumping*, 2011, recorded on black and white 16mm film shows the artist attempting to repeatedly achieve a complex ice-skating manoeuvre within view of the camera. Understandably, having not practised since her youth, the artist is a little rusty and often not only misses being caught in full view of the camera but also regularly falls on the ice. Video available here: http://hollybushgardens.co.uk/?page_id=1259 [Accessed 15 May 2014].

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Exhausted

In *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really* Want (2010) Jan Verwoert describes how people no longer do work.[24] Instead, as part of a capitalist system with its conveyor belt of constant productivity and demand, people perform their roles. Doing is not enough. He specifically applies this condition of the 'pressure to perform' in relation to artists performing the 'I Can': the expectation to be constantly at work and to be visibly producing.

Verwoert proposes a different concept of how to perform as an artist. In a culture of high performance, he offers an alternative to transgressing or crossing boundaries. By using an obtuse 'I Can't' he suggests the artist can perform directly on the margins, so they are neither one thing nor the other. Despite suggesting a model of action to counter the constant pressure to perform, his interest in boundaries doesn't appear to cease the conveyor belt of production, instead just re-positions the artist who resists through a 'performance of the 'I Can't' performed in the key of the 'I Can',[25] which is still part of the system of high performance, leading to exhaustion.

To perform on the margins seems somewhat precipitous. Instead, is it not better to try to blur the boundary itself, create an ambiguous space, so one is never quite sure if a line has been crossed? Does it create a bit more room for manoeuvre, space and leverage; or just a no-man's land, of un-occupied territory? Either way, it is still a space to stretch ones arms out and be neither here nor there.

[24] Essay entitled: 'Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform' in Verwoert (2010), p.13-72.

[25] Ibid, p.28.

For Verwoert, beyond exhaustion lies the ‘I Care’. It is the impossibility of saying ‘I Can’t’, and so is the ultimate ‘I Can’. In the American TV medical drama *House MD* (2004-2012), the lead character, Dr Gregory House, is a drug addicted, social misfit who deliberately refuses to play by normal societal and hospital rules. He lies (‘Everybody lies’), cheats and steals and is generally rude but most of his transgressions are forgiven because of his ability to solve medical mysteries that no one else can and thus save lives that would otherwise be lost. Why perform within the normal rules when you are ultimately doing the right thing anyway, just slightly differently.

House performs the ‘I Can’ but always in the key of ‘I Can’t’, and generally with the attitude of ‘I don’t care’. He remains emotionally detached from his patients, not meeting them so that his focus remains on their medical condition as ‘puzzle’ and not because he cares but because it is the right thing to do. When he is dealing with someone that he has a relationship with (be it his own staff, partners or someone he is attracted to) his judgement is impaired and he is unable to perform to his full ability.

In the final series, House’s best friend, Dr Wilson is diagnosed with terminal cancer. House foolishly jeopardises his parole and faces the prospect of being sent back to jail for six months. Wilson has been given only five months to live. In the end House commits the ultimate act of ‘I Can’t’ as ‘I Can’ in the key of ‘I Care’ by killing himself (in name only). Thus he escapes his past and present and reveals his re-birth to Wilson, so they can ride off into the sunset and spend Wilson’s last five months together. House stops performing the act of friendship and just does it. There is no try. In order to escape the pressure to perform he has to disappear in order to be present (visible) for his friend.

The final scene opens on House’s serene looking face. The camera pulls back to reveal that he is urinating off a bridge in the

country before mounting his bike, next to the patiently waiting Wilson, and they ride off into the distance together. It is possible to see this expression of bodily fluids as taking the platonic place of what would otherwise be the romantic kiss. There is no doubt that these two characters love each other. It is the only relationship of House's that has survived, with many wounds, through the entire eight series, and it is done through actions not words.

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This

> "When people kiss they've stopped talking. If her kisses were words, what would they be saying to you?"[26]

If this question were answered, it would take all the fun out of it. It presumes that all actions can be translated into words, but perhaps there is too much expectation of language, which quite regularly fails. One word can mean many others and it is often in the gaps and pauses around words that meaning comes. Kisses aren't substitutes for words. There are no words.

As Elvis sung,

> A little less conversation, a little more action...

(On the cheek? Or, if you're more continentally inclined: each cheek? In the air each side of the face? On the lips? Or perhaps a handshake instead? Or no handshake: hands firmly rooted by one's sides, maybe just a stiff smile? Or a hug?)

[26] Phillips (1993), p.99.

Words like kisses can be extended. They could spread beyond the confines of these sheets but not now, not yet.