

Composite Memory, Reparative Pleasure and the Shedding of a Filmic Skin: Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir*

By Davina Quinlivan

The Souvenir, Hogg's autobiographical fourth feature film, opens with stark, grainy black and white photographic stills of Northern England, Sunderland, during its industrial height.¹ The bleak immensity of industry and labour is evoked through monochromatic images of steel, light and air. We move from post-war buildings and their neat rooftops to shipbuilding machinery, angular concrete spaces and smoky skies (fig. 1). Such images encourage viewers to attend to the pictorial rendering of objects and their material qualities, as objects in the frame, as well as the formal matter of the photographs themselves. Furthermore, the very slow and precise unspooling of such images open up viewers to states of recall and an ambiguous nostalgia which is here examined and re-imagined. Above all, the objecthood of these images is acutely prescient of the centrality of materiality in Hogg's film. Our attentiveness to this process is key. Indeed, this epigraph haunts us long after we have entered into the subsequent, diegetic space of Julie's apartment, transmitting a very tangible and vivid sense of the past which, as we shall see, will only come into sharp focus through our close attention to its abstraction.



Fig. 1 Sunderland and the objecthood of photographs from Hogg's private collection.

¹ According to the press release, these were actual photographs taken by Hogg while studying at film school.

Ostensibly, *The Souvenir* is about Julie (played by Honor Swinton-Byrne), a young film school student whose flourishing career as an artist and filmmaker runs parallel with her gradual, corrosive entanglement with an older man, Anthony (Tom Burke), who is later shown to be a thief, a heroin addict, a liar, suddenly reported to be dead from a heroin overdose at the film's close. It is important to note that the film's title and the name of Hogg's heroine refers to Jean-Honoré Fragonard's 18th century Rococo painting of the same title (1775) in which a young woman is seen carving her lover's name into a tree; the couple also visit this painting in The Wallace Collection in one particular sequence.² While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider the specificity of the thematic correlations between the film and the painting, I acknowledge, here, its role as part of a wider set of materialities and intertextual layers which foreground the reparative pleasure of *The Souvenir*. This article will privilege Hogg's employment of the filmic medium as a means through which to construct a 'composite' evocation of memory.³

Criticism of *The Souvenir* has focused on the largely autobiographical nature of its narrative but, while the theme of memory is frequently addressed, the *matter* of memory is often elided. In her book *A Tour of Memories*, Alex Heeney writes of the role of memory and Hogg's attention to detail through costume and props (Heeney: 2019),⁴ but I want to draw closer attention to the layering of time and matter that these objects come to represent, as well as the formal framework Hogg adopts, namely the particular use of differing materialities in the film's form. Heeney makes apparent the personal possessions and objects drawn on by Hogg (including private letters) in order to somersault through past and present, a moving continuum between those states of consciousness.⁵ For the film critic Peter Bradshaw, on the other hand, this 'continuum' of memory suggests itself as a kind of dance, or circling of movement which crucially avoids painful memories:

(the film) sometimes feels as if it is circling around and around a memory that is too painful to be approached directly, of an episode which arguably endangered her development as an artist and in another way stimulated it. But there is something so coolly elegant in this circling – a choreography of young love, and a talent preparing to take flight (Bradshaw: 2019).

² Hogg usefully explains the influence of Fragonard here: < <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/joanna-hogg-souvenir-six-visual-influences> > [last accessed 2 July 2020)

³ I have discussed in more detail Fragonard's painting at Hogg's representation of gender at a talk presented in situ at The Wallace Collection, 1st February 2020.

⁴ I am very grateful to Heeney for sending me a copy of this publication while I researched this article and the final chapter of my forthcoming monograph *Joanna Hogg: Female Expression and the New Art Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press), part of a series on female directors entitled *Visionaries*, edited by Lucy Bolton and Richard Rushton.

⁵ I have written elsewhere on the various objects in Hogg's cinema in *Arty* magazine (2020). This issue also include some of my own illustrations of these objects.

While I agree about the film performing a kind of dance around memories too traumatic to fully revisit or re-negotiate. I think *The Souvenir* does indirectly do this in a way which implicates the very processes of the filmic apparatus, as well as its diegetic evocation of matter, surfaces, props, interiors and other elements of the *mise en scene*. This article will examine the psychological states of Hogg's film and its envisioning of memory and vulnerability, drawing on embodied film theory, the post-structuralist thought of Henri Bergson and the psychoanalytic thought of Melanie Klein. Here, we shall also see how the film cuts across the axis of patriarchal conceptions of vision and aligns itself with a feminist perspective.

Julie's (Honor Swinton-Byrne) photographic stills at the film's outset are important because they open up viewers to the theme of appropriation and materiality, of their objecthood and their function as 'souvenirs' – gleaned, re-appropriated and always already beloved. As a film school student, Julie is challenged for her 'appropriation' of a world which is not hers in her endeavor to make a film set in working-class Sunderland when she is from a Southern, upper class farming family. In this sense, Julie's intense connection to her subject matter corresponds with our role as spectators of *The Souvenir*; the intimate connection that is woven, through textures and filmic form, can be understood as a way of 'synthetically' identifying with Julie on a psycho-somatic level: something we can only ever access through a kind of imaginative colonization. Further, Hogg's film might also be better understood as a critique of the relationship between vision and knowledge, active as well as passive spectatorship. We are encouraged, then, through the matter of Hogg's film, to engage more actively and self-critically with the image; this is the embodied film experience that is signaled through the very confluence of voice, breath, matter, light and texture.

Hogg's film is anchored in a zone of 'recollection' which we must, conversely, appropriate as our own through *the skin of the film*, to invoke the title of Laura U Marks' seminal book (Marks: 1998). Of course, while Hogg's narrative innovatively looks back on her time as a fledgling filmmaker, all of this is tied to her affair with a much older man, Anthony, and his sudden death. In interview with *The New Yorker*, Hogg describes *The Souvenir* and its borrowing of the title from Fragonard's painting of the same name as a gift to her 'Anthony': 'I see the film that I have made – the film itself has become the souvenir to him, it is almost like I am giving something back to him' (Mead, 2019). In this sense, the film is an active mediation of the past as composite memory and every aesthetic choice serves this perception, steps towards this act of reciprocity, which Hogg speaks of, which is by its very nature an act of hope, of survival beyond trauma.

For Henri Bergson "a memory only becomes 'actual' by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips". *The Souvenir's* opening images are important because they work as the 'body' of perception which Bergson writes about. For example, Bergson is concerned with how we use objects or vessels in order to contain our memories; objects not only prompt memories, but they make them tangible, physical manifestations available to us in the present. I want to think more about the implications of Bergson's 'borrowing bodies' and the strange materiality of the image which plays out alongside the film's preoccupations with class and appropriation, as well as the idea of composite memory. While Bergson's thought offers up an understanding of *The Souvenir* as a 'vessel' of memory, the psychoanalytic thought of Klein is revelatory

through her identification of external objects, matter, as potentially recuperative, transformative. This is particularly developed in her seminal text *Love, Guilt and Reparation* (Klein: 1975). Here, Klein remarks on the creative activities of the child and the externalization of emotion which may be understood as a reparative process: ‘it is the wish and the capacity for the good object, internal and external (...) to maintain love and relationships through conflicts and difficulties’ (Hanna Segal: 2008). With this in mind, I argue, Hogg’s film is not only a particular containment of matter, of memory, in a Bergsonian sense, but also a recuperative act of transformation and *recuperative pleasure*, in the Kleinian sense.

Shedding Skin: Marksian/Kleinian Reparation

Marks is well known for her ground-breaking, materialist analysis of embodied film experience. Marks’ thought directly serves as a move away from an ocularcentric, male privileging of vision over the body, and is thus invariably aligned with a feminist strategy. Thinking through the bodily implications of film inherits from a lineage of feminist criticism which aims to unsettle the largely psychoanalytic prioritizing of vision over the other senses and the gendered relationship between vision and knowledge as one that is specifically male. Thus, an exploration of the material attributes of the image, as well as the evocation of the bodily experience of film, can be seen to articulate a feminist perspective; the formal and contextual content of *The Souvenir* offers up fertile ground in which to test such strategies further. Most strikingly, Hogg’s film and her formal use of grainy photographic stills as objects in the *mise en scene*, her shifting between 16mm and 35mm film stock, as well as her filming of Julie’s body, tend towards a feminist form of active spectatorship, one that is especially concerned with the matter of memory, female embodiment and imagination.

Elsewhere, I have written about the fruitful connections between the thought of Klein and Marks (Quinlivan: 2015). In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Marks originates her concept of *haptic visuality* as a means through which to find a way of more appropriately describing diasporic filmmaking and its evocative use of ‘sense memories’. Haptic visuality is predicated on a tactile relationship with the image, one that is the proximal, unsettling between figure and ground. While Marks works from within a post-structuralist and, invariably, Deleuzian framework, she does contemplate the ways in which her theoretical model may resemble a mother-child relationship from a psychoanalytic perspective. For Marks, haptic film experience can be described in terms of wholeness of, and indeed separation from, the image:

The haptic is a form of visuality that muddles inter-subjective boundaries (...). If we were to describe it in psychoanalytic terms, we might argue that haptics draw on an erotic relation that is organized less by sexual difference than by the relationship between mother and infant. In this relationship the subject (the infant) comes into being through the dynamic play between the appearance of wholeness with the other (the mother) and the awareness of being distinct (Marks, 2002: p. 234).

These particular conditions of materiality and embodied film viewing can be usefully reconfigured through the thought of Klein. For Klein, it is the mother’s body which is the site of proximity and the child, the subject whose wholeness and separation

from the mother generates a whole set of interactions extending to the wider world of external objects which enable cathartic processes of play. The mother's breast symbolizes the most important object ever to encountered, at once a source of plenitude and frustration which, in turn, becomes an object of love and hate. In her analysis of Klein's model, Segal claims: 'it is the wish and the capacity for the good object, internal and external, that is the basis for the ego's capacity to maintain love and relationships through conflicts and difficulties. It is also the basis for creative activities, which are rooted in the infant's wish to restore and recreate his lost happiness, his lost internal objects and the harmony of his internal world. The child's relationship with objects, then, constitutes their externalized anxieties about the mother's body and they are preserved or destroyed as an externalisation of such fears'. The 'objects' within *The Souvenir* as multiple, varied and deliberately posited within the diegetic structure of the film and its formal representation; these are brought into play as points of negotiation and reckoning with the sense memories they hold deeply within, excavated through the film experience.

Reparative Objects

In dialogue with Bergson, Marks and Klein, Hogg's photographic stills of Sunderland may be seen to function as reparative objects in the *mise en scene* and the 'vessels' for Julie/Hogg's memory. The film image is emphasized as photographic object and in the context of the film's evocation of memory and trauma, they hold residual traces of this psychic state, for Hogg, as extra-diegetic elements of her film. Their role here, especially in Klein's terms, calls to mind a deliberate playing out of events, literally and symbolically, playing with their object-status as a means through which to negotiate traumatic memories, not as a 'choreography' of it, as Bradshaw suggests, but as therapeutic practice. Hogg has described her filmmaking processes and its coming to an end at the closure of each production as a 'shedding' of a skin, a term she uses almost explicitly as a way of uncovering the therapeutic and bodily implications of her work.⁶

In order to understand the Kleinian dimensions of Hogg's work further, it is important to return to the opening of the film and its use of sound, before going on to consider the back projections within Julie's Knightsbridge flat, which the film's production designer Stéphane Collonge, painstakingly reconstructed using photographs taken by Hogg as a student using a Super 8 camera and Hogg's other 'composite' choices.

⁶ Agnieszka Pietrowska writes of a similar kind of materiality and the psychological effects of spectatorship in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, a film which moves between the boundaries of fact and fiction in order to explore subjective truth, especially since it is evoked through the film experience where editing and the use of sound connote shifts in the perception of memory. See Pietrowska, 'The Nasty Woman as a Deceiver and a Creator in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*', *The Nasty Woman and the Neo-Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 65-84.



Fig. 2 Differing materialities: Hogg's use of grainy film stock.

Beginning with the shots of Sunderland, the film opens with a high-pitched, unsettling noise which can only be described as the abrupt reverberation from a microphone. We hear a male voice welcoming 'Julie' to Sunderland and it becomes clear that she is involved in a radio interview. The first shot of cranes and building machinery switches before we hear Julie respond; there are further radio signal noises and then the image shifts to men outside a café by the beach and a wooden cross in the centre of the image, held up by the sea wall. We hear Julie go on to describe the film she is making about a boy called 'Tony' and his love for both the city and his mother. We see a shot of a pile of debris, demolished buildings, and a high-rise block of flats with ink-daubed clouds spreading across the edges of the image. There is a low angle shot of a woman with long leg lifted, midair, as she strides along a deserted street, a concrete open space with a dog in the foreground, a woman folding clothes in her living room with a child hovering beneath a clothes basket, a shot inside a shop front looking out at the other side of the street with parked cars alongside it, an angelic tombstone in a tree-lined cemetery. Finally, as we hear Julie describe the death of Tony's beloved mother the montage of stills come to an abrupt end and we enter the world of Julie's life in full colour, switching from still images to moving image material.

The juxtaposition of Julie's voice, hesitant and stilled as she thoughtfully responds to the radio presenter's questions, with the pre-existing personal photographs from Hogg's archive imbues this sequence with much meaning; it can be read as a straight-forward narration which aptly illustrates the mood and tone of Julie's creative endeavor, tied to the present in which Julie speaks; it is also the reality of Hogg's first creative endeavor, mirroring Julie's narrative trajectory. However, the photographs are, importantly, physical objects which are here woven into the 'body' of the film in order to

forge a composite object.⁷ This reworking of materials, and their sense memories, is a recovery process of a very Kleinian nature. Disparate fragments, individual artefacts are assembled into a montage of physical and sensuous objecthood, enmeshed in a creative play of varying emotional and physical states. The newly found object of love, as Klein would put it, is given new meaning through its ability to recuperate from fragmentation to 'wholeness', from abstraction to meaning in this newly forged context and thus take the shape of some form of reparation. Through the Bergsonian, borrowed 'body' of these photographic stills, memory is not only contained, but interrupted and reconstituted. This is the 'skin' Hogg attends to and quietly sheds as the reels of her film come undone.

Later, the differing materialities of the film, from Super 8 mm footage, 16 mm Bolex footage (for example, see fig. 2), S-16 mm film, S-16 mm digital to 35 m digital, come to stand for other Kleinian objects whose materiality is emphasised through each choice of medium. Thus, each choice of film stock represents a fragmentary dimension which can cut up or digitally rendered; in Kleinian terms, these singular parts replicate various states of psychosomatic involvement and sense recall. In their totality, as an entire film, Hogg has created a work of great reparative pleasure, of the creative endeavour to survive beyond trauma.

In addition to the opening sequence, the filming of Julie's flat contains another significant, complex composite memory. While the design and decoration of Julie's Knightsbridge flat aimed to closely resemble Hogg's original student quarters, the views from its window are a composite of Super 8 shots taken by Hogg and digital footage (fig. 3); this painstaking detail seems particularly important to Hogg and I think it represents another gesture towards recuperative play, incorporating the photographic materials she had within the 'body' of the film and thus authenticating its particular 'skin'. Her authorial presence is also reinforced here, a kind of ghosting of its surfaces or 'dolls house' effect, as if it were her eyes looking through the apartment windows, the flat is indeed haunted by the strange alchemy of reversing one's own gaze.

⁷ I here refer to Vivian Sobchack's use of this term in order to describe the medium as a differentiated body in the film experience: 'the lived body is excessive and ambiguous in its materiality' in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 145.



Fig. 3 Shedding a skin? Back projections from Hogg's private collection and their tangible matter as residual memory.

Skin

More broadly, the objects in *The Souvenir's mise en scene* further embed notions of texture and self-reflexivity, hinting at the hyperreal chamber in which Julie's memory plays out. All of the objects contained within the *mise en scene* can be described as an extension of Hogg's skin, marking out her spectral presence in the film experience as an older female filmmaker reflecting on her youth. Importantly, Julie's flat serves not an embalming tomb, but rather like an extension of Hogg's body.

Above all, the flat contains an entirely mirrored wall which draws attention to the surface of things, to their boundaries and peripheries, their projections, real and unreal. Mirrors in film often allude to the medium's self-conscious construction or, as Emma Wilson writes of cinema and the mirror-image, a reflection of the world as it is imagined and fantasized, as well as viewed (Wilson: 2006). Writing on Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) Wilson observes how the directors' use of mirrors the 'disrupts our knowledge of actual and virtual' (Ibid: 12). In this context, the mirrored wall in Julie's apartment similarly serves to remind viewers of the dreams and reflections contained within the film's enactment of memory, 'the real and the virtual', as Wilson suggests, as well as cinema's dream-like properties. Indeed, there is even a mirrored wall in Julie's bedroom which is employed to great effect when we see Anthony (Tom Burke) lying on her bed and reflected beside Julie as she sits cross-legged on the carpet. Anthony's presence is here enlarged and disorienting, a visual disturbance in Julie's otherwise comforting and neatly organized, private space.

Beautifully curated within the on-screen space of the film like vanishing points, the use of mirrors in *The Souvenir* also emphasizes the prism of unreliable memory and its fragmentation through which Hogg aims to explore: the 'broken', Kleinian artefact she

is examining and locking into a process of reparation. In one particular sequence we view Julie with her mother and Anthony in her flat. We see Swinton-Byrne's real-life mother, Tilda, kneeling at the end of the sofa in an unfurling grey wig and red velvet dressing gown. Hogg's tentative, thematic concerns with family, intimacy and the dynamics of tethered emotion and unrest are neatly embodied by this image, but most importantly is the doubling of Julie by the mirror at the far left of the screen, cutting the image up into two uneven parts. This sliver of light and refraction delineates two 'Julies', inscribed within the body of the film as, primarily, evocative of the multiple memories Hogg excavates. There are also mirrors contained throughout the *mise en scene*, as objects and props which hint at the theme of memory and its material trace as form and texture.

Hogg switches to 16mm during some of the sequences in Julie's apartment, inscribing a different texture within the image as if to unsettle and prompt further active spectatorship and responses to the composition of memory fostered between viewer and filmmaker. We have to register such shifts as material utterances within the 'body' of the film which alters the rhythm and flow of tangible existence within the film, both literally and symbolically. These 16 mm images introduce a new materiality, or fragmentation, which add the Super 8 footage and the photographic stills, in addition to the 35 mm shots; it is significant that Hogg employs 16 mm during a sequence in which Julie and Anthony quarrel and we view close-ups of their faces, softly lit and blurred. The pain of this moment is mediated through the filmic medium and appears to puncture the surface of the film, incorporated through editing, but not stylistically. This shift also aligns our gaze with Julie, as filmmaker, reminding us of the intertextuality of *The Souvenir* and how Hogg uses the medium to make sense of the her own past. Like a physical shudder, Julie's face in close-up as a 16 mm image, like a sudden shiver expressed and then gone, is rather like Hogg catching glimpse of herself in the mirrors of Julie's flat.

In another visually striking sequence we follow Julie and Anthony on their brief excursion to Venice is a further exploration of class and decadence evoked through the prism of memory and embodied matter (fig. 4). The reflective waters of Venice can be seen to represent within the diegesis another virtual and symbolic 'looking-glass', a mirror evoked exactly through the couple's reflection on the highly polished wood of the expensive cruiser they arrive on. Venice is also a place in which Julie enters through the looking-glass, seemingly becoming the object of Anthony's gaze as she is dressed and transformed into an image of glamour and sophistication for the opera, playing a role in his fantasy. These images contrast the grainy imagery of Julie's Sunderland photographs which contain the 'realism' of a different cinematic tradition, of a working-class realist aesthetic which Julie appears to appropriate.



Fig. 4 Mirrors, decadence and abstraction.

Finally, the elemental, deep vibration of metallic noise, air and glass are entangled as obliterating noise as Julie experiences the sound of a bomb (precisely, the famous IRA bombing of Harrods in 1983) and the awful silence which it follows. Julie's apartment, carefully contained and beloved, seems to subtly process the turbulence of the effects of the bomb which comes to stand for the central trauma in Julie's life, prescient of the shockwave of Anthony's death. Like the act of lovemaking and the role of memory and trauma, twinned through Alain Resnais' adaptation of Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) where the opening titles portray the lovers of the film seen in an embrace while covered in ashes suggestive of the film's protagonist's recollection of Hiroshima, Hogg's filmic representation of an explosion is metaphysical – the rupture at the heart of her film which also marks the intersection between physical and metaphysical, real and imagined.⁸

In her seminal book, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth demonstrates how fiction is more powerful than fact in retelling traumatic memories, drawing attention to Duras and Resnais' film, in particular and the relevance of testimony as 'discursive practice' (Caruth: 16). Here, we have Julie's 'testimony' of events, like Hiroshima, entirely enmeshed in the aesthetics of film practice. On a formal level, the bomb is a connection to the steel and light of the opening images of the film, to the mirrors in its *mise en scene* and the silences of Julie's inner life. The bomb is the fleshing out of all the edges, the steel and the fire, the ash and the flame, which will intensify Julie's self-expression and forge her creativity.

⁸ It is useful to note that I have written elsewhere on the role of trauma in the cinematic experience and Cathy Caruth's reflections on trauma in my book *Filming the Body in Crisis*.

Amongst the constellation of Kleinian objects, sounds and textures in Hogg's film, beginning with Fragonard's painting *The Souvenir*, Hogg transmits an idea of film as itself a tangible object, made acutely apparent through her use of different kinds of film stock and other aesthetic choices which invite viewers into dialogue with a febrile sense of emotion, memory and flesh, crucially, feminist in her turn towards a more philosophical form of spectatorship and embodied knowledge. Next year will see the arrival of *The Souvenir II* which will follow Julie into the later stages of her film career following the events of the previous film and Anthony's death. It is clear that this second part will raise further, rich questions about the capacity of the medium, not only as mirror, but as a reparative device which generates its own kind of futurity through an intricate, precise assembling of images and voices, textures and light.

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