

Brief Encounter: Sex and Intimacy  
in Andrew Haigh's *Weekend*

Grace Sharkey

## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the representation of gay male intimacy in Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011), a film about a brief encounter between two men. The thesis stages a second brief encounter between Haigh's film and Lauren Berlant's writing on feeling. Where Berlant's ideas are originally worked out in relation to the genre of melodrama and the female complaint, I translate her ideas about intimacy and cruel optimism into the space of ordinary gay life as represented in Haigh's film.

When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could be embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, and a good idea— whatever. To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation for our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much. In other words, all attachments are optimistic. That does not mean that they all feel optimistic: one might dread, for example, returning to a scene of hunger or longing or the slapstick reiteration of a lover's or parent's typical misrecognition. But the surrender to the return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form. In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with their object.

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

Friday Night, Saturday Morning	5
Saturday Afternoon	14
Saturday Night	20
Sunday	30
References	33
Filmography	34

## Friday Night, Saturday Morning

Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* is a slow moving film that follows the relationship between two men, previously unknown to each other, as it develops over a single weekend. The film opens with a series of three shortly held shots within a spatially constricted apartment. The initial shot is of a distant, nondescript, urban skyline, bleached of colour in the twilight, as seen through a high-rise window frame. The second shot pulls back to look at the same uninspiring view across the tight space of the living room. The third shot is a reverse angle shot that reveals the narrow hallway that leads into the rest of the apartment. The sound of running water can be heard. The next cut reveals a thirty-something young man, surprisingly pale and hirsute, in the bath. The young man is seen from a high angle as if the shot were dictated by the constraints of actual space, a tight bathroom in a council flat perhaps. We watch as the young man washes his genitals. The action is framed as an ordinary event, a routine gesture of physical care. The ordinariness of the scene is reinforced by the low light levels, an effect sustained across the film in interior and exterior scenes. In both its content and its style, the bath scene is indicative of the film's ongoing preoccupation with everyday activities and the ordinary feelings that lie behind them.

We next see the young man with his back to the camera. He has just finished dressing in jeans and a dark shirt. He sits on a bed and fixes his collar. He then picks up a shoebox and takes out one of a pair of brand new sneakers. He holds the sneaker for several moments, turning it over in his hands as he surveys it. He is weighing up whether he should wear the sneakers or not. He decides not to and carefully places the shoe back in the box. He then

puts on an already worn pair of sneakers and the scene ends. This man is our protagonist. All we know about him is that he lives alone in a cramped tower block. He takes baths instead of showers. But we have seen him make a choice and, almost unbeknownst to ourselves, we begin to identify with him. Whatever event he is getting ready for, it does not warrant breaking in his new sneakers so he wears the old ones instead. It is the kind of choice people make every day, insignificant in itself but reflective of the affective investment we make in things and the promise of change they hold forth. Although we have already seen this man naked it is not until we see this action – this choice – that he is truly exposed. His masculine vulnerability is revealed in this moment of hesitation over which sneakers to wear. After he finishes dressing, he smokes a pipe of hash. His phone buzzes in the background but he chooses to ignore it. An exterior shot shows him waking to the bus stop as the title of the film appears on the screen. His weekend has begun.

*Weekend* is made up of moments like these, moments in which seemingly mundane activities become the focus of attention. Haigh's visual rumination on seemingly banal domestic routines, his sustained focus on the ordinary, knits with the emotional terrain of the film which is initially established through familiar relationships seen in familiar environments. As the film progresses, the young man arrives at his destination, a casual dinner at a friend's house. The conversation around the table establishes that the young man's name is Russell. He has known these friends since childhood and is now the godfather of their young child.

Russell leaves the party early, claiming to be going home but instead he goes to a gay bar. The grungy bar is full when Russell arrives. The camera stays on him as he orders and finishes a drink. He smiles slightly at a man who walks past him. As Russell dances, his eyes focus on another man standing near him. The camera focuses into the mirror behind

Russell, revealing yet another attractive man who makes eye contact with Russell. The man in the mirror says something to a friend and then walks away. The camera cuts to Russell, the man in the mirror, and a different man, all standing silently together at a urinal. The man from the mirror leaves and Russell looks disappointed. The club is nearly empty at this point and the music has changed as if the club were winding up. Russell is seen dancing again. He half-heartedly responds to a new man who starts kissing him. As this takes place, the camera focuses on the man in the mirror, who watches Russell with more interest than previously.

The scene cuts to a shot of the tower block in the early morning, then cuts to the interior of the flat where Russell is in the kitchen making two cups of coffee. As Russell is seen bringing the coffee into the bedroom, the man he has slept with remains hidden from view. The two men have a conversation – “How are you feeling?” “Thank you for the coffee” – before the camera finally reveals the figure in the bed. It is the man in the mirror, the one Russell had initially cruised, now naked in his bed. The dialogue tells us this man is called Glen. As with Russell, we will never learn his last name.

As this plot summary reveals, the opening scenes of *Weekend* both augments and inverts conventional elements of romantic narrative. Lauren Berlant describes female melodrama as “plots about obstacles to and opportunities for erotic fulfilment.”<sup>1</sup> *Weekend*, a film engaged by gay relationality, places sex at the very start of the film. It thereby separates sex out from the narrative of erotic fulfilment, the better to investigate the relation between these terms. The sex in *Weekend* happens early on in the temporal ellipsis between night and day. Physical intimacy is not a withheld promise for Russell and Glen, but something quickly out of the way. In *Weekend* the male leads sleep together before we witness them

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Love/Desire* (New York: Dead Letter Office, 2012), 14.

have a conversation. It is after they sleep together that their relationship develops. Sex has happened and will happen again. Sexual attraction is involved in bringing the two men together but it does not resolve, or at least not simply, any of the character conflicts the film carefully sets up, all of which concern gay intimacy and sex talk.

For a contemporary film to show two men meeting at a gay bar and going home together is to represent a commonly understood idea of what gay life is like. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, this scenario is so ubiquitous in our queer cultural and critical imaginary that it is often disregarded, as if there were nothing more of interest to say about it.

*Weekend* is interested in what else goes on around a gay culture that is centred on drinking and dancing and having sex. The film makes ordinary the sex and the drink and the drugs, none of which is demonised or even glamourised. The film is more interested in the ordinary feelings generated around these ordinary aspects of gay urban life. It opens with a scene in a bathtub, an image of a man casually washing himself getting ready for the night ahead. The entire film is a series of moments as mundane as this strung together: eating take-away with friends, rolling a cigarette. It is a film about the ordinary experience of gay life. The tonal and emotional terrain of the film remains steady, so that scenes in which Russell eats lunch in the break room at work are consistent with scenes of Russell and Glen snorting cocaine together. These scenes are equivalently rendered as moments in Russell's life, each as commonplace as the next.

Of course *Weekend* is not a film about all gay life or even what it means to be gay. Instead, it tracks two gay men, Russell and Glen, who are representative only in their ordinariness and difference from each other. It is a film lacking in details of location or setting as those details are irrelevant in understanding who Russell and Glen are or what their encounter means. The city or year the film takes place in is left open-ended. Nothing about their



clothing or the technology they use is particularly telling in any way. The action resists being placed; its wider temporal and spatial coordinates are withheld. Placing the film in any larger context is difficult, except to say what it is not. It does not take place in the cosmopolitan gay scene of London, with its cinematically stylized nightlife. Russell and Glen's regional accents remain unspecifiable (at least to an Australian ear). Nothing about the urban scenery is identifiable. Instead the action exists in a timeless suspension, in the time of routine and repetition or in the time a weekend carves out of a working week. *Weekend* is a film that contextually resides in a simultaneously definite and ambiguous time. The temporal focus of the film is not on present day England or England in 2011, but is instead defined by the time the characters spend together, by the weekend that slides past as all weekends do, and by the slow burning pace of the film itself.

The film follows a short, constricted timeline. Russell and Glen meet up on four different occasions within a single weekend. When Glen first leaves Russell's apartment he is seen in a shot taken from the perspective of Russell's fourteenth-floor apartment in a block on a council estate. The subjective camera tracks Glen as he walks between the buildings: we identify with Russell as he watches Glen, who has just come into his life, walk away. This formal shot set-up will be repeated several times in the film and with each repetition the action becomes more emotionally significant due to the events that transpire between Glen's leavings.

Three sexual encounters take place between Russell and Glen across the duration of the film, though only two are given on-screen representation. The three sex scenes correspond to the three phases of dramatic action that describe the narrative arc of the film. As previously discussed, the initial off-screen sex scene brings the protagonists together. The second sex scene provides narrative complication with the revelation that Glen is leaving

for America. The final sexual encounter occurs on Sunday night as the weekend draws to a close. In meeting the expectation of a sexual encounter between its two main protagonists so early and so matter-of-factly, *Weekend* reveals that conventional love plots, in which obstacles to romance appear and disappear according to the needs of a three-part story arc, regularly conflate sex and intimacy as the end-goal of narrative. In *Weekend*, however, sex is not the ultimate destination of Russell and Glen's crossed pathways. Rather, the question of intimacy as something other or additional to sexual compatibility is raised and pursued throughout the film. Do these two men meet up only for sex? Instead of the conventional heterosexual framing of sex as the reward for two people having attained intimacy, Haigh is more concerned with the forms of intimacy that roll off the back of gay sex. Candace Vogler, in her work on sex and talk, notes that "Life stories become the 'we' of which 'me' is made."<sup>2</sup> That is, talking about sex is a project of self-fashioning. Although Foucault has taught us to be suspicious of the role of sexual confession in shaping subjectivity, Haigh's film stays attentive to the way sex talk continues to shape the gay self and the feeling of being gay.

The conversation that Russell and Glen have in bed the morning after they first have sex reveals the emergence of feeling through talk about sex. The conversation begins abruptly. Glen wants to record Russell speaking about their encounter as part of an art project. Glen informs Russell that he does this with all the men he sleeps with and that Russell's account will be included in the tape if it "makes the grade." Russell is resistant at first. He refuses. This is too intimate, too bizarre. Glen asks Russell to talk about what happened between then last night, what Russell wanted to happen, "anything you like, really". Russell shyly begins to recall the activities of the night before: "You kissed me in the hallway." Unlike

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<sup>2</sup> Candace Vogler, "Sex and Talk," in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 55.

Glen, Russell is not explicit about the sexual actions he is recollecting. He feigns not remembering the details of what happened but is caught out when he disagrees with Glen about a certain moment. Glen points out that Russell didn't want to have anal intercourse with him, "You didn't want me to fuck you." Russell responds with a curt "No" before quickly moving on, as if to avoid a subject that the film wants to keep at the front of our mind. In what is the most intimate moment of the film thus far, Russell recalls how Glen kissed him on the hand. He stumbles over his words while saying how "nice" he thought it was. This moment alters the relationship between the two men. It reveals to the audience a fledging intimacy but the sentimental moment is immediately blocked by Glen's response, "Do you wish my cock was bigger?" This interactional rhythm, in which there is a show of cautious emotional advancement from Russell that is quickly knocked back by Glen, will be repeated throughout the film suturing us into an identification with Russell as seemingly the more feeling and vulnerable partner in the encounter. This narrative pattern seems to keep feelings in check but also strings them out and intensifies them. As Berlant might have advised us, there is more feeling to be had in the cruel withdrawal of feeling, or in feelings going unmet, than in untrammelled sentimental exposition<sup>3</sup>. The film sets up two very different men. Russell, as we know from the evidence so far presented, is the romantic. He places hope in his future with Glen and we, as romantic as him, invest in this future too. Glen is more detached. As we will learn, his relationship is less about sharing intimacy than ritualistically building the self, even if that self is fake. Later on Saturday, when the two meet up again, Russell asks Glen how the tape will become an "art project" and "not just people talking dirty." Glen responds that people should talk more about their sexuality and sexual experiences so "everything will become normal." Glen's art project is

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 37-38.

presented as a rumination on one night stands and identity formation. Glen says that when you sleep with a stranger you can pretend to be someone you are not, and perhaps discover what is preventing you from being your idealised self. The role of desire and love in the formation of personal identity is the underlying theme of *Weekend*. The art project is a symbolic manifestation of what it means to identify with a sexuality that is not considered the norm. Glen tells Russell that his reason for starting the project was that “gay people never talk about it in public unless it’s just cheap innuendo. I think it’s because they’re ashamed.” In Glen’s version of things, to open up and reveal all is a step forward in normalising queer desire.

Initially, *Weekend* is set up as a casual encounter between two gay men. The relative anonymity of the characters and the withholding of life data from the audience and between the characters themselves enhance the feeling of a fleeting, transient encounter. At the same time, however, the film asks us to invest in the possibility that the two men may have a future together. Unsurprisingly, the most heated scene in the film involves an argument Glen and Russell have about monogamy. Russell defends gay marriage, calling it admirable, while Glen dismisses it and reminds Russell that he does not “do boyfriends.” Opposed in relation to conventional forms of love, the two men allegorically present what Berlant identifies as love’s paradox:

Even in its most conventional form, as “love,” desire produces a paradox. It is a primary relay to individuated social identity, as in coupling, family, reproduction, and other sites of personal history; yet it is also the impulse that most destabilizes people, putting them into plots beyond their control as it joins diverse lives and makes them situations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Berlant, *Love/Desire*, 12.

It is this situation that the film constantly returns to in its restaging of sex between the two men. Moreover, the film reveals that the two men come together not for the sex or romantic love, or to secure the coupled social identity that can be relayed from either of those impulses, but for the destabilization that is another of love's corollaries. Russell, in particular, seems to have a life as colourless as the film itself. The advent of Glen in his weekend provides the prospect of breaking through the dull routine of his day with the possibility of feeling. Russell and Glen's brief encounter turns into a situation in Berlant's definition of the term because of their "will to feel feeling."<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Glen's art-school theorizations that present one-night stands as a way of performing ideal selves, it seems the drive behind the casual encounter is an attraction to feeling itself. Further, the attraction to feeling might not necessarily feel good but might hurt in a good kind of way.

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<sup>5</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," in *The Affect Theory Studies Reader*, ed. Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 170.

## Saturday Afternoon

On Saturday afternoon and Glen and Russell end up back at Russell's apartment. Russell watches Glen eat a chocolate bar to satisfy his post-marijuana cravings. The camera faces the pair, who sit next to each other on the couch. As Glen eats, Russell asks, "Are you out to your parents?" to which Glen quickly and almost aggressively replies, "Are you out to yours? You don't look like the kind of boy who would be." Russell replies that it is complicated. Glen launches back, "It's not fucking complicated. You just have to do it." Russell then reveals that he can't come out to his parents because he "doesn't really know them". He tells Glen that he was raised in foster care until he was sixteen. He gives these details in an entirely matter of fact way, insisting to Glen that it was "fine." After this disclosure, which ends with Glen gently caressing Russell's cheek, the two men fool around on the couch. The revelation about Russell's past is the catalyst for affection that then becomes the catalyst for sex. This relay of affects heightens the intensity of the moment and the physical intimacy it culminates in. The sexual scene is not itself romanticised. The audience sees just enough to be able to know what is taking place and then it is over. This sex scene, like every other scene in the film, is cinematically naturalistic. It happens in broad daylight. When it is over Glen fetches a towel so that Russell can clean himself up. All we hear are the noises one would expect in a moment like this. This sexual encounter is not visually differentiated from any other moment in the film. The sound remains diegetic, the colour bleached out, but, because of the brief gesture of intimacy that precedes it, this sex feels different.

*Weekend* does not use physical sexual content as the exclusive basis of narrative crescendo but instead uses sex in a variety of ways throughout the film to scaffold different kinds of

intimacy. Haigh threads sex throughout the entire film, making it continuous with the everyday world the two men inhabit and with their ordinary selves. What is significant about the second sex scene, in contrast to sexual experience the men first share, is the conversational catalyst behind it. The antecedents of the sexual encounter are in talk, not in the silent cruising witnessed in the gay club scene. This sex is no longer a wordless hook up between strangers, but instead consolidates an intimate connection between the two men coming to know each other. The intimacy they have built through talk makes this sex more emotionally resonant and individualised than their off-screen encounter at the beginning of the film. With its antecedents in talk, this sex is also distinguished from the sex Russell could have had with any of the other men we saw cruise him at the gay club before he went home with Glen.

The distinctiveness of the emotional terrain explored in *Weekend* can be revealed through a brief comparison with Hettie Macdonald's 1996 film *Beautiful Thing*, which shares several similarities with Haigh's film.<sup>6</sup> Both are British productions that involve stories about gay men who live on council estates. Both explore relationships in which one male figure is more socially and sexually confident than the other with whom he is involved. Yet, despite these surface similarities, the films barely resemble each other in terms of their genre affiliation and style. The crucial difference between the two is that *Beautiful Thing* is a gay teen film. In his work on queer teen melodrama, Gilad Padva argues that the genre "portrays the maturation process as a courageous attempt to escape the dominant erotic regime and to attain same-sex fulfilment."<sup>7</sup> The gay teen's struggle is intrinsically linked to coming out as a homosexual. It is from this conflict that queer melodrama is derived.

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<sup>6</sup> *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie MacDonald, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Gilad Padva, "Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-out in New Queer Adolescence Films," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1.4 (2004): 375.

However, gay teen film is not always or exclusively melodramatic. As Catherine Driscoll has pointed out, teen film is a “hybrid” genre.<sup>8</sup> As an amalgamation of genres, teen film is simultaneously romantic, comedic and melodramatic. In the 1990s there appeared a host of queer films that centred on queer adolescence among which *Beautiful Thing* distinguished itself for handling the coming out narrative using elements of melodrama, romantic comedy and musical.<sup>9</sup>

Gay teen films always almost present the coming out process as a situation of risk. In *Beautiful Thing* the teenage lead, Jamie, is constantly worried about his mother finding out he is gay. In his essay on *Beautiful Thing*, Scott Henderson notes that MacDonald’s film, like so many others in the gay-teen genre:

uses standard teen film conventions of escape from an oppressive family and social life to explore not only youth anxieties but also anxieties around sexual identities in contemporary settings.<sup>10</sup>

Gay teen film is all about formative moments that shape who these adolescents will one day be. Characters like Jamie and his boyfriend Ste are filled with potential. Teen film presents characters that are constricted by surroundings over which they have no control, just as they are in conflict with institutions and older generations.<sup>11</sup> Jamie and Ste

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Other queer teen films of the period include *Get Real* (Simon Shore, 1998), *Edge of Seventeen* (David Moreton, 1998) and *But I’m a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999). These films are all examples of gay teen film that deal with the coming out narrative. *But I’m a Cheerleader*, however, is also regularly indexed as part of ‘New Queer Cinema,’ a term coined by B. Ruby Rich. New Queer Cinema refers to a host of queer themed independent films that engage, not just a queer perspective but also a queer cinematic modality. Prominent examples include Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and Kimberly Pierce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999). See B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>Scott Henderson, “Youth, Sexuality, and the Nation: *Beautiful Thing* and *Show Me Love*,” in *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, ed. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 257.

<sup>11</sup> Driscoll, *Teen Film*, 2.



seemingly entrapped “within restrictive families and/or communities” and the film “makes the idea of ‘getting out’ synonymous with ‘coming out’”<sup>12</sup>. They go through the trauma of coming out and emerge as new people. Queer teen films, like most teen films, are about securing their protagonists a future. Russell and Glen, however, are not teenagers or even young adults. They have already become the gay men they might once have had trouble imagining.

If *Beautiful Thing* is about creating a self that is ready for the future, *Weekend* is about dealing with a self that is burdened by the past. Where Jamie and Ste are vulnerable, Russell and Glen are complicated. The actors who play Russell and Glen present them as gay men who maintain intensely youthful bodies and styles but are probably in their early thirties. Neither man is particularly successful professionally, although Glen might be on the verge of something else. Russell is a lifeguard at the local council pool and, though Glen assures him “there’s nothing wrong with being a lifeguard,” he knows it’s an unexciting job. When asked how many lives he’s saved he replies they were “old people, mostly.” When Glen says he works in a gallery, Russell asks, “Is that the ugly one in town?” These are not teen protagonists bucking against the constraints of their lives and about to attain queer futurity but two men who are doing okay in a landscape that is comfortable enough but holds out little more than the promise of a sexed-up weekend.

*Beautiful Thing* place vulnerable teen characters in a social setting that is against them but, with the addition of a Mamma Cass soundtrack, the film becomes an up-beat, pro-gay feeling machine. *Weekend*, however, explores the realm of ordinary feeling as it is defined by Berlant. The affective tone of *Weekend* is grounded in a place of “affective realism” that explores “how people’s desires become mediated through attachments to modes of life

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<sup>12</sup> Henderson, “Youth, Sexuality, and the Nation,” 275.

to which they rarely remember consenting.”<sup>13</sup> Russell and Glen are not thrown into the deep end and forced to come to terms with a whole new identity, like Jamie and Ste. Rather, Russell and Glen are shown navigating an existence that is not new or formative but deeply, almost depressingly, familiar. The realist mode of *Weekend* and the emotional ordinariness of the film seem to place them in a mode of life that it is unlikely they remember making even though it constantly presents as something they choose to do. It is impossible not to acknowledge the fact that gayness, now that it is no longer regarded as a pathology, is often presented as a lifestyle choice. When discussing ideas of consenting to a world that is made around us, Berlant argues that “we assume our position as subjects in a world and therefore *it is in us* as a structuring condition for apprehending anything.”<sup>14</sup> Homosexuality is in this sense simultaneously volitional and non-volitional and this conflict is intrinsically linked to how Russell and Glen respond to the world. Berlant expands on this:

Any account of realism requires an account of affect, and any object/scene could come to belong to a realist genre – an anecdote, an uncanny sound, a dream, a pet or a cookie. What matters is the presence of a relation that invests an object/scene with the prospect of the world’s continuity.<sup>15</sup>

Queer teen melodrama produces extreme moments of change but *Weekend* concerns resignation to gay adulthood, gay domesticity, even the gay everyday. The constricted temporality of Russell and Glen’s brief encounter merely entrenches their relationship to ordinariness: there is no escaping the boredom of real-time. The length of their weekend coincides with the prospect of the world’s continuing as it is. They have already been

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<sup>13</sup> Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” 52.

<sup>14</sup> Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” 52.

<sup>15</sup> Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” 52.

through process of creating the gay self. Russell and Glen do not partake in the fumbling first kisses of teenage novices, they already know all the sexual moves: how to pick up men, how to flick them on, how to take them home. Where Jamie and Ste are shown struggling with their identities at a formative time in their life, Russell and Glen are responding to a gay world that is already known to them, just as they know themselves.

Russell is a character defined by, and preoccupied with, the past. There is a moment in the afternoon where Glen comments on the mismatched cups and saucers Russell owns.

Russell tells Glen that he likes to buy things from second-hand stores. He thinks about the little old lady who owned this tea cup before him and how it was probably her favourite and he resents that, after she died, someone sold it like it was nothing. Haigh shapes Russell as a character with a deep investment in things with a history, particularly a personal one, and this small moment reveals his sentimental nature. This scene takes place before we are aware Russell has no tether to a past that he can directly call his own.

At the end of their afternoon together, after the talk and the sex, Glen leaves. Russell shuts the door but it is only a moment before Glen knocks on it again. He tells Russell he is leaving for Portland, Oregon to do an art course and he doesn't know when he will be back. Russell naturally tells Glen that he thinks that is great, trying to seem happy for him. Although Haigh's film prioritizes dialogue, over action, much of the drama resides in what is unsaid between the two men. Glen leaves in a rush, only to come back yet again. He nervously plays with his jacket while asking Russell to come to his going away party that evening. Glen is visibly uncomfortable, seemingly afraid of rejection and also afraid that his relationship with Russell will move from one night stand to something more that will complicate his future.

## Saturday Night

It is Saturday night and Russell has found an event worthy of his new shoes. We watch as he puts them on, gets the bus and arrives at his destination. The last night Russell and Glen spend together begins at a “straight bar.” Russell seems uncomfortable being out in a heterosexual context, asks Glen why he chose this place specifically. Glen responds that it’s a nice change from a regular gay bar. It is soon apparent, however, that Glen has made this choice with the specific intention of starting trouble. There have been moments in the film previously where the distinction between Russell and Glen’s ways of being gay has been shown, as when Glen yells out the window at homophobic teenagers calling someone a “fag” while Russell asks him to stop, but the difference in their gay social identities becomes more apparent when they are placed in a heterosexual space.

As we have already seen, Russell is uptight and awkward. In one of the earliest scenes in the film, we see him surrounded by his noisy straight friends, failing to make himself heard when asking for an extra plate for the table. In a later scene, he sits alone in his workplace staff room on the outside of the conversation his male co-workers are having about sleeping with women. This is not a vague conversation but instead involves a young straight man giving a crude description—complete with hand movements—of fisting a woman. Russell will later remark that, “Just because he can’t talk about how many fingers he can put up a girls fanny” doesn’t mean he’s not comfortable with his sexuality. The sexual explicitness engaged in by Russell’s straight co-workers further illuminates his difference, his outsidership, his discomfort at being gay in a straight place.

Glen, on the other hand, is sexually confident in any context. Unlike Russell, who is uncomfortable talking about sex and made awkward hearing about the sex lives of others, Glen is adamant that gay sex needs to be talked about, not just through art, but everywhere.

Glen goes out of his way to be heard talking about sex, particularly when straight or homophobic people might be around. In the scene in the straight bar, Glen recounts in animated detail a bizarre sexual encounter he had with a man he met online. Much like Russell's straight co-workers, Glen is not shy about details. Like them in their straight baiting of Russell, he is being intentionally "offensive." But, unlike them, Glen's actions can be seen as a pre-emptive strike. Rather than risk what it is like to not belong in "straight places," as Russell is out of place in the staffroom, Glen defiantly clashes against his surroundings. He is the aggressor who remains in charge and is not at risk of being a victim. Glen is eventually confronted by a large working-class man who asks him to quieten down. Glen accuses the man of being homophobic. Glen's conduct is a form of resistance against the norm but it also reflects his larger strategic model for feeling. Nurturing a form of gay social aggression allows Glen to deny the mundane emotional existence he otherwise resides in and feel vindicated as a gay man. Glen thrives on situations like this, being perhaps more fearful of merging into the background in a social world that has fewer and fewer objections to gay men.

In contrast to Glen, Russell is painted as a figure who nurtures feelings of sexual melancholy, which survive the weekend not just intact but intensified. Russell's perpetual sadness and longing is also a kind of resolve to maintain his orientation to emotion or feeling. His relationship with Glen, a stranger until the night before, is an attempt "to attain proximity to even the most vaguely, inarticulately defined pleasure."<sup>16</sup> In *Weekend*, this proximity to pleasure involves the promise of both positive and negative feelings, pleasure and its negation.

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<sup>16</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 166.

In her discussion of *Rosetta*<sup>17</sup>, Berlant describes the female protagonist of the Dardenne Brother's 1999 film as:

a contingent being [who] tries, aversively and indirectly, to induce through an improvised relation with a semi-stranger an attachment that might become a solidarity that could produce more and better traction in the world; an attempt at speculative intimate tethering more impulsive than strategic whose affective stake are both unstated and profound.<sup>18</sup>

We might say many of the same things about Russell. We know through constant formal reminders that he lives alone. While he has a familial connection to his best friend Jamie, it appears this relationship is insufficient to ground him in the world. While he loves Jamie and is shown fondly engaging with Jamie's wife and daughter, Russell is uncomfortable talking about his romantic life with his straight friend even though Jamie is obviously fine with it. On the other hand, when Russell meets Glen, he is placed in a situation that immediately becomes a "scene of promise" that requires no further set up.<sup>19</sup>

The emotional promise Russell invests in Glen is slowly revealed as an attempt to tether himself to something real, to conjure feeling in experience. It is not that Russell does not want to be with Glen in an ordinary way. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that Russell might like to settle down with someone and spend his future weekends shopping at IKEA with his boyfriend, but Haigh's film catches at something else. What Glen first and finally represents to Russell, and to us, is a chance at feeling. Although entirely naturalistic, the film explores the space and time of emotional promise. It provides a naturalistic window into the fantasy of fulfilment and never quite takes the risk of translating those feelings

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<sup>17</sup> *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," 96

into the mundane sphere of the everyday, which nonetheless provides the only space and time these characters occupy.

Glen, as we know, is driven by a desire to “re-draw” himself. He is trying to change who he is, to be someone different, to experience new and exciting things. He complains that his friends won’t let him evolve: old friends won’t let you be “any version of yourself, only the version they want you to be.” As the film moves towards a resolution it is revealed that Glen had a boyfriend, John, who cheated on him. We are led to assume that it was after they broke up that Glen decided to never commit to anyone again. Glen will ultimately tell Russell, “I don’t care that he cheated on me, I care that he was a faggot and a liar.” It is not the sex but the breach in trust that derails Glen. This is one of the few reminders in Haigh’s film that this story is entrenched in a gay space where negotiated non-monogamy is prevalent if not the norm.

Glen does not wish to settle down and form a romantic relationship with someone; he is entirely opposed to the idea. Glen’s best friend Jill (the only female character named in the film, apart from Jamie’s daughter) tells Russell that his plan to leave for Portland is ridiculous and that her friends have a bet going on as to how long he will last. According to Jill’s version of Glen, he always “does this”, he always has plans of leaving and experiencing things. As Jill tells it, Glen’s flirtation with teaching in Africa was “just after he split up with John.” Jill’s account of Glen shapes him, not as someone who is tough or unfeeling, but as someone who is hurt and defensive. Glen needs to be in control of what he feels. To emotionally invest in another person—in romance, with Russell for instance—is too risky since it makes your feelings contingent on someone else’s feelings.

When Glen introduces Russell to his friends, he refers to them only as “Fag 1, Fag 2.” Glen has no connection to anything about his past, but keeps restating his desire to escape it by creating a future. After the scene with the straight man he finds Russell at the bar and says to him, “You look like you want to kiss me.” Russell responds that he does but “not here.” Glen responds, “Do you want to get the fuck out of here?” He leaves his own farewell party without a second thought. This is not because Russell is what matters to him now but a sign that Glen is tired of being tied down to this place, these people. Perhaps he will soon resent the idea of being tied to Russell?

The two men head into the night and visit a carnival. They play arcade games and eat fairy floss and then return to Russell’s apartment. Somewhere along the way, they have obtained a substantial amount of cocaine and spend the rest of the evening doing lines of coke, smoking weed and continuing to drink. The talk they engage in is loosened by the drugs they take. Russell brings out his laptop and we are reminded of the last time we saw it, shortly after Glen had left following their first night together. It is now revealed that when Russell previously said that he “had something similar” to Glen’s art project, he was referring to a document in which he records his sexual encounters. Russell insists to Glen that his journal is “private, not public like yours”. It is clear that Russell needs to be drunk and drugged up before he has the courage to show Glen his journal, and even then he remains anxious that Glen will think he is a “freak”.

Glen and Russell take turns in reading from the journal in between drinks and lines of coke. The opening entries are tame and sweet (“He was good looking and normal which was nice”) but become more conflicted as they go on. Russell reads out an entry about an encounter with a married man that mentions how he thought of the man’s children waiting for him to come home, which is the first clue that Russell’s journal is as much about



family as it is about sex. The one thing all the entries have in common is that Russell always asks how his sexual partners' parents felt about their being gay. He asks all the gay men he sleeps with what their coming out story is, just as he did with Glen. Russell's journal is a history of his sexual past, but it is also a collection of reactions from parents, reactions that he will never get.

*Weekend* is not a film that constructs coming out as the high-risk situation that gay teen film does. To Russell and Glen, as to many gay people, coming out is already a memory, a story about the past transacted in the present. As Jen Bacon has reflected, gay people all have some kind of story about coming out and sharing these stories is an act of community building. It is a transactional enunciation that is traded in gay space. In this respect it is not the possible disapproval of his unknown parents that causes Russell pain but his lack of a coming out story to share with others. Jen Bacon elaborates,

The coming out narratives that I'm talking about are the stories of individual 'outings,' not the outings themselves. I am not talking about 'going public' with your gay identity at work, or to your parents, or to an old high school boyfriend who wants to keep in touch. I am talking about the stories that we tell each other in smoke-filled bars, on first dates, in the crowded hallways of parties, and on camping trips. The sort of stories that you share when you are not risking an identity crisis, but are solidifying a current moment of identity by highlighting its trajectory through time.<sup>20</sup>

While coming out of the closet does not operate in the same way as it would in a film like *Beautiful Thing*, it is still present in the margins of Haigh's film. Glen finally shares his own coming out story as the two men walk through the carnival. He tells Russell about being interrupted by a school friend while masturbating to a paused video frame of Rupert

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<sup>20</sup> Jen Bacon, "Getting the Story Straight: Coming out Narratives and the Possibility of a Cultural Rhetoric," *World Englishes* 17.2 (1998): 251.

Everett. His friend told the whole school and Glen lost all his friends. Glen's account of his forced coming out strikes a chord in Russell. It is not that he can identify with the story itself but that he knows the film Glen is talking about. He knows the exact scene that turned Glen on. The sharing of these experiences create a gay cultural imaginary. The coming out stories that Bacon describes are not intrinsically risk-inducing or dramatic but are instead part of gay world-building.

Throughout *Weekend*, Glen constantly makes allusions to Russell being closeted. While Russell is adamant that all those close to him know he is gay, in Glen's eyes Russell still occupies the place of the gay man who struggles to come to terms with who he is. Russell says to Glen in their final argument, "You think just because I can't walk around the fucking streets holding hands or talk to my mates about fucking sucking cocks, you think you know me." However, Russell later discloses that every time he leaves the house, he gets a pain in his stomach: "I'm okay when I'm on my own.... When I leave the house, it feels like I have indigestion." The distinction is made between Glen who is out and proud, and Russell who is still eaten up inside by something hard to specify.

The final entry in Russell's journal is the most significant. It documents Russell's first time having anal intercourse. As Glen reads the entry beginning "I told him I had never done it before," he becomes increasingly tense:

I worried about the condom coming off and me getting AIDS and everybody thinking I was scum. When I got home I felt so ashamed... I spent all day in bed thinking about all kinds of stuff.

At the line, “He wouldn’t give me his number because he said he had a boyfriend,” Glen has a realisation. He connects this scene with the man from the previous entry and asks Russell to describe him. On hearing the description, Glen says it is his ex-boyfriend, John.

After the realisation that Russell and John have slept together, the two men have a conversation about gay marriage. Unsurprisingly, Glen is against it, arguing that gays don’t need to be validated by a heterosexual institution. He mockingly says the only reason people get married, buy a dog and settle down is so that they can say, “Oh we can’t go away this weekend, who will look after Buster?” The coked-up Russell becomes increasingly aggressive in response:

Why does it bother you, Glen? Two people fucking love each other and they wanna get married and they want a relationship and they want to be happy.

Russell goes on to tell Glen that it will be scary and lonely in America and, while he never asks him not to go, that implication looms behind his aggression. Haigh’s film constantly allows the audience to see what is happening under the surface talk and also to identify with the commonplace experience of not being able to say what we mean, especially when it matters most. The argument Glen and Russell have about marriage and monogamy is transparently an argument about their own relationship, although that relationship is barely two days old. Russell insists that “Nobody, nobody can deal with being by themselves,” but what he means is that he is lonely and perhaps together they will be less lonely. Glen understands what Russell is saying perfectly well. When Russell says, “You think I’m an idiot because I want a relationship, but the thing is Glen, I think you want one too,” Glen

fires back that he “does not, cannot have a boyfriend right now.” With the unsaid said, Russell leaves the room on the excuse of taking a piss.

When Russell returns from the bathroom he finds Glen standing outside the window that we were presented with in the opening of the film. The window is open and the sky is black and starless. The two men share few words but do share a joint. In contrast to the quickly paced editing that opened the film, the camera is now positioned outside where it holds on Glen and Russell for the lengthy duration of a kiss. A second shot of the tower block at night reveals Russell’s apartment is the only one in the block with the lights still on. Where the apartment window previously represented Russell’s isolation from a distant world, this shot of the two lovers from afar shows us the depth of the intimacy they now share.

A cut then reveals the two men in the bedroom about to have sex for the last time. Their final sexual encounter carries the most emotional weight. This is not because sex has suddenly gained narrative importance but because sex has been reframed as an expression of the intimacy that has been built up throughout the film. The sex scene begins with a song diegetically sourced to Russell’s radio. It is the only song that plays in the film outside of a bar. The sex scene that follows is the most explicitly connoted in the film. There is a close-up shot of Glen’s face as Russell performs oral sex on him. The soundtrack supports the cinematic naturalism of the film. The sex is not smoothly choreographed but marked by pauses and moments of hesitation that signify realness. Though carrying more emotional weight than the previous sex scenes, this sex is still consistent with the naturalistic mode of the film; it remains of a piece with the bike seen in the cramped hallway at the opening of the film. The final sexual encounter is significant not only because it claims an extended duration of film time, nor because it is the first time

the two men have anal intercourse, though neither of these facts is insignificant. The length and nature of the sex is to confirm that a deeper emotional intimacy now exists between Russell and Glen. Haigh could have shown these two men having extended anal sex at the opening of the film but the audience would not have invested in it the way they do now. This spectatorial investment in anal sex, it goes without saying, mirrors the emotional investment we think Russell and Glen now have in it. To put it another way, at this point it is clear we are identifying with the feeling of gay feeling, not the feeling of gay sex.

The pillow talk that takes place after this scene, as the first light of Sunday morning comes through the window, is where the real dramatic action resides. As before, talk follows sex but this time Glen and Russell are seen in bed for the first time in the film. Facing each other and still half asleep, Glen holds Russell's hand. He asks him why he always documents the coming out stories of the men he sleeps with. Russell replies that "Everyone's got their story," except him. When Russell says he has never wanted to find his real parents, Glen offers to pretend to be his father so that Russell can come out to him. What might seem an oedipal acting out does not feel strange in this context. The two men acknowledge it might be weird but they go ahead anyway. Russell tells his pretend father, that he's gay. Glen replies:

You know what son, it doesn't matter to me. I love you just the same. And guess what? I couldn't be more proud of you than if you were the first man on the moon.

There is a sharp transition to an exterior shot of the tower block. The moment is gone.

## Sunday

There is almost no talk the morning after. Russell asks what time Glen's train leaves. He tries to say something—perhaps he will beg him to stay, or tell him how much their time together has meant to him—but Glen shushes him. There is nothing left to say. Glen leaves the apartment and we watch him as he walks away from the tower block for the last time.

Surprising no one, Russell arrives at the station to send Glen off. They share their final goodbyes on the platform but talking is not the point of this scene. We observe Glen and Russell from a distance through the gaps in a metal fence. The noise of the trains drowns out anything they say. Out of earshot we are still close enough to see it is Glen, not Russell, who cries at the thought of leaving. When we do hear them speak, nothing of real importance is said. They share a kiss and when homophobic abuse is heard shouted at them from out of shot, it is this time Glen who tells Russell to ignore the teenagers. Glen gives Russell a parcel, they kiss again, then Glen is gone. The film cuts to Russell looking out his apartment window again. He opens the package from Glen labelled “Russell the Lifeguard.” Inside he finds Glen's tape recorder. Just as Glen was given the privilege of reading Russell's journal, he now gives his project, a piece of himself, to Russell. This gesture provides closure for Russell and closure for the audience. It assures the viewer that their brief encounter meant something to each of them. It makes us hurt but in a way that feels good.

Berlant uses the term cruel optimism “to name a situation in which something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”<sup>21</sup>. The melodramatic ending of Haigh's film puts on display our capacity to attach to objects we cannot have that continue to hold out the

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<sup>21</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

promise of our happiness. As Berlant conceives, an object of desire is not a single entity to be achieved or consumed but instead a series of interrelated promises. A series of promises is what Glen constitutes for Russell. Russell's difficulty in coming to terms with his sexuality, his loneliness, his desire for love are all now tangled up with the idea of Glen. No longer a handsome dark stranger glimpsed in a gay club, Glen is now an emotional lightning rod for "the feeling of aspirational normalcy, the desire to feel normal, and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented."<sup>22</sup>

A more cynical viewer might object that Russell has no real reason to believe that Glen secretly wants a relationship with him. Whether or not this is the case is irrelevant. Russell's feeling for Glen reveals the simultaneous superficiality and complexity of all objects of desire. The man he took home from the club, one of several equally handsome men that are hard to distinguish in the dim light of the club, becomes a vessel to invest feeling in, an excuse to feel the joy of discovering someone new and, finally, an excuse to feel loss and the melancholy that is its aching compensation.

The interactional rhythm between Russell and Glen, in which tentative acts of emotional advancement are strung out across the duration of the film, intensifies the affective experience of the viewer. These events hurt us in a way that also feels good. As Berlant notes, "something does not have to feel good viscerally for it to be a pleasure."<sup>23</sup> Berlant's diagnostic of the female complaint is apposite for thinking about the gay situation mapped out in Haigh's film. The female complaint, she writes,

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<sup>22</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 170.

<sup>23</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*. 84.

is a discourse of disappointment. But where love is concerned, disappointment is a partner of fulfillment, not an opposite. Each is central to the absorbing anxiety that gets animated by having an object of desire.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet this conception of the female complaint as something that seeks out disappointment in love as its own kind of fulfillment, does not translate to the gay situation unchanged. We should remember that the ordinary weekend that *Weekend* traces began with two men meeting at a gay bar and going home together. The gay complaint includes, therefore, the understanding that the next weekend will hold out similar possibilities, other brief encounters with handsome men about whom one need learn only enough to sustain the promise of happiness before they will disappear into their own ordinary lives.

On the Saturday afternoon they spend together, Glen says to Russell that straight people won't come to see his art project on display because it's about gay sex and so “has nothing to do with their world.” He complains to Russell about the lack of representation of queer people in popular culture:

The whole straight narrative is there for you to inherit, it's just there. There to shape your foundations, to set you up... Boy meets girl, they go skipping through the meadows and that's how your life is set. Everything is there. All the books, all the films, all the TV shows, everything is just inherited to you.

Haigh takes the melodramatic inheritance of popular culture, not least elements of David Lean's *Brief Encounter*, and turns them into a gay narrative in which bad feelings are their own queer reward.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945).



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