



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Framing Memory: An Exploration of Memory and Autobiography in Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*, Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* and Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun***

Helder, Emma

### **Citation**

Helder, E. (2024). *Framing Memory: An Exploration of Memory and Autobiography in Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*, Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* and Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun**.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4004025>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Framing Memory: An Exploration of Memory and Autobiography in Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*, Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* and Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun*



Emma Helder

S2338661

Supervisor: Dr M.S. Newton

Second Reader: Dr H.D.J. van Dam

MA Thesis: Literary Studies (English Track)

Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities

21 June 2024

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Theoretical Framework .....	3
Sigmund Freud .....	6
Walter Benjamin – “The Image of Proust” .....	9
Autobiography .....	13
Structure of Thesis .....	17
Chapter One: Steven Spielberg’s <i>The Fabelmans</i> .....	19
Synopsis .....	19
Memory as a Cinematic ‘Image’ .....	20
Framing People: Sammy’s Ditch Day Film .....	25
Autobiography through Cinematic Language .....	30
Chapter Two: Andrew Haigh’s <i>All of Us Strangers</i> .....	33
Synopsis .....	34
Memory as ‘Images’ .....	35
The ‘Image’ of Lost Happiness .....	37
Collective Memory Made Personal .....	39
Adam’s Freudian Dream .....	41
Autobiography in <i>All of Us Strangers</i> .....	46
Chapter Three: Charlotte Wells’s <i>Aftersun</i> .....	48
Synopsis .....	49
Memory as Image .....	50
Calum’s Self-Image .....	55
Memory, Drift and Autobiography .....	57
Conclusion .....	61
Works Cited .....	65
Works Consulted.....	69

## Introduction

Throughout cinematic history film directors have used film to reframe their own past. Reconstructing memory through film creates an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which cinematic pictures visualize memory. This thesis offers an analysis of memory and autobiography in three contemporary movies: Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans* (2022); Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* (2023); and Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun* (2022). All three films depict narratives where the protagonist is either in the process of remembering or is occupied with depictions of the past. The autobiographical elements create a space in which the movies additionally reflect on memory; as the protagonists do within the narrative, the filmmakers themselves reenact memory. In *The Fabelmans*, Spielberg frames his past and reflects on significant moments in his adolescence that steered him towards a life behind the camera. In *All of Us Strangers*, Haigh uses his childhood home as a set where the protagonist visits his deceased parents. In *Aftersun*, Wells reflects on personal events through a fictional narrative of a father and daughter on vacation in Turkey. In an interview with Esther Zuckerman for *Vanity Fair* director Wells declared: "The more I spent thinking about memories and anecdotes from childhood, the more the process of thinking about them wove itself into the narrative" (Zuckerman). As Wells states, thinking about memory can inspire a director to incorporate their own process of remembering into their film.

While the films analyzed in this thesis reflect on memory on a more personal level, their narratives simultaneously offer a meditation on human memory and on the ways in which memory's representation in cinematic art further complicates an already complex phenomenon. By examining the films' autobiographical elements through scholarly works on autobiography, I aim to scrutinize the significance of cinematic autobiography and how this correlates with the representation of memory. In all these ways, this thesis aims to answer and explore the question: How and why do these three films represent memory and to what effect does this

relate to their autobiographical elements? This thesis explores the question in the chapters that follow and affirms that the films understand memory as the characters' process of creating an 'image', i.e. an understanding of the past. The fact that this understanding of the past is open to constant reinterpretation further complicates the 'image'. In addition to this the director, like the protagonist, is in the process of creating an image of the past, in both a literal and figurative sense. The autobiographical elements in the films demonstrate that memory and autobiography are expressed through an amalgamation of genres.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The section that follows discusses why these three films are suitable for a discussion on memory and autobiography. I examine each film in relation to what has been said by critics. There has been little academic critique surrounding the films as of yet, as *The Fabelmans* and *Aftersun* were released in 2022 and *All of Us Strangers* in 2023. In consequence, most of my analysis draws on critical reviews. This thesis hopes to contribute to the critical discussion by offering insight on the films' relation to memory and autobiography.

The first chapter explores memory and autobiography in Spielberg's film *The Fabelmans*. Mark Kermode writes in *The Guardian*: "An element of autobiography has long fuelled Spielberg's work" (Kermode). Spielberg's films often incorporate family dynamics that reenact his understanding of his past. Robbie Collin writes in *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*: "The Fabelmans' fictional parts feel just as honest and revealing; seamless syntheses of life and art" (Collin). Collin's observation is of interest when exploring the film's representation of memory and autobiography, as it suggests that the fictional and non-fictional elements of the narrative blend in a fluid way. This is of course due to Spielberg's years of perfecting his craft but more than this, I explore the ways in which Spielberg questions and plays with the "syntheses of life and art". Danny Leigh writes in *The Financial Times* that this "is the movie's signature: the

acceptance that two things can be going on at once. Loving marriages fall apart; callings are driven by talent and fear. And films that seem simple are actually hugely sophisticated” (Leigh). Leigh’s take on the film suggests that the film depicts doubling on multiple levels. In Chapter One I demonstrate this by exploring the doubling of lenses: Spielberg’s lens and the protagonist’s lens. The chapter examines what effect this doubling has on the reenactment of memory. As critics have noted, the film’s depiction of memory and autobiography is significant as Spielberg explores the boundaries of fiction and autobiography through his (and the protagonist’s) skillful lens.

The second chapter examines memory and autobiography through Haigh’s *All of Us Strangers*. Jake Wilson writes in *The Age*: “Haigh is telling us ... that the past sticks with us, for good and for ill. Which means there are dreams, and nightmares, that we never do wake up from” (Wilson). Wilson’s review suggests that memory is pertinent in Haigh’s film and notes that dreams take part in the film’s representation of memory. Alex Godfrey writes in *The Empire*: “Throughout *All Of Us Strangers*, dreams, memories, fantasies and reality collide and blur” (Godfrey). I confirm this reading and explore the ways in which Haigh blurs reality and fiction with memory. Furthermore, Bill Goodykoontz writes in *The Arizona Republic*: “One of the great things about “All of Us Strangers,” Andrew Haigh’s beautiful film, is that it doesn’t allow for easy categorization. It is a love story, a ghost story, a family drama” (Goodykoontz). It is evident that Haigh’s film fuses genres to depict a narrative about memory. In the second chapter this thesis contributes to critics’ observations through a close reading of *All of Us Strangers* to scrutinize Haigh’s depiction of memory and autobiography.

The third chapter explores memory and autobiography in Wells’s *Aftersun*. Critics have noted the subtle strength of Wells’s debut film. Adam Graham writes in *The Detroit News* that “Wells’ promising debut feature plays with memory as a tool and lets its story unfold in dream-like waves” (Graham). As Graham notes, the film is narrated through a dream-like state. I

affirm this and demonstrate in Chapter Three how and why Wells narrates her film through “dream-like waves”. Shubhra Gupta writes in *The Indian Express*: “Aftersun is a film about belonging, aching loss, and making memories, and you will find yourself taking deep dives into personal pools of these elements, looking for your share of the sun” (Gupta). Gupta observes that the film invites the audience to revisit their own memory as they view the film. I will affirm this idea and demonstrate the ways in which the film does this. Furthermore, Richard Whittaker writes in *The Austin Chronicle* that “Aftersun is lyrical without ever being obtuse, and it’s a film that flourishes when attention is paid to details” (Whittaker). In Chapter Three, I aim to scrutinize the film’s details to demonstrate the ways in which Wells’s film expresses memory and autobiography in a subtly yet striking way.

As set out above, the films clearly incorporate memory and autobiography. My thesis question exploring this, consists of two parts. The first part is concerned with how the three films examined in this thesis represent memory. A lot has been written on memory as its complexity invites complex discussion. This thesis will particularly make use of Sigmund Freud’s theories of memory and Walter Benjamin’s analysis of memory as set out in his reading of Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* (1913-1927). Although this may result in a somewhat eclectic approach to the subject, these approaches will also deepen the perspective on memory and offer a methodology that is most suitable to each film’s unique visualization of memory.

The second part of the thesis question is concerned with autobiography - although this thesis touches upon that element less than it does on memory. Its overall approach to the subject engages with the discussion on autobiography and the way in which film as a medium complicates the traditional description of autobiography. There will be a section on Benjamin’s essay “The Image of Proust” (1929) which demonstrates the ways in which memory and autobiography are tied to one another. In addition to this, I discuss some aspects of the critical

debate surrounding autobiography to develop a theoretical background for the analysis of autobiography in the three films. This section primarily draws on theories set out by Laura Marcus in her book *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (1994) and Paul de Man's essay: "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979). This thesis aims to demonstrate that like memory, autobiography is expressed through an amalgamation of genres. I shall now turn to a fuller consideration of the methodological presuppositions with which I shall be working, as set out by Freud and by Benjamin.

### **Sigmund Freud**

Freud is, of course, one of the most influential figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding the human psyche. The section that follows discusses ideas laid out by Freud that are relevant to the analysis of the films considered in this thesis. There will be a discussion of three of Freud's main concepts. The first will be taken from his essay: "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (1924). In this essay he explains the double layer of our psyche in relation to memory. I analyze his initial section on mnemonic devices and examine the way in which this is relevant to the film analysis of this thesis. The second idea explores memory concerning trauma and its relation to the unconscious. The third idea discusses the ways in which memory interacts with dreams. Although Freud's work is contentious in scientific terms and has been subject to critique, nevertheless his work offers significant insight on how and why the depiction of memory in these films interacts with family dynamics, repression and trauma.

#### The Interpretation of Mnemonic Devices

Freud's essay "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" offers an analogy through which he argues the workings of our perceptual apparatus. However, for my purposes the main interest in this essay is the opening discussion on mnemonic devices. Initially Freud discusses several mnemonic devices. He writes that the advantage of using a mnemonic device is that the



information “will have remained unaltered and so have escaped the possible distortions to which it might have been subjected in my actual memory” (227). However, he reaches the conclusion that “devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent, even though not unalterable memory-traces of them” (228). Here, Freud notes that when encapsulating information with for instance a camera, it fails to mimic human memory due to the camera’s limited functions. Freud is likely right in his observation; moreover, it offers a clear starting point for his argument on the different layers of memory retention. However, at the same time he fails to see that any type of mnemonic device is subject to human interpretation. Although Freud is correct in stating that the record “will have remained unaltered”, our interpretation of the record will continually alter how we read the information stored in the mnemonic device (227). Interpretation is relevant when discussing films that depict memory. As interpretation, like memory, is subjective and subject to change over time. Memory and interpretation of memories is a process, and not fixed and static. This is significant in relation to film as a medium; even though films may remain unalterable, the way we interpret them changes over time. This constant reinterpretation mimics the way in which memory is a constant state of reinterpretation. My analysis of the films demonstrates the way in which mnemonic devices are subject to interpretation. Both protagonists in *The Fabelmans* and in *Aftersun* subjectively interpret mnemonic devices. The films demonstrate the way in which mnemonic devices alter the protagonist’s memory while simultaneously the protagonist’s memory influences their interpretation of the mnemonic device.

### The Unconscious and Trauma

Freud’s work on the unconscious and trauma demonstrates the ways in which memory plays a part in our psychological well-being. In his lecture “Traumatic Fixation – the

Unconscious” (1920), Freud discusses his findings on how traumatic events affect patients in their daily lives. He states that patients such as these: “give us the impression of being fixated upon some very definite part of their past; they are unable to free themselves therefrom, and have therefore come to be completely estranged both from the present and the future” (230). Moreover, Freud states: “Mourning is a type of emotional fixation on a theory of the past, which also brings with it the most complete alienation from the present and the future” (233). The word ‘theory’ is significant. Freud suggests that the fixation is not on the past itself but what the patient believes their past to be. It is thus an interpretation of the past or as Freud names it a ‘theory’. Chapter Two examines the film *All of Us Strangers* and applies Freud’s observations on trauma and mourning to the protagonist Adam. As the narrative unfolds it becomes evident that Adam’s interpretation of his past trauma alienates him from the present and future. By analyzing Adam’s character within the context of Freud’s ideas, I hope to demonstrate that in *All of Us Strangers* memorializing the past becomes a fixation that literally and figuratively alienates Adam from his present and future.

### Dreams

Freud argues in Chapter One of *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that “The way in which the memory behaves in dreams is undoubtedly of the greatest importance for any theory of memory in general” (20). He further states that “it teaches us that nothing which we have once mentally possessed can be entirely lost” (Freud 20). Freud discusses trauma in relation to dreams in his lecture on “Traumatic Fixation – the Unconscious” (1920). In this lecture he argues that patients who deal with traumatic neuroses relive their trauma in their dreams. He states: “It is as if these patients had not yet gotten through with the traumatic situation, as if it were actually before them as a task which was not yet mastered” (232). In his lecture on “Wish Fulfillment” (1920), Freud argues that the simplest kind of dreams are hallucinations that depict our hidden wishes and desires (181). The chapter on *All of Us Strangers* demonstrates Freud’s

ideas on dreams through Adam's conflict between his trauma and fear and his underlying wish for belonging.

This section has laid out some of Freud's main ideas on memory, trauma, the unconscious and dreams. Freud's theory suggests that as memory becomes part of our unconscious it is never truly lost. The implications of this occur when one's memory contains trauma. One relives this trauma through dreams. Moreover, Freud's theory argues that dreams contain our hidden wishes. Freud's ideas contribute to an understanding of the psychological implications of memory. His theory will be predominantly applied to the film *All of Us Strangers*. The discussion on mnemonic devices will be of use when examining Chapter One on *The Fabelmans* and Three on *Aftersun*. The section that follows moves into exploring memory in relation to autobiography by discussing Walter Benjamin's essay on Proust.

### **Walter Benjamin – “The Image of Proust”**

Benjamin peruses memory and autobiography in his essay “The Image of Proust” through Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*. While Benjamin's focus lies on Proust, his insight on the author's auto-fictional work offers concepts that are applicable to the films discussed in this thesis. The section that follows sets out main ideas taken from Benjamin's reading of Proust. These ideas contribute to the discussion on memory, particularly in relation to autobiography.

In her article “Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust” (1971), Carol Jacobs states that “Benjamin refers to Proust's image as an expression of discrepancy between life and poetry” (912). As Jacobs notes, Benjamin's reading of Proust elucidates the convoluted relationship between memory and fiction. Benjamin suggests that the act of remembering is inextricably linked to forgetting (198). He proposes that remembering is the utilitarian work of daytime, as opposed to forgetting, which is the novelist's ornamental poetic weaving of the past at night

(Jacobs 913). Benjamin writes: “This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him” (198). In this passage, Benjamin suggests that Proust’s nocturnal poetic weaving of memory, which is more akin to forgetting, triumphs over the merely utilitarian memory of daytime. In addition to this, Benjamin writes in the passage that it is “artificial illumination” which luminates the novelist’s desk (198). This stresses the point that when an author incorporates memory into their art it is by definition an artificial representation of their past just as Proust’s lighting is artificial according to Benjamin. The novelist’s representation of the past is thus a decorative translation which turns fact into fiction.

As the previous section demonstrated, Benjamin argues that Proust’s nonfictional fictional volume demonstrates that memory does not occupy itself with objective facts stored in the brain but is instead a process of subjective poetic interpretations of the past. Memory in Proust’s writing is thus subject to change and appropriation as the memories reappear and are forgotten. According to Benjamin, Proust’s novel reveals that auto-fictional works are less about reporting what occurred in the past but are instead the novelist’s subjective interpretation of the past through the process of memory weaving. It is in the nature of the novelist to create images and in an autobiographical tale the novelist creates an ‘image’ of the past and of himself.

Benjamin’s writing resembles Proust’s in so far as it fuses non-fiction with fiction. Benjamin writes that Proust’s work “is fiction, autobiography, and commentary in one” (197). He describes it as “[a] Nile of language, which here overflows and fructifies the regions of truth” (197). Jacobs states that “Benjamin, like others before him, dissolves an old genre (literary criticism) in order to found a new one, which combines fiction and commentary” (911). In her essay “Proust and Benjamin: the Invisible Image” (1986), Beryl Schlossman argues that “the poetic and the analytical stand side by side, the comfortable distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ literature is dissolved” (92). These scholars’ observations suggest

that there is a parallel between Proust's novel and Benjamin's essay, as both texts display an amalgamation of genres. This is of interest as it suggests that 'image' making, and thus the process of understanding, results in convoluted genres. It demonstrates that although tenuous, the fruitfulness of these texts occurs through a mingling of genres. The significance of this will be further explored in the section on autobiography. As autobiographical texts, like Benjamin's essay and Proust's novel, consist of an amalgamation of fiction and non-fiction.

As mentioned, an author or as this thesis will demonstrate, a film director, creates an image when remembering the past. It is important to formulate a definition for this term 'image' as it carries multiple meanings. Each chapter of this thesis is concerned with images, in both a figurative and literal sense of the word. The figurative sense of the word relates to 'image' as a subjective understanding of someone, oneself or the past. It relates to Benjamin's description of an author's subjective fabrication of the past through the process of weaving and writing about memory. Another way this thesis will use the term image is the term's literal meaning: a depiction, reflection or cinematic/photographic image. The use of images that are close to our perceptual apparatus is one way in which cinema distinguishes itself from the written text. For this reason, I discuss the cinematic images used in each film regarding memory and analyze their significance in relation to the figurative meaning of 'image'.

The previous paragraph defined how this thesis uses the term image. As mentioned, Benjamin's essay is also concerned with Proust's use of the 'image' in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*. Benjamin argues that the 'image' (i.e. the novelist's understanding of himself, the people he encounters and his past) is a search for happiness. According to Benjamin, the novelist seeks out this happiness in fleeting moments, images, and faces and tries to find a resemblance between the original happiness and the 'images' in which he endeavors to find it (200).

Benjamin compares Proust's unsatisfying search for happiness to a children's game of imagining a stocking as "a 'bag' and a 'present' at the same time" (200). Benjamin writes that "children do not tire of quickly changing the bag and its contents into a third thing – namely, a stocking" (200). Benjamin writes that "Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self, at one stroke in order to keep garnering that third thing, the image which satisfied his curiosity – indeed, assuaged his homesickness" (Benjamin 200). In discussing Benjamin's stocking imagery, Jacobs writes that "[the empty stocking] has become an empty sign, signifying nothing beyond itself and serving no purpose. It is mere ornament" (915). As Benjamin's reading of Proust reveals, Proust seeks out meaning in his 'image' of the past. Like the shadows dancing on the wall of Plato's cave, the 'images' sought out by Proust are to him imperfect versions of what he means to find. According to Benjamin, Proust wants to believe in an "elegiac idea of happiness"; it is this Platonic idea of truth that propels him in his search (204). However, the stocking imagery suggests that the 'images' he finds are empty, as the image refers to nothing beyond itself. Memory is thus an unachievable search for lost happiness, and it is the novelist who hunts down this happiness to soothe the soul, through obsessively writing at night. I apply this concept of the author's memory weaving as a search for lost happiness to the protagonists in Chapter Two and Three. The protagonists manifest a Proustian obsession with an 'image' of the past that is unattainable and empty. As Benjamin's reading of Proust demonstrates, when an author obsessively weaves memory, they are merely met by fleeting 'images', thus leaving the author to continue the obsessive search for happiness.

This section briefly draws upon one further idea laid out by Benjamin in his essay on Proust. Benjamin argues that Proust incorporates autobiographical elements in order to offer broader social critique. Benjamin opens the second part of the essay saying: "it is true that not only people but also ages have such a chaste – that is, such a devious and frivolous-way of communicating what is most their own to a passing acquaintance..." (201). In this section of

the essay, Benjamin suggests that Proust's satire subtly penetrates the unspoken hypocrisies of Proust's day and age. I apply this to the chapter on *All of Us Strangers*, to argue the ways in which Haigh comments on silenced queer trauma of his day and age. Benjamin's essay suggests that Proust unveils the unspoken reality of his society.

This section has set out Benjamin's pivotal ideas in his essay on Proust. Benjamin's reading of Proust hints at the convoluted relationship between memory and fiction. The novelist is in search of lost happiness and obsessively creates images of the past through his writing. Benjamin further suggests that Proust comments on real societal hypocrisies through his autobiographical fiction. This section has set out the main ideas on Benjamin's reading of Proust applicable to the films discussed in this thesis.

### **Autobiography**

As the previous section on Benjamin's essay demonstrated, autobiography is intrinsically bound to memory. This following section discusses critical work on autobiography. Alongside memory, this thesis is concerned with the autobiographical elements of the films discussed. These elements offer another dimension to the films' representation of memory. Memory and autobiography are inherently linked as autobiography would cease to exist without memory.

Laura Marcus has written on autobiography in her seminal book *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*. She describes that the critical debate surrounding autobiography is contentious as autobiography complicates traditional approaches to genre classifications (7). Marcus further states that autobiography is simultaneously seen by some critics as: "a precondition or guarantor of a remedy for the fractured identity of modernity" (7). For Marcus, autobiography's hybridity thus reflects the modern age. She further states that: "'true' autobiography has become firmly linked with the view that autobiography is both

introspective and centrally concerned with the problematics of time and memory” (Marcus 2). The analysis of the films considered in this thesis exemplifies this aspect of autobiography. This is because each film explores the problems that occur when retracing the past through memory. In addition to this, Marcus states that most critics do not see the need for verifying the truth when dealing with autobiographical texts as “this ... undermine[s] the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than ‘fact’” (Marcus 3). Marcus states that therefore “the ‘intention’ to tell the truth, as far as possible, is a sufficient guarantee of autobiographical veracity and sincerity” (Marcus 3). As Marcus declares when dealing with autobiography it is unfruitful to decipher which aspects are truthful or fabricated by the author. Instead, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, fruitful analysis occurs when examining the author’s process of weaving the past and what implications this holds. Marcus mainly focuses on the written word; the sections that follow discuss critical debate surrounding cinematic autobiography.

In his book *Autobiography Film/Video/Photography* (1978), John Stuart Katz wrote on cinematic autobiography at a time when autobiographical film was becoming increasingly popular. Katz argues that this popularity was mainly due “to a heightened interest in self-awareness, personal growth, family background, expanded consciousness and the human potential movement” (10). All this contributed to an opportunity for film makers to be less hesitant when incorporating their private experiences, resulting in an intimate bond between audience and filmmaker (Katz 10). Katz argues that the process of making the film can allow the filmmaker to interrogate their past and in some cases to “investigat[e] their relationships with family and friends not to control but to understand them, and to make them meaningful both to themselves and to others” (10). As the chapters that follow demonstrate, familial bonds are particularly relevant to the films analyzed in this thesis.

While cinematic autobiography offers novel ways of creating introspective narratives, the medium through which it is told further complicates the genre. In her essay “Eye for I:



Making and Unmaking Autobiography” (1980), Elizabeth W. Bruss argues that “the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends—seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed ... and the person filming” (297). What Bruss’s argument demonstrates is that cinematic autobiography confounds the narrative voice. Bruss continues her argument by stating that “film appears to lack the same capacity for self-observation and self-analysis that we associate with language and literature” (298). Moreover, in her view (surely a correct one) cinematic works are collaborative works, meaning it is difficult to attribute its status as autobiography to the input of one individual (Bruss 299). Bruss’s points show how film as medium further complicates the autobiographical genre classifications.

As Bruss’s approach to cinematic autobiography demonstrates, film complicates autobiography as a genre. This section discusses deconstructionist Paul de Man’s approach to autobiography and language. De Man states in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement” that one of the problems surrounding autobiography is critics’ approach as “[they] attempt to define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others” (919). De Man argues that, “The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution” (922). He posits that it is through this mutual reflection between reader and writer that all texts have the potential of being autobiographical while simultaneously “none of them is or can be” (de Man 922). His argument suggests that autobiography comes into existence when the writer and reader interact through the text.

While de Man suggests that autobiography is mode of reading, he also argues that while a writer creates a “self” through writing about their life, they simultaneously distort the “self” as language can only ever depict the “self”. De Man writes: “To the extent that language is

figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute” (930). In this passage, he argues that language falls short in capturing the full essence of the thing it describes. Like a picture, language depicts the thing but never is the thing. In the case of autobiography this complicates our stance towards the written word. Language can feel like an intrinsic part of us but as de Man’s passage suggests it cannot fully describe our complete essence. He takes his argument further by stating that: “Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (930). Here, he argues that as an author aims to grasp the essence of the “self” through autobiography, it distorts the mind of the writer in the process. Moreover, the autobiographical text masks that this has occurred, as the writer thinks they have encapsulated their essence through the text. De Man’s argument is significant for the discussion on cinematic autobiography, as the director mostly expresses the “self” through cinematic techniques instead of language. The final section in Chapter One explores this through de Man’s ideas on autobiography and language.

As the previous section suggests, cinematic autobiography creates an opportunity to reimagine the genre through a different medium than the written word. The medium through which cinematic narratives are told complicates a traditional literary definition of autobiography. The films discussed in this thesis are loosely autobiographical as they contain autobiographical elements within fictional narratives. However, it is evident that the autobiographical elements are of importance to the filmmakers. Each chapter of this thesis reflects on the autobiographical elements through ideas laid out by the scholars mentioned in this section. By analyzing the prevalence of autobiography, I aim to investigate the parallels between the protagonist’s and the filmmaker’s reconstruction of memory.

### *Structure of Thesis*

The previous sections have set out the main ideas and concepts this thesis uses to explore memory and autobiography in the three films. The first chapter considers why and how memory and autobiography are incorporated in Spielberg's film *The Fabelmans*. This chapter makes use of Benjamin's reading of Proust to argue that Spielberg explores his understanding of the past with an awareness that cinema complicates this understanding. I argue that Spielberg and protagonist Sammy understand and play with the artful nature of cinema. I discuss the director's awareness in relation to de Man's ideas on autobiography. I affirm that Spielberg and (co-author) Tony Kushner display an understanding that their film's representation of memory depicts and plays with an amalgamation of genres.

The second chapter examines Haigh's *All of Us Strangers*. This chapter incorporates Benjamin's essay to argue that the film depicts protagonist Adam's understanding of the past as a search for lost happiness. Moreover, I argue that Haigh uses his personal experience to unveil and comment on societal issues towards queerness. He incorporates a personal narrative to portray collective queer trauma. In addition to this, I use Freud's theory to analyze and argue that the dream sequence in the film adds a psychoanalytical layer to the depiction of memory. I explore the autobiographical elements and suggest that Haigh's incorporation of personal elements, invites the audience to view the queer experience as legitimate even though it is told through a fictional narrative.

The final chapter offers an analysis of Wells's *Aftersun* and confirms that protagonist Sophie is in a constant process of reinterpreting the past through video images, memory and her imagination. Wells uses imagery to visualize the distortion that takes place in Sophie's constant reinterpretation of the past as she searches for lost unhappiness. Moreover, Sophie's search for lost unhappiness depicts the way in which she imagines her father's struggle with his 'self-image'. In addition to this, the chapter scrutinizes the film's incorporation of "drift".

I analyze this aspect of the film through Leo Charney's ideas set out in his book "Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift" (1998). I demonstrate that the film's incorporation of drift invites the audience into a dreamlike state to enhance subjective experience of memory. Lastly, I argue that "drift" as an instantiation of "the loss of presence" suggests that the images do not refer to anything beyond the images themselves which leaves room for the audience to project their own memories onto the film.

The final section of this thesis summarizes my main ideas, suggests ideas for further research and discusses and concludes the films' representation of memory and autobiography. The chapters that follow verify that the films express memory as the character's subjective understanding of the past. The protagonist's constant reinterpretation of the past complicates their weaving of an 'image' of the past. In addition to this, the director parallels the protagonist's process of remembering. The director creates an understanding of their own past through their film. As the director incorporates autobiographical elements into the narrative, the film demonstrates that memory and autobiography are expressed through an amalgamation of genres.

## Chapter One: Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*

With his film *The Fabelmans*, Spielberg creates a fictionalized memoir about his early interaction with film during a time when his parents' marriage was falling apart. This film reflects on the mechanisms of filmmaking and the notion of the artist. Throughout Spielberg's career, he has incorporated autobiographical elements in his films, most notably in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), where his parents' divorce becomes an element of the fictional narrative. When talking about filmmaking and the director's role in a film Spielberg says: "your life is going to come spilling out on celluloid whether you like it or not (...) but in the sense of *The Fabelmans*, it wasn't about metaphor it was about memory" ("The Fabelmans Interview" 0:17-0:31). Within this film memory plays an important role, particularly in its relationship to the camera. Spielberg demonstrates with this film that the camera never neutrally captures the past. Therefore, when exploring memory through film there is an artificial nature to its representation. This chapter commences with a summary of *The Fabelmans*. The sections that follow argue my claim that protagonist Sammy as well as Spielberg demonstrate an awareness of cinema's artful techniques and play with the notion of art in relation to reality in their films. In addition to this, the film depicts the camera as a mnemonic device that through interpretation becomes meaningful to the interpreter. Moreover, this film offers an ode to filmmaking and suggests that through film perhaps one can frame and edit memories into a fictional narrative. Both Sammy and Spielberg express memory in their films as an amalgamation of genres as they use their directorial choices to turn memory into fiction.

### *Synopsis*

*The Fabelmans* starts at the movies, Mitzi Fabelman, played by Michelle Williams, and Burt Fabelman, played by Paul Dano, take young Sammy, played by Mateo Zoryan Francis-DeFord, to see his first film. Sammy asks for a model train set for Hanukkah to recreate the train crash he saw on screen. His mother, Mitzi, helps him recreate the crash on film so he can

re-watch it without damaging his toy train. This awakens Sammy's love for filmmaking, and he uses his father's camera to create short films starring his sisters. The family moves to Phoenix, Arizona for Burt's promotion and at Mitzi's request, family friend, Bennie Loewy (Uncle Bennie), played by Seth Rogen, moves to Arizona too. The narrative jumps to Sammy as a teenager, played by Gabriel LaBelle, creating films with his fellow scouts. The family and Bennie take a camping trip where Sammy films snippets of the trip. Mitzi's mother dies, leaving Mitzi depressed. Burt gives Sammy editing equipment and asks Sammy to make a film from the camping trip footage to cheer her up. While editing the footage Sammy discovers an (emotional) affair between his mother and Uncle Bennie. After a couple of weeks, he confronts his mother with the footage. Burt receives another promotion which moves the family to California, this time without Uncle Bennie. Sammy suffers antisemitic bullying at his new school. In addition to this, Burt and Mitzi announce their divorce to the family after moving into their new home. The film Sammy made of Ditch Day is shown at prom which receives an enthusiastic response from his peers at prom. In his film he depicts one of his bullies, Logan, as the hero and the other bully Chad, as a loser/villain. Logan is distraught and confronts Sammy causing the two to discuss Sammy's directorial choices. Chad tries to hit Sammy, but Logan heroically punches Chad. The final part jumps ahead a year, here, Sammy is living with his father in Hollywood as he tries to make it in film. He obtains a job on a tv-show. When Sammy's co-creator on the show learns of Sammy's interest in filmmaking, he arranges a meeting with director John Ford, played by director David Lynch. In this meeting, Ford lectures Sammy on where the horizon should be in film. The final shot depicts Sammy walking into the horizon while Spielberg suddenly adjusts the shot to follow Ford's advice.

### *Memory as a Cinematic 'Image'*

One of the most significant scenes within the film in relation to memory is the scene where Sammy edits the footage he shot during their family camping trip. In this scene, he

discovers the (emotional) affair between his mother and Uncle Bennie through images where they interact in a close and secretive manner. This scene continuously switches from Sammy editing the footage in his room to his parents sitting downstairs where Mitzi plays piano, and Burt occupies himself with work. This scene is significant in relation to memory and autobiography. The section that follows argues that the camera becomes more than a narrative device as it becomes a device that confronts and corrects Sammy's memory. Moreover, it is Sammy's interpretation and response to the images that holds merit. This scene encapsulates the way in which the film relates memory to image making in both a literal and a figurative sense. In addition to this, the scene is visualized through distinct cinematic choices. This demonstrates the layering of lenses in the film: there is Sammy's lens and Spielberg's lens. The cinematic choices depict Spielberg's retrospective narration of his past. Moreover, there is a significant interaction between motion, memory and emotion which emulates the way in which moving through memory is a process of constant reinterpretation. As Sammy moves through the footage, he is moved in an emotional sense.

The scene represents the camera as corrective memory. Sammy is confronted with the images he sees of his mother and Bennie. His interpretation of the images demonstrates the way in which he must reinterpret the past. The discussion in the theoretical framework on Freud's essay "A Note Upon 'the Mystic-Writing Pad'" argued that mnemonic devices encapsulate the past in an unalterable form. Although the content captured in the mnemonic device is unchanged, the interpretation subjectifies that which is captured. This proves true for Sammy: the images he shot during the camping trip confront and force him to reinterpret his memory of that moment. The film suggests that although the footage depicts what occurred between his mother and Uncle Bennie, what truly matters is the effect it has on Sammy as he interprets the images. The sections that follow will discuss the way in which Spielberg frames

this scene to visualize his retrospective understanding of the past as well as the way in which he centralizes Sammy's interpretation of and reaction to the camera footage.

The scene depicts Mitzi through reflective images in the piano and cinematographic images Sammy shot during the camping trip. This visualizes the way in which Sammy must reinterpret the 'image' he has of his mother after he is confronted with the camera's corrective memory. It pictures the way in which his mother fails to perform her parental role in his eyes. Moreover, although Sammy does not comprehend his mother's complex internal life, Spielberg's interpretation of the past does so more fully. Therefore, it is simultaneously Sammy's interpretation, revealed through Spielberg's retrospective lens.

As mentioned, in this scene Spielberg depicts Mitzi's face as a reflection in the piano. The second reflection of her face in the piano occurs when the camera moves down to show Mitzi's hands playing Bach (see fig. 1). The shot depicts an example of Spielberg's deliberate shot composition in this scene. The shot visualizes her internal reflection on the roles she must play in life (see fig. 1). The film suggests that she could have been a famous concert pianist and instead she must occupy herself with her nuclear family. Spielberg frames Mitzi's reflection in her instrument to visualize her internal reflection on these matters. Throughout the film there are glimpses of the complexities of parenthood. It suggests that Sammy's parents must perform their parental roles in the narrow ways that society then circumscribed, and that this constraint is only evident through Spielberg's retrospective lens. These reflective shots are one example of how Spielberg's lens offers insight into the private lives of his parents. Moreover, these shots demonstrate the way in which he retrospectively aims to comprehend the difficulty his mother must have felt as she attempts to fit into society's 'image' of a mother and wife. In the case of this shot sequence, Spielberg demonstrates how he retrospectively imagines his mother's internal reflection on her parental and marital roles as the scene that



follows reveals her instability in those roles. Moreover, Mitzi is suffering from depression since her mother died, and the mirrored image of her face emphasizes her internal struggle with loss.

Sammy cannot fully comprehend his mother's difficulties with depression and societal roles; Spielberg can, thus captures these moments through shots like the one in fig. 1. Spielberg's lens adheres to Benjamin's idea that Proust's autobiographical fiction "did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it" (198). This scene demonstrates that Spielberg visualizes his memory through a retrospective understanding of his mother. Without knowing his mother's internal thoughts, he imagines the past and subjectively depicts life as he remembers it not as it actually was. By visualizing her face as a reflection, Spielberg expresses an understanding of Mitzi's somber internal thoughts and feelings as she is lost the music she plays. This shot demonstrates that Spielberg's retrospective lens can capture and imagine the moments he could not comprehend at the time.



Fig. 1: Mitzi's reflection in the piano

In addition to Spielberg's framing of Mitzi's internal reflection, the shots suggest that the 'image' Sammy has of his mother changes as he reinterprets the past. The shot of Mitzi's reflection in the piano is followed by a shot of an image of her in Sammy's editing display. This further indicates that as Sammy and Spielberg reinterpret the past, they are dealing with images in both a literal and a figurative sense. As the previous section argued, Benjamin's reading of Proust suggests that in reconstructing memory one is always dealing with a subjective understanding of the past. This is applicable to Sammy as his memory of his mother is a constant reinterpretation of his 'image' of her. The film uses literal images to add another dimension to the figurative meaning of 'image'. The scene suggests that cinematic images can alter and contribute to one's understanding of the past. However, unlike one's memory, which is inconsistent and variable, film provides a fixed image. Sammy's interpretation of the cinematic images suggests that although the images are fixed, his interpretation varies like memory. This scene visualizes the way in which Sammy's 'image' of his mother alters as he edits the footage of the camping trip. It implies that memory is one's merely subjective understanding of the past. The emphasis in this scene falls on images; naturally as a film, the film depicts Mitzi through images and in doing so it invites reflection in Sammy as well as in the audience.

Spielberg narrates this scene through distinct editorial choices. These choices visualize Spielberg's retrospective framing of the past as a subjective interpretation of a key moment in his life. This suggests that autobiography in film is subject to the implications produced by *mise-en-scène*. This type of framing can be read as significant considering the autobiographical undertone of the film. Spielberg's directorial choices reveal that framing the past is never neutral. The *mise-en-scène* reveals how the filmmaker wants the audience to feel towards characters and situations. For example, his choice of panning from right to left when framing his parents, a shot that reverses the customary movement of the eye. The movement from right

to left suggests a negative or sinister situation. This foreshadows the negative shift in Sammy's feelings towards his mother as he discovers her infidelity while editing the camping trip footage. Moreover, Spielberg positions Burt on the right and Mitzi on the left to suggest that Burt is the stable parent and Mitzi the weak, unstable parent. Additionally, his use of an arc shot stresses the emotional impact this discovery has on Sammy. As the arc shot moves around Sammy it visualizes the emotional movement that takes place in him as he discovers his mother's infidelity. Moreover, the shot where Sammy jumps back as if witnessing something horrific amplifies the emotional impact. These techniques demonstrate that Spielberg's retrospective lens does not neutrally depict his memory. As a director he makes directorial choices that employ specific cinematic techniques to depict the narrative.

In the previous section I claimed that the scene where Sammy discovers his mother's infidelity is significant for the film's representation of memory and autobiography. Spielberg depicts Mitzi through a reflection in order to hint at her internal struggles. The mirrored shots simultaneously suggest that Sammy is constantly reinterpreting the 'image' he has of his mother, just as he reinterprets the home video images he shot during the camping trip. This scene demonstrates the way in which Spielberg's retrospective reenactment of memory is expressed through his subjective use of *mise-en-scène*. The section that follows explores the doubling of Sammy and Spielberg's lens.

### *Framing People: Sammy's Ditch Day Film*

The previous section demonstrated that remembering is a process of image making in both a literal and figurative sense. A filmmaker can use the cinematic medium to manipulate the depiction of memory. This section examines the way in which this relates to the notion of art and how this affects the way memory and autobiography are visualized. Throughout the film, Spielberg is occupied with realism vs art and what role filmmaking plays in this. The scene where this clearly unfolds is when Sammy's peers watch the film, he made of their Ditch

Day. This scene demonstrates how filmmaking can turn memory into art. Sammy purposefully edits and reframes Ditch Day to create fictional characters out of real people to enhance the narrative. This section affirms that the confrontation between Sammy and Logan is telling for the film's representation of memory and autobiography. Logan's discomfort with Sammy's film offers a reflection on the implications of framing memory. It suggests that when depicting the past, the filmmaker can purposefully turn memory into artifice. Sammy's edit of Ditch Day emulates the way in which Spielberg's film *The Fabelmans* likewise turns his past and loved ones into art.

As this implies, the confrontation between Sammy and Logan visualizes the complex relationship between the filmmaker's ability to edit and reframe the past. Logan's discomfort lies in Sammy's ability to transform Logan's image through filmmaking. This scene suggests that filmmakers can distort reality into art through cinematic techniques. Logan's discomfort offers a reflection on *The Fabelmans* as this film is Spielberg's framed interpretation of his own past. After the class has watched Sammy's film Logan confronts Sammy in the hallway. He urges Sammy to tell him why he made him look magnificent to which Sammy responds: "Logan. All I did was hold the camera and it saw what it saw". Logan and Sammy both know this answer is too simplistic, and Logan persists until Sammy gives the answer that follows:

Sammy: "I wanted you to be nice to me for five minutes, or – I did it to make my movie better! I don't know why. You are the biggest jerk I have ever met in my entire life, I have a monkey at home that's smarter than you, you dumb anti-Semitic asshole. I made you look like you can fly!"

Logan: "But I can't fly! I can outrun any guy in Santa Clara County, and I worked real hard to do that! But you, you make me feel like I'm some kinda failure or a phony or, or like I'm supposed to be some guy I'm never gonna be,

not even in my dreams – you took that guy whoever he is wherever you got him from and you put him up there on that screen and told everyone, everyone that that’s me! And that’s not me!”

As the dialogue shows Logan is distraught by the fact that Sammy’s cinematic image of him is unattainable and untrue. Logan feels as though it distracts their peers from his real-life accomplishments and diminishes them. In the dialogues above, Sammy gives two possible answers as to why he framed Logan this way. On the one hand, Sammy is a boy who endures antisemitic bullying and uses his film to gain control over the situation. This suggests that a filmmaker, like Spielberg, can use his lens to gain control and understanding of difficult situations in life. Much like his first interaction with film; the train crashing into the car. On the other hand, Sammy is a filmmaker who wants to create an intriguing and entertaining narrative. Sammy is aware that as a director he can frame the world around him to his liking. The scene seems to play with the idea that filmmakers can create heroes or villains and that this influences the way the people on screen are remembered. Sammy frames Logan as the hero and as the cheering reactions of his peers demonstrate, this is how he will be remembered by them.

There is an additional tension to Sammy’s framing in his *Ditch Day* film. As mentioned, Logan bullies Sammy because of Sammy’s Jewishness. Despite this, Sammy chooses to frame Logan, a WASP, as the hero of his film. The film does not give a clear answer as to why Sammy depicts the anti-Semitic bully as the hero in his film, however their fraught relationship does add to the tension in this scene. As Sammy says, perhaps, he did it to make his movie better. It is clear, however, that Sammy and Spielberg’s Jewish heritage are of importance within the narrative. Although this thesis does not touch upon this aspect of the film more fully, it is important to note that Spielberg’s Jewishness also likely interacts with the film’s representation of memory and autobiography. Therefore, Sammy’s framing in this scene complicates the way

in which Spielberg invites the audience to understand how both he and Sammy relate to their Jewish heritage.

Alongside the additional tension of framing bully Logan as the hero, the scene reveals much about the ways in which the film represents cinema's relation to memory – and indeed to reality itself. The confrontation between Logan and Sammy invites the audience in a subtle way to question the truthfulness of the film they are watching. Spielberg is a director who throughout his oeuvre has played with cinematic techniques to create dramatic fictional narratives. With this scene, he invites the audience to reflect on cinema as an artform and the way in which its techniques complicate the film's autobiographical elements.

In addition to the confrontational dialogue between Logan and Sammy, Spielberg incorporates specific cinematic techniques in this scene and the scene leading up to it to demonstrate precisely the point Logan makes about framing. Spielberg frames these scenes in such a way that Logan is the hero and Chad the villain like in Sammy's film. Spielberg executes these techniques as a subtle meta cinematic wink at the audience. By doing this he drives home the point on realism versus art in film. The analysis of this scene aims to contribute to the discussion on the film's representation of autobiography.

Spielberg frames the scene leading up to Sammy and Logan's discussion on the artfulness of cinema in such a way that it emulates precisely the type of filmmaking that Logan finds discomfiting in Sammy's film. After the Ditch Day film is finished, the camera pans towards Logan who is praised by his peers. It is important to note that the music that was playing during Sammy's Ditch Day film is still playing. As the heroic optimistic music continues, Logan dismisses the praise but is met by Renee (the girl he cheated with), who wants to tell him how amazing he is. Ex-girlfriend Claudia pushes Renee aside and dramatically kisses Logan as the girls in the background giggle and smile at the kissing couple. The mise-

en-scène and music in this shot sequence heightens the drama to emulate a classic Hollywood ending where the hero ‘gets the girl’ and is praised by onlookers. Therefore, the drama captured in Sammy’s film continuous in Spielberg’s film. Not only does this blur the boundary between Sammy and Spielberg emphasizing the autobiographical undertone of the film, but it also demonstrates that Logan’s point about film as artifice holds merit. Spielberg continues the drama on Sammy’s screen to his own, to set up Logan’s issue.

Spielberg frames Logan as the hero and villainizes Chad when Logan punches Chad to protect Sammy from Chad’s attack. This creates a parallel between Sammy’s framing in his Ditch Day film and Spielberg’s framing in *The Fabelmans*. Spielberg’s meta cinematic wink at the audience demonstrates the point Logan tries to make when discussing Sammy’s artful image of him. In the scene, Logan and Sammy’s confrontation is interjected by Chad. The camera captures Chad screaming “Fabelman” in a dramatic manner. As he runs up to Sammy, Logan punches him and scares him off. Chad dramatically runs away, while the camera captures Logan cracking his neck. Though subtly executed, this section in the scene is heightened in its dramatic delivery. Chad and Logan both step into their roles as villain and hero. The lower angle from which the punch is shot emphasizes Logan’s strength and the awkward manner in which Chad runs-off frames him as the unsuccessful villain. Spielberg uses his directorial skills to visualize exactly the point Logan makes in his discussion with Sammy. The previous section explored my claim through Benjamin’s reading of Proust. Benjamin’s observation that the writer narrates life as it is remembered and not as it actually was, is of interest to this scene. Sammy and Spielberg demonstrate that they have a clear understanding that their depiction of the past is in fact artifice. The following section explores this idea further. The scene discussed demonstrates that Spielberg establishes a parallel between Sammy’s film and his film. By doing this Spielberg winks at the audience as the incorporation of dramatized mise-en-scène demonstrates the artful nature of film.

### *Autobiography through Cinematic Language*

As the previous section demonstrated, Spielberg plays with the form of his film to give an answer to the film's stance on art vs reality. His incorporation of distinct cinematic and narrative techniques complicates the representation of memory. Spielberg is not blind to this complication; instead, he comments on it and plays with it throughout the film. The scenes discussed in the chapter give examples of how he does this. This section will give some final thoughts on the film's autobiographical elements. I argue that the title is telling for the film's representation of autobiography. Moreover, I discuss Spielberg's awareness of the artful nature of cinema as directors learn how cinema works, they understand the rhetorical implications. The final scene of the film hints at this awareness in a playful manner.

The title of the film is noteworthy for the discussion on autobiography. In an interview with Charline Bouzon for *En-Vols* magazine co-writer Tony Kushner explains the origin of the name *The Fabelmans*. He took the name from Spielberg's last name. Kushner states in the interview: "Spiel in Yiddish means a speech or a play. I always thought it was crazy that this man was this storyteller like you meet one every century and that he had this name" (Bouzon). Kushner continues stating that: "I thought of the German word fabel, which I've always liked, which means fable or story. And since the film is largely inspired by Steven's life, but has fictional elements, I thought Fabelman was a perfect nod to that" (Bouzon). As Kushner explains, the film amalgamates fiction and autobiography. The title hints at Spielberg's last name while simultaneously punning on the narrative's fictional nature. This demonstrates Kushner as well as Spielberg's awareness of the film's hybridity. As the title suggests, it is both fiction and autobiography at the same time. The co-authors play with this by depicting a narrative that is self-aware of the complications when framing memory. This idea will be explored further in the final section.



Although film may feel closer to reality than the written text, as its techniques emulate our perceptual apparatus, it is precisely these techniques that come with implications. Making it impossible to encapsulate the true essence of the past. Spielberg explores the power of cinematic techniques in this film. When an author writes their autobiography their closeness to language as a seemingly natural phenomena may blind them to the rhetorical implications. As language may feel like a natural and true expression of our essence and being. However, as de Man argues in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement”, it is impossible to encapsulate the essence of something through language as language cannot fully encapsulate anything (930). Moreover, de Man argues that language is inherently rhetorical which complicates a narrative that claims to depict the ‘truth’ (930). It is difficult to know whether an author intends these rhetorical figures or if they are blind to the implications language holds when writing an autobiographical text.

Film differs from language, in so far as the medium initially creates distance between the maker and the narrative. To make a film, a director must learn cinema’s rhetoric as if learning a second language. Therefore, a director is aware of cinematic rules and thus aware that cinema can manipulate what it captures on screen. In *The Fabelmans*, Spielberg demonstrates that he is fully equipped with the awareness that cinematic techniques complicate the representation of memory. The scenes described in this chapter demonstrate how Spielberg executes his rhetorical cinematic language while simultaneously reflecting on it. To further accentuate this point, I will discuss the final scene of the film and the way in which the closing shot is Spielberg’s demonstration of cinema’s artful nature.

In the final scene, Sammy is invited by the co-creator of the show he is working on to meet the classic Hollywood director, John Ford. In this scene Ford gives Sammy a lecture on where the horizon should be in film. Ford says to Sammy: “now remember this: when the horizon’s at the bottom, it’s interesting. When the horizon’s at the top, it’s interesting. When

the horizon's in the middle it's boring as shit". After Sammy leaves Ford's office, the camera films him walking down the street. In this shot, Spielberg abruptly adjusts his lens so that the horizon moves from the middle to the bottom. This closing scene finalizes the film's entire journey through memory and autobiography and most notably the film's stance on filmmaking as an artform. The final scene is based on a true story which adds to the autobiographical nature of the film ("Where's the Horizon"). In addition to this it suggests that cinema frames and that through framing one can create a narrative that is either interesting or boring. Spielberg's final framing adjustment at the end playfully demonstrates his role as a director. In his film he incorporates parts of his memory, but whilst framing those memories he exhibits that he is, just as he has been throughout his oeuvre, a filmmaker. With the final shot he shows the audience that he is aware of his ability to frame his past in order to make it 'interesting' for the audience.

This chapter discussed memory and autobiography in relation to Spielberg's film *The Fabelmans*. The first section argued that the camera is a mnemonic device that corrects Sammy's memory as he subjectively interprets the footage. This suggests that although film footage is static, the way in which one interprets it changes over time. In addition to this, there is a doubling of lenses in this scene; Sammy's lens and Spielberg's lens. In the scene discussed, Spielberg's lens frames his memory in such a way that it depicts his subjective retrospective point of view. The second section claimed that the film depicts both Sammy and Spielberg's awareness that cinema can frame reality into artifice. Moreover, Spielberg and Kushner exhibit that as director and co-author they are equipped in their understanding of cinema's rhetoric. Throughout the film Spielberg playfully frames his past and demonstrates his awareness that the act of framing memory complicates the way in which he represents his life as it spills out on celluloid.

## Chapter Two: Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers*

In Haigh's *All of Us Strangers*, screenwriter Adam, played by Andrew Scott, visits his parents even though they died in a car crash when Adam was twelve. Memory acts as the driving force of the film. As Adam reminisces with his supernatural parents, he is simultaneously confronted with memories that drastically shaped his life. Throughout his life traumatic memories cripple Adam's ability to connect with people. Like Adam, Haigh also explores the ghosts of his own past through this film. The autobiographical elements interwoven with the fictional narrative reveal that Haigh, like the protagonist, finds himself in the process of creating an 'image' through his screenwriting. This chapter will argue that Haigh's film visualizes the type of Proustian interplay between autobiography and fiction. The film shows that memory and literature are intrinsically bound to one another in art and dreams. While Spielberg's film discussed in the previous chapter is clearly autobiographical, this film is autobiographical in a much more subtle way. This chapter will explore the effect this has on the narrative and what this contributes to the discussion on autobiography in film. By reflecting on this process, I aim to argue that the film reveals that fact and fiction are intrinsically linked through memories and dreams.

This chapter commences with a summary of the film, followed by sections supporting my claim. The section that follows the synopsis supports my claim that the film depicts memory as an 'image' of the past. It visualizes this through meaningful colors and reflective images. Moreover, as protagonist Adam creates an 'image' he searches for lost happiness only to find that his past never contained the happiness he obsessively seeks. The chapter further argues that Haigh takes a personal narrative in order to comment on societal issues surrounding queer experience. He thus takes that which is personal to visualize collective memory. The Freudian dream sequence adds a psychoanalytical aspect to the film's depiction of memory. It visualizes the way in which Adam's unconscious explores his wish for belonging, while also terrorizing

him with the ghosts of his past. The autobiographical elements of this film are subtle and unique. By incorporating his own past in the film, Haigh legitimizes and places the queer experience he depicts in his fictional narrative. In all these ways, Haigh's film *All of Us Strangers* expresses memory as an 'image' of the past; though this subjective understanding of the past, the film breeches the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction.

### *Synopsis*

Haigh takes the premise of a screenwriter in his late 40s who reconnects with the ghosts of his parents from Taichi Yamada's novel *Strangers* (1987). In the novel, the theme of loneliness haunts the pages through protagonist Hideo Harada's first-person narration. Harada is a straight man who is recently divorced and lives in Tokyo. In *All of Us Strangers*, Haigh incorporates the main premise of a lonely screenwriter who reconnects with his past through a phantom experience but turns it into an opportunity to tell a more personal narrative.

The film starts with Adam, a screenwriter in his late forties who lives in a high-rise apartment in London. He is writing a screenplay that incorporates elements from his past. His neighbor, Harry (played by Paul Mescal), visits him one evening but Adam declines Harry's offer to come in. Occupied with the past, Adam takes a train to his childhood home. To his surprise, he is met by life-like phantoms of his deceased parents, who are the age they were when Adam was twelve. He spends an evening with them catching up and reminiscing about the past. Back in London, Adam visits Harry and the two men become romantically involved. Adam revisits his parents and engages in a difficult conversation with his mother (played by Claire Foy) about his sexuality. On a later visit, he confronts his father (played by Jamie Bell) with his emotional distance throughout Adam's childhood. Back in London, Adam and Harry visit a nightclub. Here, reality and dreams merge as Adam finds himself, in the nightclub, at his parents' house and in the London underground through a dream-like sequence. As Adam awakes from the dream, he takes Harry to see his parents' house. Upon arrival the house is

dark, Harry is skeptical and leaves. Adam wakes up in his parents' home and his parents take him to their favorite family restaurant where they give him their approval of his relationship with Harry before saying their final goodbyes. Back in London, Adam walks into Harry's apartment and is met by a stench, drugs and empty bottles. Adam walks in on Harry's corpse wearing the same clothes he wore on the night they met, which suggests their relationship was also imaginary. Harry's phantom walks in, distraught that Adam must see him like that. Adam comforts Harry and takes him to his apartment, where the two men lie in bed. As the camera zooms out the two men transform into a beam of light among a starlit sky.

### *Memory as 'Images'*

The film's opening shot visualizes and foreshadows Adam's process of creating an 'image' through his reflection in the window looking out at the city (see fig. 2). The use of the colors blue and red in the opening shot depicts his process from loneliness to connection. The image of Proust described by Benjamin reveals that the novelist's writing is weaving, and that the memories of the past reveal more about the 'image' of the artist than the actual past (198). When one is searching, one is deliberate and personal. Proust weaves with his words, Haigh weaves through his film. The protagonist is in a similar state of searching through memories of his past. While Adam writes his script, he weaves memories in a most peculiar way. This search is in a way a search for his own 'image' i.e. an understanding of himself. The opening shot is telling for the entire film, as it is precisely this shot that reveals the 'image' of Adam the narrative depicts. The shot is of London through Adam's window, the most notable part of this image is the color blue. The cool tones of the color signify Adam's isolation and loneliness. The use of this color reveals that city life has been a lonely life for him.



Fig. 2: Opening shot depicting Adam's reflection in the window of his apartment

The shot continues to depict Adam's reflection in the window which slowly gains focus. As the shot focuses on Adam's reflection the sun rises, turning the blue skyline red. It is notable that Adam's reflection is red throughout the shot (see fig. 2). Red signifies Adam's longing for love and belonging amid the isolation he experiences through life in the city. In the film Adam and Harry's conversations reveal that Adam longed for connection throughout his life but had difficulty finding it. It foreshadows the change he undergoes through his relationship with Harry. Throughout his life, he has felt isolated and lonely as the ghosts of his past crippled him in his ability to form relationships.

The first shot of Adam is a literal image as it is a reflection in a window. This suggests that as Adam revisits the past there is a constant readjustment and reinterpretation of 'images'. Moreover, the literal reflection that is depicted at the start of the film signals the figural reflection he has on his self 'image' throughout the narrative. The following sections of this chapter will explore this in more detail. Like Benjamin's Proustian image, this opening shot suggests that this film is about the 'image' of the protagonist, it is about the reflection on this 'image', his loneliness and search for belonging. Proust's approach to autobiography unveils the way in which the memories of the artist, in this case protagonist Adam as well as director

Haigh, are more akin to ‘image’ searching than a mere report of past events. The film visualizes this concept through the opening shot.

### *The ‘Image’ of Lost Happiness*

The previous section demonstrated that the opening shot visualizes Adam’s longing for belonging. The shot discussed suggests that the film depicts Adam’s search for this belonging through his interpretation of the past. This section will argue that Adam’s search for belonging is like Proust’s search for lost happiness in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*. However, as Adam seeks out his lost happiness in order to belong, he realizes the past was already flawed. I examine this concept through the scene where Adam discloses his sexuality to his mother.

As mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, the process of writing a script inspires him to seek out his past. As he reminisces in fond memories with his parents, he is also confronted with the loneliness he felt as a child. He realizes that the lost happiness he seeks out was already a distorted ‘image’. Although his parents loved him, he felt disconnected from them due to his sexuality differing from theirs. The scene where he shares his sexuality with his mother exemplifies the distorted ‘image’ of his childhood.

As his mother questions him about his love life, bombarding him with heteronormative assumptions, he tells her that he is gay. She is taken by surprise to which Adam responds: “what? you didn’t think it would be a possibility?”. To which his mother replies: “of course not, what parent would want to think that about their child? No parent I know”. This scene demonstrates that the loneliness Adam felt throughout his life was not only a result of his parent’s death, but that it was the way he felt alienated due to his loved one’s reaction to homosexuality. As Adam is questioned by his mother about loneliness in relation to being gay, nasty comments, marriage, kids and AIDS, Adam realizes that the alienation he felt in his

childhood had not been mentioned till now. The 'image' his mother had of him was incorrect and the 'image' he has of himself is disappointing in her eyes. This triggers a subtle yet emotional response in Adam as he listens and responds to his mother's indelicate inquiries.

The film suggests that memory and 'image' are interwoven. This connects to the point made by Benjamin in his essay on Proust. He describes Proust's quest for happiness as: "the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, the first happiness. It is this elegiac idea of happiness-it could also be called Eleatic- which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory" (Benjamin 200). In this passage Benjamin suggests that for Proust, there is a perfect original happiness to seek out through the preservation of memory. It is, however, unattainable, as when dealing with memory, happiness has gone before and is therefore evidently lost. So, it is an 'image' the author creates through memory. Proust seeks out this 'image' through obsessively weaving his memory.

In *All of Us Strangers* the happiness sought out by Adam was never perfect to begin with, it is this realization that confronts him. In reconnecting with his parents Adam hopes to find the happiness and belonging he missed in his adult life. The scene described in this section demonstrates that both characters have a conflicting 'image' in mind. Adam's mother is disappointed that the 'image' she had of him is incorrect. She prefers to see her son as the 'image' she had created in her mind, instead of who he is. Adam in turn is disappointed that his mother prefers this 'image' of him. Moreover, he realizes that although this process initially may have been a search for happiness and belonging in his past, he realizes that the 'image' of the past he had hoped for is flawed. Like Proust, Adam becomes obsessively occupied with seeking out this 'image' by visiting his parents' apparitions, however this scene exemplifies his realization that the past was flawed even before the traumatic experience of losing his parents.



The scene examined in the previous section demonstrates the way in which the film depicts memory as a reinterpretation of the past. Moreover, the film depicts that when the characters are confronted with conflicting ‘images’, the process of reinterpretation can cause disappointment that one’s understanding of the past needs adjustment. The section that follows discusses how Haigh uses a personal narrative to communicate collective experiences.

### *Collective Memory Made Personal*

While Adam is haunted by personal ghosts throughout the narrative, the film simultaneously visualizes collective ghosts. Haigh uses this film to comment on queer experience, particularly how the AIDS epidemic marked a generation of gay men. Moreover, he uses this film to communicate the lost childhood of many queer people. Adam’s loss of his parents symbolizes this lost childhood. Haigh visualizes the collective memory and experience through a personal narrative. I return to Benjamin’s essay on “The Image of Proust” to examine how Haigh uses personal memory to visualize collective memory. Benjamin writes in his essay on Proust:

We do not always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say. Nor do we always privately share it with those closest to us, our intimate friends, those who have been most devotedly ready to receive our confession. ... not only people but also ages have such a chaste-that is, such a devious and frivolous-way of communicating what is most their own to a passing acquaintance... (201)

In this passage Benjamin suggests that like our own apprehension in sharing our most important confessions, an age contains its own evasiveness. According to Benjamin, Proust uses satire to penetrate through the evasiveness of his age (204). This section will argue that Haigh uses a confrontation between different generations to explore the silenced collective trauma of his own generation’s queer experience. By reflecting on memory of that age, how it shaped a

generation of gay men, Haigh confesses that which is difficult to confess. As Haigh says in an interview with Alex Needham for *The Guardian*: “I wanted it to be very specific about a certain generation of gay person, which was our generation, it wasn’t an easy time” (Needham).

In the scene discussed in the previous section, when Adam’s mother questions him about the dangers of AIDS, this triggers a physical response in Adam which Haigh uses to explore collective memory and trauma. In the interview with Needham, Haigh sheds light on Adam’s deteriorating health in the film: “I think all of us gay men of that generation know that every time we had a bit of a sweat if we were having sex with other people, we were suddenly terrified that we were going to have HIV” (Needham). Haigh continues this idea stating that: “A swollen gland was not just a swollen gland. I wanted to have that trickling under the surface, that AIDS is another fear that Adam has buried. I’m telling a ghost story – what are the things that haunt him?” (Needham). Haigh points out that the memories that haunt Adam are collective memories. Through Adam he represents the fear felt in one’s body during the AIDS epidemic. Adam’s bodily response, coughing and fever, visualizes the way in which memory can haunt one’s body. Haigh depicts this collective queer memory of fearing one’s body during the AIDS epidemic through Adam’s declining health.

Haigh further explores this collective experience through Adam’s conversations with Harry. Through these heartfelt conversations, Haigh aims to penetrate the evasive attitude an age can have towards queer experience by incorporating the voice of two different generations of gay men. Adam has lived through the prejudices of the 80s into a more accepting attitude towards queerness, yet he is still haunted by the prejudices of the age he grew up in as the conversation with his mother in the previous section demonstrated. Adam’s love interest, Harry, is from a later generation yet experiences this type of estrangement in his own way. One example of this is when Adam and Harry lie in bed as Harry shares how he has been pushed to the margins of his family. Harry says: “I’ve always felt like a stranger in my own family, then

coming out just puts a name to that difference, it's always been there". Harry's words move Adam as it confronts him with their shared experience of familial and societal estrangement. Adam responds by saying: "Things are better now, of course they are, it doesn't take much to make you feel the way you felt". In these scenes, Haigh confesses the generational trauma experienced by queer individuals. He uses personal narratives to create societal commentary.

As Proust incorporates some aspects of his own life in his novel to diagnose the societal hypocrisies of his age, Haigh weaves his own experience into the narrative of *All of Us Strangers*, to comment on collective queer experience. Unlike Proust, who was not forthcoming regarding his homosexuality in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*, Haigh does integrate his own queer experience in his film. There is no consensus as to why Proust was open regarding some aspects of his life and evasive regarding others. It does show that when examining autobiography, one automatically meets with the author's liberty to make editorial choices regarding their memory. Haigh makes the editorial choice to let this particular experience seep through the narrative of his film so that the personal can comment on generational trauma. This suggests that it is in the nature of the artist, novelist and director to take that which is zoomed-in and personal into a larger frame. As the artist, in this case director Haigh, incorporates certain aspects of his past over others, he literally and figuratively frames memory. Through this framing he creates an 'image', memory is thus more akin to an 'image' i.e. an understanding of past experiences, than a mere factual depiction of the past.

### *Adam's Freudian Dream*

As the previous sections demonstrated, the film represents memory as an 'image' of the past. The past shapes the 'image' of the protagonist. Moreover, the process of memory weaving is in part the 'image' of the protagonist as well as director Haigh. It is evident that childhood and trauma interact with this 'image'. The film is a therapeutic exploration of these underlying issues; it explores the unconscious through a dreamlike narrative. In his lecture "Traumatic

Fixation – the Unconscious”, Freud states that patients who experienced trauma: “give us the impression of being fixated upon some very definite part of their past; they are unable to free themselves therefrom, and have therefore come to be completely estranged both from the present and the future” (230). Moreover, he argues in this lecture that patients who deal with trauma relive their trauma in their dreams (232). Freud’s work on repressed trauma and wishes of our unconscious and the exploration of this unconscious through dreams, suggests that repressed experiences and memories beset this underside of our brain. The most prominent scene that explores Freudian unconscious is the dreamlike sequence, where Adam and Harry’s drug-induced partying at the nightclub takes a dark turn. By analyzing this scene with Freud’s theory in mind, I aim to demonstrate that the film visualizes Adam’s memory as it intersects with repressed trauma and wish-fulfillment. His past becomes part of his dreams and alienates him from the present. The therapeutic conversations with his parents and Harry add a psychoanalytical dimension where the plague of his unconscious drifts to the surface of consciousness where it can be treated. At the same time, by making this film, Haigh delves into his own therapeutic process. Like dreams, filmmaking in the case of *All of Us Strangers* is a fictional narrative through which the filmmaker visualizes his own past.

The film transitions Adam’s reality into a dreamlike scenario to visualize that the trauma trapped in Adam’s unconscious plays a major part in his everyday life; so much so that reality and dream morph into one another. The flashing colors in this scene hint at his internal struggle between loneliness and wanting to connect and belong. The scene is part of a montage where Adam and Harry spend their time together in a nightclub and shots of their domestic life together. During the segment the song “Death of a Party” by Blur plays. The scene takes a dreamlike turn when Adam wakes up from his sleep and walks to his apartment window. The skyline is lit-up with blue and red flashing lights. The shot morphs into a shot of Adam standing in the nightclub with similar blue and red flashing lights. As mentioned early on in this chapter,

the cool tones of the blue skyline in the opening shot visualize the loneliness and isolation Adam experiences. The dream sequence incorporates the flashing lights to depict Adam's constant battle between the blue light that haunts him and the red light he longs for, which represents connection and love. By morphing reality into dream, the film emphasizes that Adam's unconscious wishes and trauma seep into his everyday life.

The nightmarish scene in the nightclub visualizes Adam's wish to connect with Harry. At the same time, it visualizes his fear that his connection to Harry is a fleeting image. In the nightclub, Adam walks into people which confuses and disorients him. He is relieved when he sees Harry standing behind him in the reflection of a mirror. His relief turns into distress as he realizes it is not Harry but an image of Harry. The music slows down which distorts the melody to signal Adam's distress. He screams and moves his head in an erratic manner as if shaking off the ghosts that haunt him. This brief shot sequence speaks volumes as it suggests that however real Adam wants Harry to be, his relationship with him is a wishful image of his imagination. The ending of the film confirms his fear played out in this dream when Adam walks in on Harry's corpse only to realize the whole relationship was imaginary. The red and blue flashing lights in the club further stress his struggle between his wishes and his fears. This sequence of the dream suggests that Adam's unconscious toils with the constant battle between loneliness and disconnection from others and his wish fulfillment for connection and belonging. It demonstrates that the search for happiness is distorted as it is not real happiness he finds, but an 'image' that is as fleeting as Harry's face is in the mirror at the night club.

The scene where Adam wakes up in his childhood home visualizes the wishes and fears of his unconscious. In this part of Adam's dream, his wish fulfillment is abruptly disrupted as he relives his trauma. This demonstrates Freud's point in his lecture on "Traumatic Fixation – the Unconscious", that patients who have experienced trauma relive the traumatic situation in their dreams (232). The dream sequence cuts from the nightclub to him waking up in his

childhood bed wearing tight-fitting pajamas from when he was twelve. He walks downstairs into the living room where his parents are decorating the Christmas tree. After sharing a wholesome family moment, his mother puts him back to bed. As Adam is unable to sleep, he gets into his parents' bed in between his mom and dad. When he turns to his dad, his dad is replaced by Harry who kisses Adam. He is confused and relieved to see Harry, however his comfort is disrupted when he sees blue lights flashing from the window. He turns back to his mother's side of the bed, but she is no longer there. Harry disappears as well, leaving Adam alone in his parents' bed with blue lights flashing from the police car outside. This scene demonstrates Freud's concept of wish fulfillment in dreams. Adam returns to a childlike state, the pajamas visualize this. He seeks out his parents' love and comfort. As his father is replaced by Harry, the film suggests Harry is his new wish fulfillment, replacing the love and comfort he can no longer receive from his parents. The slight oedipal tension further enhances the Freudian undertone of this dream segment. The police car's blue flashing lights signal that his parents' death causes him to feel lonely throughout his life. This scene shows how Adam relives this traumatic event in his dreams. Moreover, the scene depicts the ways in which Adam's unconscious toils with his wish fulfillment and the fear that his wish is unattainable.

The final scene depicting Adam's dream, further enhances his underlying fear that his wish for belonging and connection cannot be met. The scene transports him from his parents' bed to the London underground. Here, he sees Harry walking by, Adam follows him but loses him. As Adam sits down, he sees his own reflection in the window of the tube screaming, the shape of the window distorts the image. Adam's reflection is morphed into the reflection of him as a child screaming for his mother (see fig. 3). The shot cuts to him in bed with Harry where he wakes up from this nightmare in distress. This final scene of the dream segment emphasizes the fear Adam experiences due to his trauma. Adam seeks connection in Harry to find the connection he longs for throughout his life. In this scene, Adam loses sight of Harry.

By following this loss with a shot of him screaming for his mother, it signals that Adam's unconscious is marked by his traumatic experience and that his trauma and wishes become part of his dreams. Another significant detail is the use of the distorted window reflection (see fig. 3). As this chapter has aimed to demonstrate, Adam is occupied with the 'image' i.e. his understanding of the past. The final shot of him as a child screaming in the tube window visualizes the importance of 'images' in relation to memory. His traumatic memory becomes part of his 'image' of the past and the film uses literal images to reflect this aspect of Adam's memory.



Fig. 3: Adam's reflection morphs into him as a child screaming for his mother

This section demonstrated that part of Adam's memory is depicted through a Freudian dream segment where Adam relives his trauma through dreams. The scenes discussed in this segment visualize that Adam's reality is morphed into a dream where the wishes and fears of his unconscious are explored. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, Haigh's film is like Adam's dream as it is a fictional place where wishes and fears can be investigated. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss some final thoughts on the autobiographical undertone in the film.

### *Autobiography in All of Us Strangers*

This chapter touched on some significant aspects of Haigh's autobiographical elements in the film. In this section, I would like to briefly consider what this film has to contribute to the overall discussion on cinematic autobiography. As mentioned, Spielberg's film is clearly autobiographical, the characters are based on his family and the narrative depicts significant moments in his life that prompted his passion for filmmaking. Haigh's autobiographical undertone is subtle. He uses a ghost story to communicate his generations queer experience. In his film Haigh investigates relationships and the way in which the treatment of one's sexuality can distort these relationships as well as mend them. This type of investigation in relationships through autobiographical film matches Katz description where filmmakers: "investigat[e] their relationships with family and friends not to control but to understand them, and to make them meaningful both to themselves and to others" (10). This is what Haigh aims to do, by incorporating elements of his own life, such as his childhood home as a set for the film, he personalizes the fictional narrative. Moreover, Andrew Scott, who plays Adam in the film, states in interviews that this role is deeply personal to him. Like protagonist Adam, he is a homosexual man from the generation Haigh depicts through the protagonist. In an interview for *BAFTA Online* Scott states: "There's a huge amount of my own experience, I suppose I wanted to bring to it" ("BAFTA interview" 2:21). Scott points out the personal connection an actor can feel when taking on a role. Bruss argues that actors complicate autobiographical cinema as their presence in the film schisms the narrative voice (297). Autobiographical film is thus collaborative in its autobiographical undertone. As this section argues, Haigh invites the audience to view the queer trauma as real even though it is wrapped up in a fictional ghost story. Moreover, autobiography is a collaborative effort as film is equally a collaborative effort.

This chapter claimed that *All of Us Strangers*, expresses memory and autobiography as an 'image' of the past. Haigh uses his understanding of the past to narrate collective queer



experience through a personal narrative. Moreover, in the film memory intersects with unconscious trauma and wishes which breeches reality with a dreamlike state. Haigh incorporates personal elements in the film to subtly suggest that although the narrative is fictional, the experiences told are real and important. Moreover, actor Scott's incorporation of his own experience into his role suggests that film's collaborative nature further schism the traditional narrative voice in written autobiography. In all these ways, *All of Us Strangers* expresses that when memory intersects with fiction; genres schism and merge.

### Chapter Three: Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun*

The previous chapters have suggested a connection between memory and 'image' making. This chapter builds on this by investigating memory and autobiography in Wells's debut film *Aftersun*. In this film, memory shapes the body of the narrative. An adult, Sophie, played by Celia Rowson Hall, reconstructs her memory as she looks through old video footage of a summer vacation with her father, Calum, played by Paul Mescal. She looks back at herself at age eleven and tries to reconstruct the 'image' she has of her father. Eleven-year-old Sophie, played by Frankie Corio, is perceptive but cannot completely comprehend the mental health issues her father experiences during their vacation. It becomes evident that the way she saw her father at the time of their vacation has been altered by events that occurred after their trip. The film depicts the ways in which memory can be seen as a subjective interpretation of past images. Throughout the narrative, we see the difficulty Sophie has in attaining a clear 'image' of her father. Their trip in Turkey can no longer be seen as summer fun, as the memory of her father's suicide influences the way she remembers the vacation. Although the film does not explicitly depict her father's death, it subtly suggests that this might be Sophie's reason for searching through her memory to find what she missed at that time. Moreover, Wells took inspiration from memories of her own relationship with her father, who passed away when Wells was sixteen. The suggestive nature of the film text emphasizes the subjective and interpretable nature of memory. As Wells allows the audience to fill in what the film merely hints at, she leaves room for the audience to project their own memory on the film. "In A Note from Charlotte Wells" for *A24films* the director states that: "there is room for you in this film too. I hope you can take it, fill it, in order to feel it" (Wells). Wells states that this film is unmistakably fictional but that it is emotionally autobiographical. Through close analysis of the film's representation of memory and autobiography, I aim to shed light on the significance of Wells's personal fictional narrative.

While the first two chapters of this thesis relied on Benjamin and Freud's theory on memory, alongside the other theories considered, this chapter also draws on Benjamin's reading of Proust as well as on Charney's definition of "drift" in his book *Empty Moments; Cinema, Modernity and Drift*. As in the previous chapters, I argue that Benjamin's reading of Proust can be usefully applied to this film. In *Aftersun*, memory is for the most part related to one's 'image'. Moreover, the process of weaving one's memory is simultaneously the process of creating an understanding of oneself. Both Sophie and Calum are preoccupied with their 'image'. Sophie is in search of lost unhappiness as she tries to form an understanding of her father's mental health issues, whereas, Calum is occupied with the conflict between his private 'image' and the 'image' he wants Sophie to remember. Lastly, using Charney's definition of "drift", I claim that the film incorporates "drift" to emphasize memory's dreamlike subjective essence. I apply his concept of "drift" as "loss of presence" to demonstrate that *Aftersun*'s autobiographical elements are present while simultaneously they are not. The film's drifting nature suggests that in art an image is merely an image. It is only when the audience interprets the image by projecting their own subjective memories onto it that it gains meaning. In all these ways, I claim that *Aftersun*'s subtle emotional journey through memory merges and schisms genre categories to express the complex nature of memory.

### *Synopsis*

The first scene of the film depicts an adult Sophie watching home videos she and her father (Calum) shot on a MiniDV camera during their vacation in Turkey. The home video frames are followed by frames of Sophie as an adult in a strobe-lit rave. While the non-linear narrative is primarily set at a vacation destination in Turkey during the late 90s, it switches back to the present day where we see Sophie in her apartment. Moreover, there are shots of (adult) Sophie and Calum in a strobe-lit rave dispersed throughout the narrative. The plot revolves around Sophie and Calum as they engage in summer entertainment at a budget resort.

The film depicts Sophie on the brink of adolescence as she befriends British teens. At the same time, we see subtle glimpses of Calum's depression. Although the narrative does not disclose any clear reason for his depression, it hints at Calum's attempt to hide his psychological turmoil from Sophie. The story reaches its climax when Calum refuses to sing a karaoke version of "Losing My Religion" by R.E.M with Sophie, forcing her to sing alone. When they part ways, Sophie joins her older friends and Calum walks into the dark ocean. Although hinted at briefly, Calum does not commit suicide and is asleep in their room when Sophie is let in by a hotel staff member. The film closes with Calum and Sophie dancing to "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie. The dance scene is paralleled with a dance scene between grown-up Sophie and Calum in the rave. The final scene of the film is a video recording of eleven-year-old Sophie waving goodbye at the airport. This is followed by Calum closing the MiniDV camera and walking through a door into the rave.

### *Memory as Image*

In the first two chapters, I argued that memory is largely related to fabricating an 'image'; the 'image' of the past one remembers and the 'image' of oneself whilst memorizing the past. The 'image' and the act of creating an 'image' is a prominent way through which Wells represents memory in her film *Aftersun*. As protagonist, Sophie reimagines the past; she fills in the gaps in her memory to create an 'image' of her father that seems more suitable to her for the present. Memory is depicted as a constant reinterpretation of the past. In this process of reimagining her father's 'image' she is closer to creating an 'image' of herself. This section argues the ways in which the film depicts Sophie's process of reimagining and adjusting her memory as a search for lost (un)happiness through which she hopes to create a deeper understanding of her father. In this search she guides her memory through the home video recordings. In the film, Sophie's subjective interpretation of the home videos images infuses them with meaning. Moreover, the camera, in addition to the subjective interpretation, also

distorts the true essence of a moment due to the performative nature one has when being filmed. Sophie's use of the video images depicts the way in which memory is a distorted interpretation of the past. The section that follows justifies this claim through a close analysis of the film's opening scene as it is telling for the film's representation of memory.

For the analysis of this section, I would like to return to Benjamin's reading of Proust. As mentioned, in the second chapter, Benjamin focusses on 'the image' of Proust, as the title of his essay suggests. Benjamin writes that "the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection" (198). Not only is this applicable to Proust but also to the protagonist in *Aftersun*. It is the weaving of memory that holds merit – the creation of an 'image' of the past. In the previous chapter, I also described Benjamin's take on this image of Proust. According to Benjamin, Proust is in search of lost happiness, one that is pure and unattainable but sought out, nonetheless. In *Aftersun* there is a similar pursuit, however in this case, it is a pursuit of lost unhappiness. Adult Sophie is occupied with seeking out what she seemed to miss as a child. She searches for signs of her father's mental health issues in video images and memories of their summer vacation. Her weaving of memory is a pursuit of the unhappiness Calum felt at the time of their vacation, and of her own unhappiness due to her loss. This again relates to memory as an 'image', that is to say a subjective understanding of the past. This restructuring and reimagining of the past suggests that the film represents memory as a narrative one can rewrite with knowledge of the present. The following section analyzes the opening shot where the film visualizes the ideas discussed in this paragraph.

One of the most poignant scenes comes when Sophie asks to interview Calum. The home video footage of this moment occurs twice in the film. The video is initially the opening scene of the film and emphasizes the way in which the entire film is Sophie's process of creating an 'image' of the past through video/photographic images, memory and imagination.

The term 'image' carries multiple meanings. I argue that in the case of this scene 'image' means how Sophie sees her father and how this relates to Benjamin's definition of image in relation to Proust. Moreover, 'image' also relates to cinematic image and that which is captured within the frame of a camera. The connection between these two definitions of image reveals the ways in which the film represents memory.

As mentioned, the opening scene depicts a home video recording where Sophie wants to interview Calum. The home video is paused on a faded silhouette of Calum's face which is partially covered by the hotel room curtain (see fig. 4). When the video is paused on this shot, there is a vague silhouette of adult Sophie reflected in the television screen where she is re-watching the old footage (see fig. 4). This shot is followed by a rewinding of the video which then cuts to adult Sophie in a dark strobe-lit rave. This opening shot sequence reveals much about the film's representation of image in relation to memory.



Fig. 4: Home video paused on Calum with Sophie's reflection in the television

The opening scene suggests that Sophie is preoccupied with the image she has of her father in both a literal sense, through his video images, and a figurative sense in how she constructs her understanding of him. By pausing on the shot of his silhouette, the film emphasizes that his video image is all Sophie is left with and that it is up to her to color in the image she has of her father as if coloring in the darkened silhouette to delineate its unclear features. While Calum's face is partially hidden behind the curtain, it is through her memory that Sophie hopes to unveil her father's pain and thus her own pain of losing him. This signals the way in which the narrative is Sophie's search for lost unhappiness. The shot of Calum's dark silhouette is likened in its meaning to the shadows in Plato's cave, as it is merely an unclear projection of who her father was. This relates to what Wells says about memory "In A Note from Charlotte Wells" for *A24films*: "Memory is a slippery thing; details are hazy, fickle. The more you strain, the less you see. A memory of a memory endlessly corrupting itself" (Wells).

While this shot of Calum's silhouette depicts Sophie's baffled search for lost unhappiness, it also visualizes the complexity of video images in relation to memory. This shot suggests that film and the act of framing and capturing complicates memory. The home videos do not neutrally contain the past. To understand the implications this has on memory, I will apply elements of Geoff Dyer's observations on photography in his book *The Ongoing Moment* (2005) to the home videos in *Aftersun*. In his book, Dyer reflects on the relationship between the photographer and the subject captured in frame. Dyer does this by considering photographers' interest in photographing blind people. Dyer writes: "The blind subject is the objective corollary of the photographer's longed-for invisibility" (13). The photographer is conscious of the fact that their relationship with their subject is distorted by the subject's awareness of the camera. Unlike the photographer, Sophie and Calum do not seek invisibility when capturing each other on camera. However, as Dyer's observations suggest, the subject's

awareness of the camera does affect how they act in front of the camera making it impossible to capture their true essence.

In *Aftersun*, Calum dances in the home video, and he acts up and plays the fool to avoid Sophie's questions about him. He is aware of the camera's ability to capture moments and is uncomfortable with it. In an interview with Sogo Hiraiwa for *Tokion*, Wells states that: "I directed Paul (who plays Calum) to avoid the camera, which is why he dances from side to side" (Hiraiwa). Wells also states in the interview that we mainly see Sophie in front of the camera (Hiraiwa). Wells's directing in this scene emphasizes Calum's awareness of the camera capturing him. His evasive attitude in front of the camera suggests his discomfort with being framed, captured and remembered in that moment. As mentioned above, the shot of Calum's silhouette in this video suggests that even though Sophie is left with video images of him, she cannot see his true essence in the videos. Therefore, although Sophie uses the camera as a mnemonic device, the film suggests that the memories preserved in the video images are not neutral depictions of the past thus complicating their use as an aid to Sophie's memory.

The film's use of blocked images as Sophie rewinds the camera and strobe-lights in the rave scene visualize the fragmentation in Sophie's memory process. The aforementioned shot of Calum's silhouette is followed by blocked images as Sophie rewinds the old camera (see fig. 5). The narrative switches to a scene where adult Sophie finds herself in a strobe-lit rave. The strobe lights create a distorted image of Sophie's face in a similar way that the rewinding of the film footage distorts the images of Calum and Sophie's summer vacation. By placing the strobe lights after the blocked images of the video footage, the film creates a continuity between the two. These shot combinations illuminate the film's representation of memory. The blocked images emphasize the fragmentation that occurs in Sophie's memory as she moves through the videos of their summer vacation (see fig. 5). To remember her past, she must piece together fragments and imagine the missing parts. In the rave scene, the camera zooms in on her face



which is distorted by the strobe-lights. This visualizes the way her journey through memory distorts her search for herself. The process of remembering consists of brief glimpses of her past just as the strobe-light illuminates her face for a mere moment only to then leave her in the dark.



Fig. 5: blocked image as Sophie rewinds the home video

### *Calum's Self-Image*

The previous section demonstrated the ways in which the film depicts Sophie's memory as her fragmented reinterpretation of the past. While Sophie is in the process of creating an 'image' of her father by means of memory, she contemplates his struggle with his own self-image. Throughout the narrative, Calum is in the process of creating an 'image' of himself for Sophie's memories. As adult Sophie reinterprets what she did not fully understand as a child, the audience sees Calum's private struggle. Throughout the narrative, the film offers glimpses of Calum's conflict. On the one hand, he is occupied with preserving a good 'image' of himself for Sophie's memory. On the other hand, his mental health issues affect this process which tires

and frustrates him. During the course of the film, Calum repeatedly looks at vacation images captured on the MiniDV camera revealing his preoccupation with the nature of the images portrayed there.

In one of these scenes is when Sophie is sleeping, and Calum looks back at the videos shot at the airport. As Calum lies on his hotel bed at three in the morning and stares at the camera, the shot depicts Calum, and not the footage he is watching, yet the audio indicates his occupation with the way the camera preserves his image for Sophie. In the video, Sophie and Calum joke about him being amazing for taking her on the trip. When Sophie starts to explain in the video why her dad is “being amazing”, Calum closes the camera. This scene is subtle, yet significant, as it signals Calum’s preoccupation with the image he will leave behind for Sophie from the start of the film’s narrative. As this scene visualizes, it is this preoccupation that keeps him up at night. The shot depicts the camera as an important mnemonic device, but simultaneously, one with implications. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, filming someone is never neutral, it is an act of framing, there is performativity involved. While Calum’s obsession with the preservation of his image for Sophie is evident as the video lights up his face in the dark room, the image he wants to portray also confronts and haunts him. This is evident when he shuts the camera just as Sophie is about to explain why he is “being amazing”. Although the film does not directly imply it, the act of shutting the camcorder suggests that Sophie’s explanation is too confrontational. It suggests that Calum, who is in a constant struggle with his self-image, cannot listen to Sophie’s positive words about him. The scene discussed is part of Sophie’s reconstruction of her past, she reimagines moments like these to create a subjective understanding of her father. As mentioned earlier on, she revisits the past with her knowledge of the present to search for lost unhappiness. As this scene demonstrates, she imagines her father’s unhappiness as a struggle between who he is and how he wishes to portray himself to her.

### *Memory, Drift and Autobiography*

In the final section of this chapter, I claim that the shot of Sophie sleeping on the bus contributes to the feeling of “drift”. Charney correlates modernity with “drift” in his book *Empty Moments; Cinema, Modernity and Drift*. Charney describes drift as “the general condition of subjective experience in the loss of presence” (7). The film depicts “drift” through the slow-paced vacation setting, shots of water and sky and shots of Calum and Sophie sleeping. The latter will be explored in this section as it is fundamentally related to memory. Moreover, I claim that the autobiographical elements of the film can be read in relation to “the loss of presence”. I argue that the images exist without a referent thus leaving room for the audience to project their subjective memory onto the film. The section closes with some final thoughts on the film’s autobiographical elements and the way in which this complicates and contributes to the discussion on autobiography.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, one way the film depicts “drift” is through long shots of the characters sleeping. The scene on the bus at the start of the narrative, where Sophie is half asleep on Calum’s lap, is a key example of “drift”. This scene contributes to the feeling of “drift” and emphasizes the subjectivity of Sophie’s memory. Moreover, by incorporating these shots, the film suggests a correlation between the narrative, which is memory, and dreams, where memories are processed. By placing the shot of Sophie in between sleep and non-sleep at the beginning of the narrative, it invites the audience to enter a similar in-between subjective place as they watch the narrative unfold.

Charney’s reading of Proust in relation to “drift” sheds light on the relationship between sleep and non-sleep. Charney states that in Proust: “‘Sleep’ as a state of experience is replaced by drift, which weaves sleep and nonsleep into one continuous experience as it brings together past and present” (11). Although different in their narrative form, as Proust’s *À la Recherche*

*du Temps Perdu* is a written text and *Aftersun* is a film, both narratives incorporate a dreamlike essence that can be read as “drift”.

There are multiple shots where Sophie and Calum are sleeping at the beginning of the film. The one I refer to is the dreamlike shot sequence when they are on the bus on their way to the hotel. Sophie is half asleep on Calum’s lap; the shot depicts Sophie as she dozes off alongside shots of the passing view. The shots out of the window create a dreamlike feeling as it is dark outside and the lights from the buildings and houses flicker as the bus passes them. In these shots, Sophie is in-between “sleep and nonsleep”. This visualizes the way in which memory is likened to a similar in-between space. It is as Charney describes it, “drift” is this in-between dreamlike place, where there is a mingling of past and present (11). By placing these shots towards the beginning of the narrative, the film invites the audience to view the rest of the narrative through “drift”. It invites the audience into the in-between space. The space where memory is experienced through dreamlike subjectivity. Although shots like these are subtle, they contribute to the overall feeling of “drift” in the film. Moreover, these shots contribute to the film’s representation of memory. The dreamlike “drift” suggests that memory is a subjective amalgamation of past, present and imagination. As the narrative unfolds it becomes evident that Sophie and Calum’s bus journey to the hotel is merely the beginning of the “drift” through Sophie’s memories.

Alongside the subjective space of “sleep and nonsleep”, Charney’s definition of “drift” describes that subjective experience is situated in “the loss of presence” (7). This concept is of interest when investigating memory and autobiography in *Aftersun*. While the autobiographical elements may suggest an intrinsic meaning captured in Wells’s cinematic imagery. The concept of “the loss of presence” suggests that the images do not refer to anything beyond the images themselves. Therefore, when Sophie searches for an image of her father, through memory as well as through the home videos, she must use her imagination to fill in the gaps as the image

itself is merely an image without a referent. In a similar way, Wells's incorporation of her own past cannot be viewed as a referent. Wells states "In A Note from Charlotte Wells" for *A24films* that: "This film is unmistakably fiction, but within it is a truth that is mine; a love that is mine" (Wells). To Wells, this film contains elements of her past, but it is not a referent to her past. It is art, and art refers to itself which leaves room for the spectator's projection onto the artwork. The strength of this film is simultaneously its weakness. As the film subtly alludes but never informs, it leaves room for the audience to fill in the empty referent in a subjective manner. If the viewer fails to project their own memory onto the film, its meaning will be lost.

As the previous section argued, the film incorporates "drift" as "the loss of presence" so that it becomes an image with an empty referent. The missing referent leaves room for the audience to participate in fabricating the film's meaning through their own subjective interpretation. Wells has called her film emotionally autobiographical, this somewhat vague explanation, does invite a novel way of viewing cinematic autobiography. As mentioned in the introduction, autobiography is a contentious genre; its amalgamation of fiction and non-fiction schisms traditional genre classifications. Cinema as a medium further complicates this, as a cinematic production is not written by one person but made by multiple people. Marcus argues that it is perhaps critics' approach to autobiography that problematizes the genre classification more so than the texts themselves (7). By approaching autobiography as a hybrid genre, one can open new possibilities for the genre classification. Autobiography is like memory in that it is an amalgamation of genres that invites multiple approaches and reinterpretations as time goes by. The film *Aftersun* is an example of how subtle incorporations such as emotional autobiography can offer a novel understanding of the genre. It allows the film to feel personal while leaving room for the audience to project their own memory onto it.

This chapter aimed to demonstrate the significance of memory in Wells's *Aftersun*. I claimed that memory is intrinsically linked to images, both in a figurative and a literal sense. I

demonstrated that both Sophie and Calum are occupied with images. Sophie searches for lost unhappiness through videos, imagination and memory. This establishes that the film expresses memory as a complex fusion of sorts. It invites the audience into a dreamlike state to experience memory as an in between-space. Furthermore, the images through which Wells narrates her emotional past, are merely images, not her actual past. This allows the audience to project their own subjective memory onto the film. *Aftersun* thus expresses memory and autobiography as both a fragmentation and a fusion of genres.

## Conclusion

This thesis analyzed the notions of memory and autobiography in Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans*, Andrew Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* and Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun*. Throughout the text, I argued that the films investigate connections between memory and autobiography through an amalgamation of genres. While weaving their stories, directors parallel the journeys of their protagonists as they occupy themselves with a subjective understanding of the past. As a director creates an 'image' of the past through film, it complicates the autobiographical elements of both the film and their own past.

In Chapter One, I asserted that Spielberg and protagonist, Sammy, demonstrate an understanding that cinematic techniques frame and distort reality. In addition to this, Sammy is confronted with images of the past as he edits the shots he took of his mother and Uncle Bennie. In this scene, Spielberg depicts the camera as a mnemonic device that confronts and corrects Sammy's memory. While the images of Sammy's home video are unchangeable, Sammy is in a constant state of subjective reinterpretation. Through the doubling of lenses (Spielberg's lens doubled with Sammy's lens) Spielberg narrates the changes that occur in Sammy as he is moved by the images. Moreover, Spielberg's lens offers a retrospective understanding of his own past. The mirrored shots in this scene exhibit the way in which Spielberg imagines his own mother's internal conflict. In addition to this, Spielberg uses his lens to offer a cinematic wink to the audience and invites them to question the ways in which the film frames memory. I substantiated this claim by scrutinizing the scene where Logan confronts Sammy with Sammy's artful framing of him in the *Ditch Day* movie. My final argument focused on Spielberg and co-writer, Kushner's, awareness of cinema as artifice, and its relation to the discussion of autobiography. I showed that cinematic rhetoric differs from language; a director must learn its rhetoric as if learning a second language. Therefore, filmmakers exhibit an awareness that cinematic techniques convolute depictions of their pasts.

It is Spielberg's understanding of this, which results in a playful self-awareness as he reenacts his memories through film.

In Chapter Two, I argued that Haigh's *All of Us Strangers* expresses memory as an 'image' of the past. I analyzed the way the film's opening shot crystalizes the constant tension between Adam's loneliness and his longing for connection. He obsessively seeks this connection in his phantasmic 'image' of the past. Moreover, Adam searches for lost happiness. Adam realizes that the past did not contain the lost happiness he seeks in the scene where he discloses his sexuality to his mother. In this scene, both characters must reinterpret their understanding of the past. I further established that Haigh uses a personal narrative laced with autobiographical elements to narrate and comment on queer experience. He, thus, frames that which is personal to depict collective memory. Moreover, I argued that the Freudian dream sequence contributes a psychoanalytical tension in the depiction of memory. Through a close reading of this scene, it is clear that Adam's wish for belonging is distorted by the trauma he experienced. Finally, I suggested that Haigh incorporates aspects of himself in this film to solidify his depiction of collective queer experience within the fictional narrative.

In Chapter Three, I claimed that Wells's *Aftersun* explicates the protagonist's process of creating an 'image' of the past. Sophie searches retrospectively for lost unhappiness as she tries to fabricate an 'image' of her father from video images and memories of their vacation. The cinematography portrays the idea that she is closer to grasping an understanding of herself as the image of her father is literally and figurately both distorted and veiled. I further posited that the video camera recordings are images that guide Sophie's memory. Her subjective interpretation of the videos suggests that as she views the videos, her memory convolutes the images encapsulated within the mnemonic device. Moreover, the performative nature one has while being filmed further complicates the images and further distorts Sophie's understanding of her father as portrayed in the home videos. In addition to this, Calum is occupied with his



self-image. The home videos Sophie and Calum shoot during their vacation occupy and confront him as he struggles to portray the ‘image’ he wants Sophie to remember. Lastly, I claim that the film incorporates “drift” through dreamlike shots to enhance the subjective nature of memory. In addition to this, the “loss of presence” expressed through “drift” signals that the images are images without a referent. This implies that autobiographical elements can be read into the film, while suggesting at the same time that they cannot. The empty referent leaves room for the audience to project their own memory onto the film.

While this thesis has touched upon several aspects of the films’ capacity for the expression of memory and autobiography, there are several avenues for further exploration of this topic. For instance, this thesis did not examine the impact of cultural identity on memory in *The Fabelmans*. Alongside Spielberg’s exploration of film as artifice, more could have been said about how his Jewish cultural heritage features prominently in the film. An analysis of how cultural heritage intersects with memory and autobiography could further contribute to the discussion of the nature of memory and autobiography as portrayed in the film. Further, while the analysis of Haigh’s film did touch upon (collective) identity, more could be said on memory in relation to the different generations depicted in the film. Though examined briefly when discussing the conversation between Adam and Harry, the film clearly explores generational identity through memory in Adam’s parents as well. An analysis of how these different generations discuss the past with one another could expand the discussion set out in this thesis. Clearly, each of these films is an example of a coming-of-age narrative, or *bildungsroman*. The role that memory and autobiography play in the journey from child- to adulthood provides new direction for further research. *Aftersun*, in particular, depicts Sophie in the process of growing-up alongside a parent with mental health issues. Sophie’s growth into adolescence is inextricably linked to her father’s mental health issues, and these, in turn, have a profound effect on her life as an adult. These are several new avenues for further exploration of the ways

memory and autobiography are portrayed in the context of the three films analyzed in this thesis.

While this thesis is in no way exhaustive, I hope it has shed light on some of the ways in which *The Fabelmans*, *All of Us Strangers* and *Aftersun* express memory and offer a new vision of the possibilities in autobiography. Both memory and autobiography can be read as an amalgamation of genres. When looking back on past experiences, one creates an ‘image’ of the past. As this thesis established, directors often choose to use their medium as an expression of their subjective understanding of the past. By incorporating aspects of themselves into the film, they create a uniquely constructed depiction of the life they remember. This thesis has attested that when one tries to encapsulate one’s life in film (or literature), genre boundaries are destined to schism, break apart or merge. Just as Freud’s “scientific” endeavors are more akin to literature than science; as Proust weaves his life into fiction; or as Benjamin writes philosophy through poetic prose; so too are these films’ expressions of memory and autobiography an amalgamation of genres. For the filmmaker’s memory seeps into their art, and their art shapes their memory.

## Works Cited

- “‘Where’s the horizon?!?!’ When 15-Year-Old Steven Spielberg Met John Ford.” *Austin Film Society*. [www.austinfilm.org/2014/12/wheres-the-horizon-when-15-year-old-steven-spielberg-met-john-ford/](http://www.austinfilm.org/2014/12/wheres-the-horizon-when-15-year-old-steven-spielberg-met-john-ford/). Accessed 10 April 2024.
- “The Fabelmans | Steven Spielberg – Director/Writer/Producer – Interview.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Critqal, 9 December 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDrf\\_GMjpGk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDrf_GMjpGk). Accessed 1 March 2024.
- Aftersun*. Directed by Charlotte Wells. Performances by Paul Mescal, Frankie Corio and Celia Rowson-Hall. MUBI, BBC Films & Screen Scotland, 2022.
- All of Us Strangers*. Directed by Andrew Haigh. Performances by Andrew Scott, Paul Mescal, Jamie Bell and Claire Foy. Film4 and TSG Entertainment, 2023.
- Leigh, Danny. “Five Stars for The Fabelmans – Spielberg’s Oscar-nominated memoir of his youth.” *Financial Times*, 26 January 2023, [www.ft.com/content/6d0643a7-991d-4981-84c0-8f20a74c499d](https://www.ft.com/content/6d0643a7-991d-4981-84c0-8f20a74c499d). Accessed 1 March 2024.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Image of Proust.” *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. The Bodley Head, 2015, pp. 197-210.
- Bouzon, Charline. “The Fabelmans: Everything you need to know about Steven Spielberg’s latest movie.” *En-Vols*, 24 May 2023, [www.en-vols.com/en/inspirations-en/culture-en/the-fabelmans-everything-you-need-to-know/](https://www.en-vols.com/en/inspirations-en/culture-en/the-fabelmans-everything-you-need-to-know/). Accessed 1 March 2024.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. “Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film.” *Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 296-320, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856312.296>.

Charney, Leo. *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*. Duke University Press, 1998,  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822379119>.

Collin, Robbie. "A train crash, David Lynch and a glimpse into Steven Spielberg's broken home." *The Telegraph*, 26 January 2023, [www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/fabelmans-review-step-inside-stein-spielbergs-broken-home/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/fabelmans-review-step-inside-stein-spielbergs-broken-home/). Accessed 1 March 2024.

De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-Facement." *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 94, no. 5, 1979, pp. 919-930, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2906560>.

Dyer, Geoff. *The Ongoing Moment*. Abacus, 2006, pp. 12-14.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. IV (1900), The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*. Translated by James Strachey. Vintage, 2001.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. V (1900-1901), The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and on Dreams*. Translated by James Strachey. Vintage, 2001.

Freud, Sigmund. "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad.'" *Theories of Memory: A Reader*. Edited by Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead. Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 114-118.

Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Tom Griffith, translated by G. Stanley Hall. Wordsworth Editions, 2012.

Godfrey, Alex. "All of Us Strangers Review." *Empire*, 22 January 2024, [www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/all-of-us-strangers/](http://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/all-of-us-strangers/). Accessed 24 May 2024.

Goodykoontz, Bill. "Inspired by a Japanese ghost story 'All of Us Strangers' is a hauntingly beautiful film." *AZ Central*, 3 January 2023,

[www.eu.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/movies/billgoodykoontz/2024/01/03/all-of-us-strangers-movie-review/72089648007/](http://www.eu.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/movies/billgoodykoontz/2024/01/03/all-of-us-strangers-movie-review/72089648007/). Accessed 24 May 2024.

Graham, Adam. "In 'Aftersun,' memories help paint a picture of loss, love." *The Detroit News*, 10 November 2022,

[www.eu.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/movies/2022/11/10/in-aftersun-memories-help-paint-a-picture-of-loss-love/69638538007/](http://www.eu.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/movies/2022/11/10/in-aftersun-memories-help-paint-a-picture-of-loss-love/69638538007/). Accessed 1 May 2024.

Gupta, Shubhra. "Aftersun: A poignant father-daughter drama." *The Indian Express*, 6 January 2023, [www.indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/aftersun-a-poignant-father-daughter-drama-8366087/](http://www.indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/aftersun-a-poignant-father-daughter-drama-8366087/). Accessed 1 May 2024.

Hiraiwa, Sogo. "A Dialogue Between a Father and Daughter via a Videotape: Charlotte Wells, the Director of Aftersun, on Imagination and Memories." *Tokion*, 6 June 2023, <https://tokion.jp/en/2023/06/06/interview-charlotte-wells/>. Accessed 1 May 2024.

Jacobs, Carol. "Walter Benjamin: Image of Proust." *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 86, no. 6, 1971, pp. 910-932, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907451>.

Katz, John Stuart, ed. *Autobiography Film/Video/Photography*. Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978. *Internet Archive*. Accessed 18 April 2024.

Kermode, Mark. "The Fabelmans review – Spielberg's lavish love letter to cinema." *The Guardian*, 29 January 2023, [www.theguardian.com/film/2023/jan/29/the-fabelmans-review-stein-spielberg-michelle-williams-paul-dano-lavishly-personal-love-letter-to-cinema](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/jan/29/the-fabelmans-review-stein-spielberg-michelle-williams-paul-dano-lavishly-personal-love-letter-to-cinema). Accessed 1 March 2024.

Marcus, Laura. *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*. Manchester University Press, 1994.

Needham, Alex. “‘A Generation of queer people are grieving for the childhood they never had’: Andrew Haigh on *All of Us Strangers*.” *The Guardian*, 29 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/dec/29/a-generation-of-queer-people-are-grieving-for-the-childhood-they-never-had-andrew-haigh-on-all-of-us-strangers>. Accessed 24 May 2024.

Schlossman, Beryl. “Proust and Benjamin: The Invisible Image.” *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1986, pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1191>.

*The Fabelmans*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Performances by Gabriel LaBelle, Michelle Williams and Paul Dano. Amblin Entertainment & Universal Studios, 2022.

Wells, Charlotte. “A Note from Charlotte Wels.” *A24*, 21 October 2022, <https://a24films.com/notes/2022/10/a-note-from-charlotte-wells>. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Whittaker, Richard. “Aftersun.” *The Austin Chronicle*, 4 November 2022, [www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2022-11-04/aftersun/](http://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2022-11-04/aftersun/). Accessed 10 April 2024.

Wilson, Jake. “All of Us Strangers feels like a time-shifting, mysterious daydream.” *The Age*, 18 January 2024, [www.theage.com.au/culture/movies/all-of-us-strangers-feels-like-a-time-shifting-mysterious-daydream-20240116-p5exop.html](http://www.theage.com.au/culture/movies/all-of-us-strangers-feels-like-a-time-shifting-mysterious-daydream-20240116-p5exop.html). Accessed 10 April 2024.

Zuckerman, Esther. “The Inexplicable, Emotional Beauty of Aftersun.” *Vanity Fair*, 21 October 2022, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/10/awards-insider-aftersun-charlotte-wells-interview](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/10/awards-insider-aftersun-charlotte-wells-interview). Accessed 10 April 2024.

## Works Consulted

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. Dover Publications, 2012.

Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson & Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. McGraw Hill Education, 2019.

Coyle, Jake. "In 'Aftersun,' Charlotte Wells makes a shattering debut." *AP News*, 19 October 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-charlotte-wells-new-york-be3193a1701066fc0aac096a4b53b562>. Accessed 1 June 2024.

De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. Yale University Press, 1979.

Haskell, Molly. *Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films*. Yale University Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300189827>.

Yamada, Taichi. *Strangers*. Translated by Wayne P. Lammers. Faber & Faber, 2005.