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Title	“Gas her”: deviant paradigms of identification in interactive spectatorship
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Publication date	2015-06-01
Original Citation	Hassapopoulou, M. (2015) '“Gas her”: deviant paradigms of identification in interactive spectatorship', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 9. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.9.06
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.9.06
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Download date	2026-11-07 00:29:41
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5908

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University College Cork, Ireland
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alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

"Gas Her": Deviant Paradigms of Identification in Interactive Spectatorship

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Abstract: *The notion of identification in visual media that require user participation is problematic. When images become clickable and navigable, then the viewer is no longer a viewer but a participant in the unfolding of the narrative. Theories of visual representation and cinematic spectatorship cannot fully account for modes of interactive spectatorship because the more the viewer is kinesthetically implicated into the formation and progression of moving images, the more the interactive action moves towards the literal realm. In this article, I explore emerging forms of interactive spectatorship through Stanton Audemars's controversial* Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love (2008)*, and connect those to a broader critical history of the sociological aspects of cinema.* Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love *challenges the boundaries of a voyeuristic subjectivity that is free of the tension associated with acting out desires elicited by the images on the screen, by inviting the viewer to become complicit in the virtual performance of sadomasochistic acts. An exploration of the processes of conditioning and reorienting spectatorship in interactive films can offer profound insights into the pedagogical potential of interactivity, especially through examples that push the boundaries of both interactivity and cinematic representation.*

Introduction

Viewer participation in visual media has complicated established notions of identification and spectatorship. When images become clickable and navigable, then the viewer is no longer a viewer but a participant in the unfolding of the narrative. Theories of visual representation and cinematic spectatorship cannot fully account for modes of interactive spectatorship because the more the viewer is kinaesthetically implicated into the formation and progression of moving images, the more the interactive action moves towards the literal realm. Interactive viewers occupy a liminal space that is difficult to theorise since there are many different degrees of interactivity in cinema. Nevertheless, despite the varying extent of viewer involvement in interactive film narratives, all interactive viewers are not, as classical film theories suggest, simply manipulated by or absorbed into the ideological apparatus of the film, nor are they quite the cognitively active spectators of newer theories, who critique the film from a distance. Instead, interactive viewers become part of the performance of the filmic text, and are therefore physically implicated in the development of the text's ideology.

In this article, I explore emerging forms of interactive spectatorship through multiple critical lenses, including game theory, reception studies, film history, psychology, and experimental art, in order to account for the hybrid positions occupied by the interactive viewer and, by extension, users of interactive media in the digital age. By approaching interactive spectatorship through these diverse critical and theoretical frameworks, I propose that goal-oriented interactive spectatorship—where narrative is treated as a game with an end goal—can forego the act of critical reflection on what is depicted on the screen and, more significantly, on what the symbolic implications of the interaction signify when translated

into "real world" terms and a relative sense of moralism. To an extent, the more one interacts with images in a material way (such as through a touch screen or a remote control), the less one reflects on them. A certain degree of critical distance, lack of control and physical detachment from the screen may imply a greater degree of reflective engagement with moving images; this, in turn, challenges older film theories by Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, and others that insist on the (noninteractive) spectator's passivity and institutionalisation, yet also paradoxically validates them in a way by suggesting that the spectator can indeed become subdued through the interactive mechanisms that are now part of the cinematic apparatus.

Viewer participation in the unfolding of an on-screen narrative challenges the boundaries of a voyeuristic subjectivity that is free of the tension associated with acting out desires elicited by the images on the screen. Stanton Audemars's controversial interactive DVD *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* (2008) is a useful example to consider when theorising the interactive spectator and revealing interactivity's potential to change its user's perspective. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* is an interactive film in which the viewer is asked to assume the persona of a kidnapper in order to act out scenarios from case studies of Stockholm syndrome. The psychological phenomenon of Stockholm syndrome refers to situations in which hostages begin to develop positive feelings and sympathy towards their captors, to the point of defending and/or identifying with them. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* pushes the limitations of cinematic voyeurism by inviting the viewer to become complicit in the virtual performance of sadomasochistic acts that are meant to represent Stockholm syndrome scenarios, through gaming mechanisms that demand the viewer's haptic/physical participation in order for the narrative to move forward and the syndrome to come full circle.

Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love can thus be regarded as a form of viewer conditioning in the sense that the viewer is asked to (inter)act before he/she thinks, and then to subsequently think in terms of gaming mechanisms and strategy rather than, for instance, character identification. Notwithstanding, *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* will be referred to as a "film" in this article. While the term is used loosely here given *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s hybrid format, which combines live-action film and video game structures, I deem it to be the most appropriate term within the context of the article, which connects *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* to previous notions of film spectatorship and historically traces how the convergence of cinema with other media has evolved.

An exploration of the processes of conditioning and reorienting spectatorship in interactive films can offer profound insights into the pedagogical potential of interactivity, especially through examples that push the boundaries of both interactivity and cinematic representation. Since interactivity has already been widely discussed from the perspective of video games (see, for instance, Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*) and other interactive media (such as transmedia narratives and online audiences, as in Henry Jenkins's *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*), I will initially focus on interactivity in cinema history—an aspect that to date has not been the subject of extensive scholarship in this context. A historical overview of different types of interactivity in cinema connects interactive practices with the "older" medium of cinema, thus going beyond interactivity's usual connections to newer, usually digital media. Moreover, this overview will serve to highlight one of the central sociopedagogical functions of the cinema that has now passed on to digital media: that of

training and priming audiences to receive and buffer contemporary technological sensations and, ultimately, that of attempting to shape and reflect contemporary subjectivity.

Viewer (Re)Conditioning: A Historical Perspective

The connection between cinema and its effect on individual and collective psychology has been debated since the medium's inception. The impact of the cinematic apparatus on the unconscious has been scrutinised within psychoanalytical frameworks; the function of cinema as propaganda has been analysed in historical and sociocultural contexts, and viewer reception and identification patterns have been approached from several disciplines including communications and race theory. Influential theorists such as Walter Benjamin regarded cinema as a disciplinary machine that trained viewers' senses in preparation for the shocks of modernity and urbanisation and/or as a buffer that provided a training ground for viewers to realign their bodies to the fast-paced demands of modernisation. In one of the earliest instances in which psychology converged with film studies, German-Austrian psychologist Hugo Münsterberg created experimental short films known as the Paramount Pictographs as psychological tests for spectators, hoping that they would also serve as self-improvement materials, thereby affirming his belief in the plasticity of the mind and its potential to be rewired through audiovisual technology (Blatter 69).

The vast potential of cinema as a psychosomatic training ground is also reflected in the history of film censorship and the commercial licensing of the film industry in response to cinema's potential to influence viewer mentality. Early on in the history of the medium, cinema's visual appeal during the silent era was considered by cinema reformers (such as the Kinoreformer, starting their protests in Germany in 1907) a potent suggestive mechanism that could exert influence over naïve viewers if it depicted imitable deviant behaviour (Hake 28). Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code (the Hays Code) morally censored and regulated film production in the US from the 1930s until the late 1960s. The Code forbade the depiction of deviant behaviour (which at the time included any intimation of homosexuality or interracial romance) on screen lest audiences chose to imitate such behaviour in real life. The fear that impressionable spectators might internalise the images on the screen and then replicate them in reality (something that in recent years has become even more prevalent when discussing video game players) overlaps with grievances about cinematic misrepresentations and stereotyping expressed by ethnic and racial minorities (see for instance Bogle's critical history of black typecasting in early and contemporary cinema, and its impact on cultural stereotyping).[1]

Prior to the development of film propaganda, some early cinema subgenres focused on socialising, training and disciplining audiences on how to behave in the public milieu of cinema and beyond. Thomas Elsaesser categorises these silent films as "rube films": comical movies about country people as naïve viewers who encounter cinema for the first time and are so astonished by its verisimilitude that they behave inappropriately by violating the tactile space between spectator and screen (207). Examples of the rube subgenre include the British film *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (Robert W. Paul, 1901) and the Edison-produced *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edwin S. Porter, 1902). By poking fun at naïve rubes' attempts at making tactile contact with cinema, rube films favoured visual pleasure and equated that pleasure with physical distance from the screen and suspension of disbelief.



Figures 1 and 2: Early cinema's tactile rubes. Left: *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (Robert W. Paul, 1901). Paul's Animatograph Works, 1901. Right: *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edwin S. Porter, 1902). Edison Manufacturing Company, 1902. Screenshots.

Elsaesser wonders whether rube films "construct their meta-level of self-reference in order to 'discipline' their audience", not just by showing negative examples of viewer conduct but, rather, "by a more subtle process of internalised self-censorship" (213). The fact that uncle Josh is eventually chastised for his behaviour by the projectionist, for instance, could be seen as an allegory of the opposite of cinematic pleasure (tactile proximity), as well as an attempt to provide audiences with models on how not to behave socially (look but don't touch). As a films-about-films subgenre, rube films discourage a materially and physically defined form of interactivity, while digital forms of interactive cinema encourage material and somatic forms of interactivity, but usually only within preset parameters. Elsaesser's reasoning suggests that interfaces and installations are subsuming the diegetic space of the narrative under interactive mechanisms that retrain viewers as "viewsers" ("viewer" plus "user": a term used in this article to signal interactive modes of spectatorship), players, participants and even rubes.

The tendency of interactive films to be accompanied by instructions for their use—similar to rube films' instructions on how (not) to behave as viewer and social subject—points to the reorienting of the cinematic experience towards a process of retraining the viewer as a user, and shifting cinema from spectacle to production. This process of cinematic (re)production usually involves the viewser following sets of instructions; the adherence to rules extends the notion of the screening space as a regulated milieu with its own spoken and unspoken rules (in modern-day cinemas, the rules also extend to mobile phone use). In a way, interactive spectatorship undermines the primacy of vision—and, to an extent, hearing—in cinema by focusing more on the physically and/or intellectually obtained outcomes of the interaction. In other words, the main focus shifts from audiovisual absorption to interactive (re)production through motion, selection, or thought.

The raw, immediate and uncensored reaction towards early cinema that is critiqued and mocked through the trope of the rube draws awareness to the fact that cinema, in its full capacity, viscerally appeals to the senses that it cannot represent through its technology (touch, smell, taste). Moreover, the notion of voyeurism explored through the trope of the rube draws awareness to the fact that, as Elsaesser and Malte Hagener observe, voyeurism "depends on forms of disembodiment, especially the idea of not having to take responsibility for one's bodily presence in a given space or at a given time" (85). The pleasure in watching slapstick rube films is therefore located in identification via the recognition of difference and

in the vicarious enjoyment of watching someone else break the rules and physical boundaries of cinema without the viewer suffering the consequences of this subversion.

The social training aspect of rube films extends to expanded cinema's efforts to train viewers as new global citizens who are able to simultaneously process multiple sensory stimulants. Expanded cinema included the physical immersion of spectators into the cinema's architectural space. In Roman Kroitor and Colin Low's *In the Labyrinth* (*Dans le labyrinthe*, 1967), visitors were able to walk through a cinelabyrinth in order to gain access to the multiple screens and projections of the expanded cinema installation. Kroitor and Low's cinema was part of the World Expo 67's effort to train the new global citizen to process various multisensory stimulants by letting visitors wander about freely within the architectural space of the cinema, rather than confine them to their seat. It was an attempt to deconstruct the primacy of vision in the cinematic encounter and reorient the cinematic experience around physical navigation. Nevertheless, the attempts to liberate the spectator from the traditional parameters of the cinematic space led to new forms of social conditioning and new ways of regulating audience behaviour. By reorienting and conditioning through repetition the viewers' bodies to new forms of cinema, expanded endeavours such as *In the Labyrinth* acknowledged the importance of bodily training in the formation of modern citizens—an objective that bears Foucauldian overtones. By extension, sociologist Marcel Mauss's anthropological inquiry has demonstrated the sometimes-overlooked yet pervasive power of physical behaviours in the formation of cultural and social structures (70–88). Physical emulation as a significant factor in social development has been demonstrated by numerous studies on the establishment of gender roles through, for example, conscious and unconscious imitation of sociocultural behavioural models (Iacoboni et al.; Mauss and Holland).

Matt Garite expands the notion of pedagogy beyond the realm of institutionalised education into the sphere of recreational video games. Garite argues that the interactivity in digital games "generally manifests itself as a relentless series of demands, a way of disciplining player behavior" (qtd. in Imre 29). Garite makes the connection between the binary choices featured in games to the testing that is "the primary means by which contemporary disciplinary mechanisms construct standardized, routine models of behaviour suitable to the working conditions of late capitalism" (qtd. in Imre 29). Mitchell Waldrop concisely reiterates an argument frequently associated with the uses of interactive technologies in saying that their real significance was in:

> how the technology was woven into the fabric of human life—how computers could change the way people thought, the way they created, the way they communicated, the way they worked together, the way they organized themselves, even the way they apportioned power and responsibility. (342)

The interactive features of computers that are designed for human control have the capacity, according to Waldrop and others, to change their user during and after each interaction. As mentioned earlier, evidence of the long-term impact of computers on the human brain and body is inconclusive, as is evidence on particular areas of interface-based activities such as online reading. The argument, for instance, that computer games, nonlinear mind-game films and hypertextual navigation help users develop new cognitive skills and autonomously figure out how to interact with automated systems is debatable and difficult to conclusively prove.[2] However, the fact that there are strong arguments supporting the pedagogical capacity of interactive technologies speaks to their potential for training users to think and behave in

specific and/or new ways. Interactive cinema (especially controversial works such as *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*) is therefore a particularly productive area of inquiry to focus on, since both interactivity and cinema have been historically linked to processes of training and conditioning their subjects.

In his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins advocates the culture-changing potential of playful interactivity (such as online activist political parodies) in stating that "we are trying out through play patterns of interaction that will soon penetrate every aspect of our lives" (134).[3] These patterns of playful interaction have the capacity of establishing behaviours that transform cultural mentality in both productive and counterproductive ways once fully integrated into our daily lives. Despite interactivity's democratising promises—that is, offering consumers more active roles in dominant modes of cultural production, including mass-mediated communication—interactivity can also be used as a means of regulating, standardising and monitoring consumer behaviour under the pretence of free choice.

Extreme Interactivity: *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* and the Ethics of Play

Stanton Audemars's *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* immerses the viewser in a subversive fantasy that, according to the filmmaker, is geared towards broadening the definition of romance and counterbalancing Hollywood's sugar-coated love stories. Many filmmakers view the international medium of cinema as the ideal vehicle for penetrating the global unconscious, and use their work to steer viewers towards particular messages and experiences. One notable case is visionary experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, who orchestrated cinematic experiences using mixed media and architecture: for instance, the 1963 design of his Movie Drome theatre in New York featured a spherical projection screen that encompassed the entire space of the theatre and aimed to immerse viewers into the space of the projected images.

If cinema is indeed such a powerful tool that subconsciously affects its viewers (and, certainly, the pioneering work of Münsterberg provides early evidence of this), it makes sense that many interactive media focus on training viewsers in premeditated ways that aim to endorse specific agendas. In the case of interactive filmmakers dealing with risqué subject matter interactivity might easily be seen as a pretext to indulge in libidinal fantasies that impose specific ideologies onto viewsers using a controlled form of interactive play. Nevertheless, a critical analysis of such risqué and countercultural interactive works can provide insights into the ethical implications and limitations of interactivity. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* is not only a useful case study for discussing the subversive potential of video practices, but can also provide insight into the use of interactivity as a mechanism for testing moral ground and for restructuring viewser interaction around the ethics of play. It is analysed here as an extreme example of both subject matter and use of interactivity to test how far interactive encounters can push ethical and representational boundaries, and to what degree they can condition user response and, even, reshape the user's perspective.

On a superficial level, it can be assumed that the film employs interactivity to explore the paradoxical nature of the Stockholm syndrome, in which the victim develops an emotional attachment to his/her captor through a form of traumatic bonding. Yet, the syndrome is turned into a game where the objective becomes to expose the social

conditioning we undergo as members of civilised communities. This game enforces its own process of conditioning—a perverse logic, if you will, wherein perversity is tentatively defined as productive deviance. Through socially condemnable behaviour—kidnap, gassing and rape—the film presents a sadomasochistic definition of love that both runs counter to, and to some extent exaggerates, Hollywood's idealised depictions of romantic love. Through enactment of perverse scenarios, the interactive experience of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* attempts to create a progressive participatory spectacle in which social taboos and condemnable practices are turned into a behaviourally transformative and, debatably, enlightening form play. By implicating the viewser in the kidnapping and subsequent molestation of the female victim, the film not only creates a perverse spectator, but also a willingly participatory instigator of the spectacle. Here, I am using the term "perverse spectator" in the sense that Janet Staiger uses it in her work (40). Staiger argues that perversion can suggest a willingly subversive mode of spectatorship, but it can also imply an inability to adopt any other position, for instance, due to an externally imposed (by the camera/POV/filmmaker) perverse viewpoint. As Staiger points out, perversion—as a turning away from typical film reception patterns—does not necessarily result in politically progressive deviance (32). *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* begins with a talking sock puppet that makes a mockery of the explicit content warning preceding the introduction. The mockery alludes to both the cliché of the susceptible rube and that of the impressionable video game player. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s tongue-in-cheek approach to changing the viewser's ethics and predispositions (assuming that they do not align with those of the filmmaker's in the first place) both parodies and attempts to use interactivity as a form of wilful conditioning.

Following the rationale of thinkers such as Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga that new ethics and cultural perspectives emerge out of play, the filmic game attempts to act as a "simulation that challenges what you've been taught love is supposed to be. The point of *Stockholm* is not that kidnapping is the right thing to do. The point is that we need to re-examine our definition of love", according to Audemars (*Stockholm Weblog*). By using notionally ludic play as a form of social training and ethical realignment, *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* exemplifies Caillois's view of *ludus* as a formalised, regulated and institutionalised activity (13). The work attempts to impose the filmmaker's agenda on the viewser through its video game mechanisms, and establish its own norms and ethics regarding the use of interactivity and, more broadly, the idea of romantic love. The film's ludic aesthetics and structure are not ethically or politically progressive enough to be considered playful resistance, but they do challenge the viewser to a subversive form of gameplay that bears the burden of representation. If Audemars's goal of broadening audiences' perspective on love is successful—or at least if it implicates the viewser into this sadomasochistic idea of love—then, as Miriam Hansen speculates, the spectatorial activity "focused on the acquisition of skills and memorizing of moves [could] vindicate Adorno's verdict against the 'sportification of play' as a form of internalized social discipline" (44).

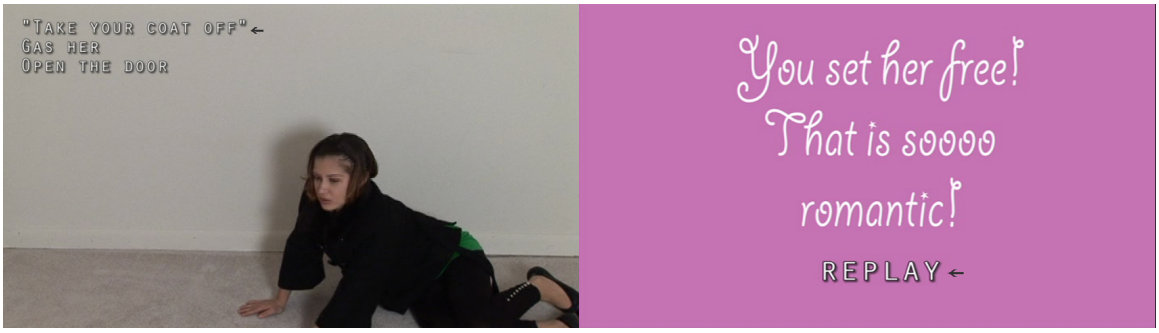


Figure 3 (left): The first command menu in the video. Figure 4 (right): Tongue-in-cheek ending: setting the woman free before intercourse means the game is over. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* (Stanton Audemars, 2008). Roland Media Distribution, 2008. Screenshots.

The goal of the film is to make the kidnapped girl fall in love with her abductor through various methods of assault, ranging from sexual harassment to gassing. If the viewser tries to be gentle with the abused girl and refrain from gassing her, then the film reaches an abrupt ending that is equated with losing in a video game—an ending similar to (yet less extreme than) the virtual slap in the face in the first version of the sexual seduction computer game *Virtual Valerie*, where the forced computer reboot indicates that the player has lost the game of sexual courtship with Valerie (Harpold 137). In both cases, the moment where the viewser loses—and is thus forced to restart the film (or, in Valerie's case, the computer)—serves as the ultimate deconstruction of interactive agency: the player has no choice but to start from the beginning, in the hope of making it further next time. In the case of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*, this is also the moment in which the film's ontology reveals a paradox: it becomes both a noninteractive (or typical) film with a finite ending, and an antifilm in the sense that its "Game Over" ending is derived from the conventions of closure in video games rather than from filmmaking conventions. The "Game Over" ending, much more so than the cinematic "The End" or "Fin", reminds the viewser that they are playing by someone else's rules.

Nonetheless, the mere fact that *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* comes in the form of a DVD—and is thus, as the medium dictates, meant to be watched like a movie, not played like a console game—might prompt viewsers to retrospectively reflect on how the interactive format reorients their viewing experience and their relationship to the moving and looping images. Arguably, the more a viewser wishes to successfully play according to the film's rules, the more he/she comes to regard the film as a game. As the viewser assumes the role of the player, he/she also becomes vicariously and haptically (via the remote control) implicated into the task that is literally at hand: to complete this sadomasochistic depiction of love. In my experience of the film, then, the more focused one is on the goal of making the girl fall in love through abusive means, the less concerned one becomes with the ethical implications of this symbolic violation. Disturbingly, repetitive losing can make one even more determined to win, regardless of what is ethically and allegorically at stake in winning. Psychological and narrative closure is dually achieved within the film once the viewser manages to make the victimised girl fall in love with him/her. Psychological closure is achieved in the sense that the Stockholm syndrome comes full circle, and thus the psychological phenomenon is fully demonstrated (gaining love through abuse), albeit through the filmmaker's reductive interpretation of it.

The film was the subject of a major online backlash after its release, with multiple users (most of them identifying themselves as female via their usernames) accusing the film

of depicting gratuitous violence and unmotivated taboo acts ("Customer Reviews"). Regardless of the accusations made against it, the film is intended by the filmmaker to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the Stockholm syndrome, whereby the hostage develops a positive emotional bond with their captor in mistaking cruelty for kindness. In many ways, the film's reputation precedes its content, for it is nearly impossible to avoid extratextual information about the work; even on the *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* website, the work is introduced, alluding to the film's notoriety, as "the controversial masterpiece that was banned from Amazon" ("*Stockholm*").

Whose POV? Mimetic Interactions and Virtual Reactions

The strong reactions that *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* has provoked speak to its mimetic potency. This case study illustrates that—despite their unconventional approaches to filmmaking—interactive works are still, to some extent, assessed by mimetic criteria and measured against standards for ethical cinematic representation when it comes to depicting sensitive issues related to gender, sexuality and violence. The critical reception of the film and the campaigns to boycott it validate this argument. Ironically, *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* has brought back intense concerns about cinema's effects on audiences and on culture at large—concerns that have now shifted to the medium of video games instead (such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Manhunt 2*). In other words, concerns about cinema reception have somewhat dissipated in recent decades with the emergence of newer media such as video games, yet these concerns reappear in the context of cinema when films demand more viewer participation.

Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love has drawn comparisons to the controversial and no longer commercially distributed 3D Japanese *RapeLay* video game that allows players to stalk, molest and rape females. Illusion, the production company for *RapeLay*, defended the game by arguing that virtual rape is a lesser crime than the symbolic acts of murder commonly instigated in action-driven video games. In a similar vein, Audemars has defended *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* against the critical backlash it received by arguing that the film depicts a more realistic portrayal of love than the sugar-coated romances viewers are accustomed to seeing on TV and in Hollywood movies. However, if we apply Linda Williams's classification of sadomasochistic pornography, then it can be conversely argued that *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s "suspension of pleasure over the course of prolonged sessions of dramatic suffering … offers a particularly intense, almost parodic enactment of the classic melodramatic scenario of the passive and innocent female victim suffering at the hands of a leering villain" (8). Paradoxically then, *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* subverts patriarchal structures of pleasure through the interactive depiction of female abuse that does not end with the typical "money shot" of male ejaculation typically signalling the ending of pornographic videos, but with an animated graphic informing the viewser that he/she has won the game. In this sense, the film denies male—and, by extension, sadistic—pleasure on- and off-screen by only showing fragmented sexual scenes (consisting of extreme close-ups on body parts with lack of establishing shots, muffled ambient sounds and dim lighting) that do not culminate in the predictable manner of most formulaic porn. This subversion of certain pornographic conventions does not, however, result in any type of female empowerment on- or off-screen; it is subversion without progression or revision of existing structures because the conclusion veers away from filmic images and into the realm of computer graphics and video game closure, thus abstaining from profoundly engaging with—and possibly deconstructing—the heteronormative patriarchal structures it evokes.

Amazon.com, the original vendor of the DVD, has discontinued distribution of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* from its website, while numerous online reviews have labelled the film as misogynistic and unnecessarily graphic ("Customer Reviews"). The backlash that it received, especially from feminist critics who opposed the film primarily due to its premise (there is no evidence that any of them actually purchased and interacted with it first-hand), partially validates the argument that interactivity in media is often a pretext for a profounder degree of user manipulation—behavioural, ideological or other. In the case of film, interactivity can become a twofold way of crossing debatably ethical lines of filmic representation by rendering the viewser complicit in the process of image (de)construction. Thus, viewers-turned-players become part of the construction of the filmic text, not just manipulated by or absorbed into its ideological apparatus, as classical film theories would suggest.

Torben Grodal argues that, in some film theories, subjectivity is linked with perversions such as fetishism and voyeurism because such conditions "activate sex-related phenomena but block the acting out of the desires elicited, so that the viewer experiences a saturated activation of sexual associations without the tension associated with acting out those desires" (248). In contrast, in interactive films like *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*, the viewser is invited to act upon the taboo desires imposed on him/her by the narrative of the film through simulated scenarios. Therefore, the viewser is aware of his/her complicity in the virtual performance of sadomasochistic acts, even as he/she is unable to interact with the film beyond predesigned, goal-oriented parameters. In fact, the viewser cannot even interact with the film as conventional pornography, since, as previously remarked, the typical "money shot" of pornographic videos is ultimately suspended, and the pornographic sequences are filmed from canted angles that disorient the viewser and discourage erotic pleasure. The viewser cannot, therefore, relate to the film through familiar spectatorial positions evoked by conventional genres such as porn, romance, and drama, especially since the role of the viewser fluctuates between viewer and player.

Most of the footage in *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* consists of POV shots in which the captured woman is the focal point. The kidnapper's point of view is mediated to the viewser as seamlessly as possible, presumably to facilitate identification with the goal of the film or, even, a superficial immersion into the kidnapper's mentality. The gender of the kidnapper's formless avatar is deliberately unclear, since he/she does not speak and is not attached to a visible on-screen body; the only filtering we are aware of is the POV shots, but there is no visible on-screen body attached to those POV shots (although a detached and seemingly artificial penis appears in later stages of the film, which leads to further gender confusion). Even the kidnapper's commands are conveyed in written form so as to directly appeal to the viewser without the means of audible, gender-coded sound.

Research has indicated, though with inconclusive results, that viewer identification with certain characters (in this case, through their POV and gender ambiguity) and the way in which media content is presented to the viewer (in this case, the attractiveness of the victim and the gaming approach to rape) can influence consumer behaviour to a large extent, particularly when it comes to real-life aggression and tolerance of sexual harassment (Anderson et al.; Yao, Mahood, and Linz). Video games that use POV instead of external player positioning (omniscient or orthographic viewing)—*Doom* and *Quake* being amongst the first games to do this—attempt to make their players part of the environment by immersing them into a subjective perspective. The first-person POV is also a popular filming

technique in pornography, thus supporting this reasoning. However, in (noninteractive) cinema, this does not quite work; as the example of the commercially unsuccessful *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) has demonstrated, audiences do not like a constant first-person vantage point, which indicates that this technique is not considered an effective storytelling tool when used throughout an entire movie.

In assessing the impact of the subjective POV as an aesthetic choice for video game design, Michele D. Dickey argues that the shift from third to first-person perspective creates a more engaging experience for the player and, further, that the impressionable first-person POV can be productively utilised as a learning tool in educational contexts (50–1). In light of this, Audemars's work could be considered a perverse way of teaching through simulation. Furthermore, if we consider Janet Murray's argument that video game playing can help us become aware of hidden parts of ourselves (54), then interactive experiences can have a profoundly transformative impact on the user. This is not to suggest that in the case of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* viewsers can explore the rapist within them; instead, in agreement with Murray's rationale, I wish to imply that video games can immerse the viewser so deeply in a specific POV scenario that this change in perspective can stimulate moral questions (54). Bolter and Grusin add that avatar POV enables empathy, and then proceed to define empathy in interactive and immersive media (including virtual reality) "as a means of knowing", which, in this case, means gaining a new perspective, but not necessarily the perspective Audemars would like us to adopt, that is, a new definition of love (245–6). Rather, experiencing love—and, more disturbingly, consensual rape—through a game can offer new insights into the moral and social agendas of interactive entertainment.

Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love is framed in a way that is reminiscent of first-person shooter games, where the form of the shooter's avatar is never fully revealed to the player controlling it. The resemblance to first-person shooter games does not end with filming techniques and avatar; it extends into connections with the training potential of those games. Simon Penny argues that first-person shooters enable their players to develop skills such as marksmanship that can be transferrable to nonvirtual realms. He goes as far as to argue that such games have "the potential to build behaviors that can exist without or separate from, and possibly contrary to, rational argument or ideology" ("Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation"). The goal-oriented, game-like structure of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* means that viewsers invested in completing its objective might be inclined to bypass representational and ethical questions (including concerns about simulated rape and misogyny) for the sake of prioritising the gaming aspects of the film.

Based on my experience of the film (and observing others interact with it with similar results), I discovered that the more I interacted with it in a material way—that is, through pressing buttons on the remote control—the less I critically reflected on the action that was unfolding in front of me on the screen. Since the narrative of the film has some inevitable loops, in order to progress further in the game I had to repeatedly watch scenes of simulated gassing and other forms of abuse to unlock yet more scenes of torture that culminated in a rape scene. Disturbingly, every time I came across the same gassing scene (the most commonly repeated one), for instance, it lost some of its shock value and eventually became a hurdle I had to overcome in order to get to the next "level". In this game, it is impossible to "win" with the mentality of a critical viewer or empathy towards the female victim. And yet, I temporarily became a willing accomplice to depictions of violence on screen and thus, retrospectively, even more aware of the hidden agendas behind the use of interactive formats.

Audemars's film is so extreme in content and purpose that the dark undertones of interactivity are ultimately more transparent (at least in retrospect); the positive aspect of this transparency is that his work has the capacity of stimulating critical reflection on the ethics, limitations and rules of interactivity.



Figure 5: "Gas her": the most commonly repeated command and ensuing looping scene of the video. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*. Roland Media Distribution, 2008. Screenshot.

Game Over? Redefining Winning as Social Conditioning and Cognitive Priming

Even if the viewser cognitively develops a strategy for winning *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*, habitual gameplay contains aspects that are pre- or post-reflective—that is, they are outside the realm of active and premeditated thought—and fall into other processes such as sensory-motor repetition (as in repeatedly clicking a cursor) and memorisation. Sherry Turkle argues that a winning strategy "involves a process of deciphering the logic of the game, of understanding the intent of the game's designer, of achieving a 'meeting of the minds' with the program" (502). In *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* the notion of authorial intent and video game logic are fused together in order to produce a particular kind of subjectivity that dictates the scope and direction of the interactive experience. The looping and repetitive structure of the film facilitates the trial-and-error memorisation of right and wrong selections in the way that players learn from their mistakes in a game and pursue alternative routes instead. With habitual interaction, the viewser learns that, for instance, gassing the kidnapped girl makes her more susceptible to the kidnapper's commands; this means that the viewser who wishes to play the film to its preordained conclusion begins to instinctively select the "Gas her" option before any other, to increase the chances of the girl complying with commands such as taking off her clothes. For someone invested in winning those commands become increasingly less literal and less shocking with every interaction, because the primary goal is to move further along in the film's game.

Katherine N. Hayles's theory about interactive hypertexts seems applicable to *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s kind of interactivity. Hayles argues that an interactive hypertext is materially performed before it is cognitively read. An interactive text's material performance is, according to Hayles, "necessarily prior to whatever cognitive processing the user performs to read and interpret the text" (185). This means that the reader—or in this case, viewser—is initially concerned with bringing the interactive text to life by helping it unfold through tools of interaction such as the cursor, the remote control,

the keyboard and the menus. Hayles therefore says that a more fitting term for an interactive text is "process", instead of the typical term of "object" applied to print literature and, in this case, most noninteractive films.[4] In light of this rationale, the term "object" in this context bears connotations of a static materiality and of a precompleted state, whereas "process" implies progression and creation in real time.

The performance of an interactive text occurring before the text's cognitive processing is a compelling argument that could explain why some viewsers might be inclined to interact with *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* before reflecting on the symbolic implications of their interaction. The film can thus be regarded as a form of conditioning in the sense that the viewser is asked to (inter)act before he/she thinks, and then to subsequently think in terms of gaming mechanisms and strategy rather than in extratextual ways. Penny would term this kind of conditioning as anti-intellectual training, which occurs when an activity is introduced methodically and/or repetitively by cultivating bodily behaviour that ultimately becomes automatic or reflex. Penny refers to anti-intellectual training in the context of sports, martial arts and military training, but then extends his argument to video games as training simulators. By comparison, *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s looping and repetitive structure includes recurrent commands such as that of gassing the victim, which, when repeated, become almost automatically selected by the viewser in order to progress in the game (meaning that the viewser gradually learns that choosing the gassing option before selecting any sex-related actions makes the victim more submissive and moves the game further along).

Anikó Imre also supports this reasoning in her allusion to Julian Stallabrass's argument that computer games mechanise the human body through repetitive motions and goal-oriented processes, and links the logic of computer games to the conditions of global capitalism and the fragmentation or loss of the self in labour-intensive tasks. Imre contends that such models impose on their subjects a limited and controlled notion of subjectivity that is defined by external factors rather than being internally formulated (11). In the case of ethically polarising contexts such as the controversial premise of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*, compartmentalisation is also essential in order to align—through play and participation—the viewser's views with the ideology of the film. In other words, if the viewser's moral values are incompatible with the principles of the game, then the viewser must either forgo critical and ethical reflection when interacting, or refraining from interacting, with *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*. As an example of affective play—that is, play that is arguably more instinctive than logic-driven—Imre cites Benjamin's analysis of gambling as a combination of affective engagement and automatic or habitual action (29).

The viewser's conditioning in *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* begins by initiating tactile interactivity with the film (pressing buttons on the remote control), and then aims to more profoundly reorient the viewser's perception of notions such as love and art. The possibility that the viewser leaves the interactive encounter unchanged does not necessarily undermine the fact that interactive media hold great potential to literally and figuratively change people's minds and bodies even more so than noninteractive media because they implicate the user into their processes. This relates back to the conditioning aspect of early cinema (notably rube films) and to subsequent social concerns about the influence of cinema—and, more recently, interactive media such as video games—on impressionable viewers. In public screening contexts, factors such as socialisation and audience dynamic can impact the process of audience training. However, since *Stockholm:*

An Exploration of True Love is only released for home viewing, the privacy of the domestic setting could mean that the viewser might be more inclined to interact with a taboo film than he or she would be in more public domains (a similar logic lay behind the shift of pornography from theatrical to home viewing in the 1980s). In this case, the privacy afforded by the domestic setting for viewing creates an environment where the viewser might be more receptive to the experience, even out of sheer curiosity, without worrying about public criticism.

Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love attempts to reorient, expand and problematise the notion of romance by inviting the viewser to participate in its deconstruction. The fact that Stockholm Syndrome is turned into a game with an end goal could be an example of procedural rhetoric, which—according to Ian Bogost—serves as a means of "making arguments with computational systems" (3). Procedural rhetoric also encompasses the users' activity of "unpacking computational arguments others have created" and, I would add, attributing additional meanings of their own (Bogost 3). Bogost uses video games as his main focus for developing the notion of procedural rhetoric, but procedural rhetoric is also applicable to an emerging filmmaking practice that has already gained popularity in festival and experimental circuits: that of interactive documentaries (i-docs). I-docs present new ways of conceptualising history and facts by allowing viewsers to access information in nonlinear and hypertextual ways, as opposed to conventional documentaries that convey information to viewers in a linear and unequivocal manner. In the case of i-docs, interaction can lead to higher awareness for the user of, for instance, documentary conventions and the limitations of linear approaches to (hi)storytelling.

Despite the empowering potential of procedural rhetoric in genres such as i-docs, the analysis of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* indicates that procedural rhetoric is not always apparent or accessible to the user, especially when the mechanisms of interaction (in this case, the game-like structure) are more prevalent than the underlying message. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*'s gaming mechanisms are essentially rewiring the viewser's interaction with a taboo scenario to which the normal or expected reaction would be disapproval, but now, instead, the prompted response is to help this taboo materialise on the screen fragment by fragment, level by level. It is as if the viewer of the excruciatingly long rape scene in Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) became its codirector through gameplay rather than being exposed to it only as a powerless voyeur. *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* is thus trying to prime the viewser by repeating acts of "love" in the hope that, through sufficient repetition, the subject will become desensitised and, even, accepting of that version of love, or at least the reasoning and agenda behind it. More than noninteractive viewing, interactive spectatorship seems to speed up the process of desensitisation by pushing the viewser towards the pursuit of a goal. Alternatively, if desensitisation is not what occurs during the interaction, then what occurs could be a different form of sensitisation: eliciting a positive response from the scenario. These two possibilities are supported by psychological research, in studies on both male- and female-user psychology, which have shown that long-term exposure to simulated violence corresponded to greater tolerance of sexual harassment and a higher rate of rape myth acceptance (Dill, Brown, and Collins).

The repetition of disturbing acts of sadomasochism until they become more acceptable within the framework of repeated externalised interactivity is reminiscent of how certain attitudes and ideas become normalised though sociocultural conditioning and routinised activities. Priming the viewser to accept certain ideas can therefore be considered a type of learning process; this priming can have long-term impact, particularly if the

interaction is frequent enough and/or if there is the predisposition towards certain attitudes and behaviour (such as violence, misogyny and aggression). Cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists have found that the mind frequently acts as an associative network in which ideas are, in part, primed (activated) by associated stimuli in the environment—that environment also including mediated interactions (Fiske and Taylor). Therefore, interactive media like *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* can prime related ideas in a person's memory without the person even being consciously aware of this process (Bargh and Pietromonaco 445). Cognitive and social-cognitive researchers have suggested that repeated priming, in the form of repeated concepts or schemas, can eventually normalise those notions chronically and automatically (as in, prereflectively/instinctively) to make them part of the individual's cognitive processing (Anderson and Huesmann 297).

What is at stake in "winning" *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*? What is ethically and psychologically at stake in a film that equates narrative and psychoanalytical closure to the act of winning a game? More so, what is at stake when gaming victory and narrative closure are brought about by vicariously performing acts of sadomasochism that virtually infringe basic human rights? The intention behind interactivity becomes even more problematic and even less convincing when the symbolism in the performative acts becomes too overwhelming to dismiss as "just a game" or "only a movie". Penny articulately expresses the representational and performative burden that controversial interactive images and their respective acts bear in his analysis of an extreme example of interactive art. *Kan Xuan* (2000) is an interactive installation by artist Alexander Brandt of a life-size image of a naked Asian woman. The virtual woman was positioned lying on her back on a crumpled cloth in a dark corner. As Penny describes, "the only possible mode of engagement presented to the user" was to stomp on the virtual woman who, in response, recoiled in pain and eventually faded away if the stomping was persistent. Brandt's work essentially invites the audience to enact unprovoked acts of violence against a defenceless woman of colour.

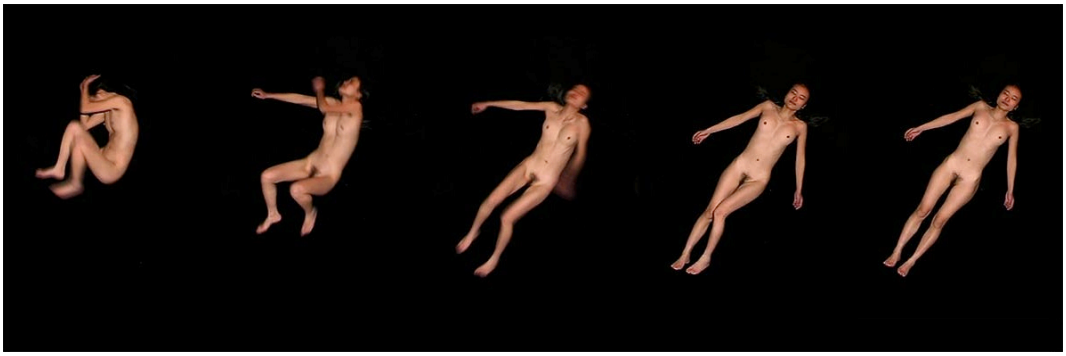


Figure 6: Various stages of interaction in Alexander Brandt's *Kan Xuan* (2000). Mixed Media Installation. © Alexander Brandt. *Feilaifeiqu: The Next Exhibition Standard*. Screenshot.

The *Kan Xuan* installation might, even more so than *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love*, have profounder intentions behind this seemingly unmotivated act of cruelty, especially given its status as an art piece and its public exhibition within a curated space. However, as Penny observes, it nonetheless presents a powerful example of "the potential of electronic representations to encourage or reinforce behaviours in the real world, in this case racist and/or misogynist behaviours." The intention behind extreme mimetic images and interactions might be to provoke critical thinking, but can the intention behind a symbolic enactment of violence negate the very act of violence? Penny notes that, in embodied

interactive practices, theories of visual representation are not sufficient to account for interactive enactment because "an interactive 'representation' is more than a representation." The more one is physically implicated into the execution of a symbolic act, the more the interactive action moves towards the literal realm. As Penny argues,

> the persuasiveness of interactivity is not in the images per se, but in the fact that bodily behavior is intertwined with the formation of representations. It is the ongoing interaction between these representations and the embodied behavior of the user that makes such images more than images.

When interactivity engages the individual in physical ways (such as the kinaesthetic playing of Wii games, where physical motion directly corresponds to on-screen movement), then symbolism becomes submerged into a more literal terrain, depending on the degree of physical immersion and film-human motion coordination. Conversely, when a viewser is able to participate in an interactive environment without the outcomes of the interaction translating into real-life consequences or social criticism, then more profound—and perhaps more genuine and more complex—forms of identity experimentation might emerge. In other words, interactive media can enable us to "engage our most compelling transformational fantasies," as Janet Murray prophesised for role-playing games in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—an observation that is also applicable for the film/game hybrids discussed in this article (264).

Feminists and others opposing the circulation of *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* would certainly agree that accountability for our decisions is part of our existential condition as human beings, regardless of the realm in which those decisions take place. Scholars studying the influence of video game simulations and life-like robots—one of the earliest examples from the Humanities being Sherry Turkle's work, reiterated in her more recent book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*—claim that these simulations are a means of training and, in some cases, desensitising people to the real thing. Recent research has indicated that the habitual actions associated with web and video game interactions—such as moving the cursor and using multiple browser tabs—have the potential to retrain and repurpose our neural circuitry. Just as reading has been shown to profoundly impact brain functioning, learning to read—and, in this case, to watch films—differently can possibly rewire or expand the cognitive abilities of the brain.[5]

The mixed and polarised reactions *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* has triggered partially confirm the argument that both film and interactivity can exert influence over their consumers. It remains to be seen whether the combination of film and interactivity will result in more hybrid media that engage diverse audiences (such as cinematic games for nongamers and playful films for noncinemagoers) that can meaningfully alter spectator behaviour and impact the collective unconscious, or at least offer consumers more alternative roles with which to experiment within the new media landscape. At a time when virtual reality and other hybrid immersive media are becoming more widespread, interactivity becomes an even more prevalent tool for simulation and control, which is why it is important to study its influence on user behaviour in various media contexts.

In any case, the (re)emergence of interactive film and video practices in the twenty-first century offers the opportunity for film and media studies scholars (as well as critics and scientists from overlapping disciplines) to revisit and revise classical theories of spectatorship and identification in order to account for a broader and more diverse range of practices and audiences. Historically speaking, this emergence of interactive filmmaking practices

illustrates that, despite technological and material changes, cinema still retains some of its primitive sociological and ideological characteristics even as it becomes more pixelated, digitised and interactive.

Notes

[1] The counterargument to this reasoning has been expressed in various disciplines. One of the most relevant in film studies is by Noël Carroll, who has argued that viewers have fixed emotional and moral positions that cannot be altered by fictional representations. According to Carroll, fictional films reinforce and offer deeper insights into viewers' already-adopted attitudes.

[2] An example of this line of reasoning is Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, which received mixed reviews regarding its titular core argument. The counterargument claims that interactivity in realms of play is equal to passive forms of entertainment that have no transformative power on cultural and political institutions.

[3] In his work *Les Jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*, Roger Caillois divided human play into the structural categories of competition (*agon*), simulation (*mimicry*), chance (*alea*), and vertigo (*ilinx*), with each category leaning towards either fantasy (*paideia*) or skill (*ludus*). Jenkins appropriates some of these categories for users of the digital era.

[4] It should be noted, however, that even non-physically interactive films can compel the viewer to cognitively interact with their narrative content. For an expanded definition of viewer interactivity in contemporary cinema, see Buckland.

[5] For a sample of diverse approaches to the benefits and drawbacks of new modes of reading and expanded cognition, see Carr; Clark; and Palfrey and Gasser. For an analysis of new forms of spectatorship that fuse narrative cognition with machinic processes, see Hassapopoulou.

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Suggested Citation

Hassapopoulou, Marina. "'Gas Her': Deviant Paradigms of Identification in Interactive Spectatorship." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 9 (Summer 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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