

Affective Contradictions: Unveiling *Aftersun*'s Narrative Through Arresting Imagery

After its release in 2022, the affective impact of *Aftersun* (Charlotte Wells, UK) left many people in rather incomprehensible emotional shock. Drawing upon Klinger's theoretical framework, this analysis explores how, in a single image, *Aftersun* innovatively utilizes arresting imagery to enhance the film's inherently contradictory essence, thereby amplifying its emotional impact. However, it will also become evident that if a scene serving as an arresting image reappears, some resolution to its contradictory state can be offered. To discuss this, focus will be placed on two pivotal scenes—the ambiguous sea sequence and the continuous dance sequence—and it will be demonstrated how these images encapsulate the culmination of *Aftersun*'s temporal complexities and the dynamic interplay between surrogates and their perspectives. Operating on the delicate balance between existence and oblivion, *Aftersun*'s arresting visuals not only embrace ambiguity, but they transform it into a potent source of affectivity.

Before delving into the analysis, it is essential to introduce some vocabulary which will link exploration of the film sequences to Laura Klinger's theory. First, *arresting image* is a term for those sequences in film which “stop to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evocative and/or uncanny image.”¹ In Klinger's words, arresting image represents the culmination of film's contradictions and it often appears outside of the film's temporality. What more, it has an immersive effect on the viewer, surpassing his conscious observation by its broad affective dimensions.² The affective power of arresting images arises from their inclination to thrust the film's contradictions to the surface while refusing to resolve them.³

¹ B. Klinger, “The Art Film, Affect and the Female Viewer: The Piano Revisited,” *Screen* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjl002>. p. 24.

² Klinger, “The Art Film”, p. 24.

³ Klinger, “The Art Film”, p. 36.

The latter will be closely explored in this essay. Klinger's theory centres around the affective power of art films, arguing that art films have the power to disrupt conventional modes of viewing and engage viewers on a visceral level. Opposed to Klinger, this essay will put aside experiences of female viewers and the idea of intertextuality. Her notion on affectivity will be explored through close examination of *Aftersun's* contradictory elements and its arresting images and akin to her analysis of *The Piano* (1993), the analysis of *Aftersun's* arresting imagery will also be built on the exploration and linkage of the film's visual metaphors.

Aftersun is a poignant narrative that delves into the journey of Sophie, a grown woman, as she grapples with the memories of her final holiday with her late father, Calum. Through the medium of old video tapes, Sophie retraces the steps of their last vacation together, gradually piecing together fragments of their past. As the story unfolds, it seamlessly navigates between the past and the present, revealing the profound impact of Sophie's loss following their holiday. Through this exploration of nostalgia, grief, and the search for closure, *Aftersun* captures the essence of love, loss, and the enduring power of memory. To fully grasp the intricacies of *Aftersun* and to examine it using Klinger's lens, it is crucial to first confront certain contradictions inherent in the film, such as its temporal shifts, the shifts between character perspectives, and Calum's ongoing struggle between longing for both life and death. These contradictions are pivotal in shaping the film's arresting images, more specifically their extreme emotional effect. Before delving into how these contradictions converge and shape the essence of the film, it is essential to acknowledge and understand their presence within the narrative framework.

In *Aftersun*, the narrative unfolds through a tapestry of distinct perspectives, each providing profound insights into the characters' inner landscapes. We embark on young Sophie's journey during holiday spent with her father, Calum, as she navigates the terrain of self-discovery and

exploration of sexuality. Meanwhile, Calum's viewpoint portrays his unwavering determination to bring happiness to Sophie amidst his own internal struggles with depression. Finally, grown-up Sophie serves as the narrative bridge, weaving together these diverse perspectives. Returning to the loss of her father, she endeavours to comprehend his motivations for suicide to reach acceptance of it. However, her understanding is constrained by the limitations of her memories and the video tapes she revisits. The depiction of Calum's lows, often concealed from young Sophie's gaze, offer a unique vantage point to the viewer who is then positioned at an intriguing nexus of past and present, revealed and concealed. Moreover, the viewer is immersed in a kaleidoscope of viewpoints, seamlessly transitioning between three screen surrogates, Calum, young Sophie, and grown-up Sophie, each offering very distinct insight. Navigating the storyline requires a delicate balance between these varied perspectives. A compassion is required for characters with different priorities and motivations, drawing viewers into the first layer of *Aftersun*'s contradictory state.

Another aspect adding to *Aftersun*'s complexity, going hand in hand with the intricate fluctuation between screen surrogates, is the film's changes in temporality. Throughout the movie, there is a fluid movement between past and present, with varying degrees of emphasis on either timeframe. At times, we are fully engrossed in the present, watching grown-up Sofia analyse video tapes and navigate her current life. Other moments transport us to the past, as we immerse into Sophie's memories while her reflection appears on the TV screen, serving as a reminder of her current existence. This blending of past and present creates a poignant experience, where we are simultaneously engaged in nostalgia while remaining aware of our position in the present. The temporal duality becomes even more pronounced when there is no reflection of grown-up Sophie, and we are left to observe scenes without her presence. Despite this absence, disparities in image quality often signify our separation from the past. This dynamic invites us to traverse through past experiences from the comfort of our present

standpoint. However, the temporal and spatial stance is abruptly disrupted by instances where we become completely immersed in the past, detached from the moments evidently captured by Calum's camcorder and devoid of any connection to the present. Such scenes presumably enrol from both Sophie's memories and outside of them, since we witness moments of Calum's solitude experiences her gaze could never access. These disorienting shifts challenge viewers to navigate their orientation in time and space with different levels of focus on changing screen surrogates. Ultimately, temporality represents another contradictory layer of the film.

The last major contradiction embedded within the diegetic space of *Aftersun* revolves around Calum's perspectives on life and death. Throughout the film, we witness Calum actively planning for his and Sophie's future, such as when they discuss their plans to buy a house outside of London or when he urges Sophie to share her anticipated experiences with relationships and drug use. However, these moments are tinged with the knowledge of Calum's impending suicide. This juxtaposition places the viewer in a conflicting position. On one hand, viewers are drawn into Calum's hopeful vision for the future, engaging with his aspirations and desires alongside Sophie. Yet, simultaneously, one is increasingly more and more aware of the tragic outcome awaiting Calum, which undermines the validity of these plans and aspirations. This contradiction creates a complex emotional experience for the viewer, as one navigates between investing in Calum's optimistic outlook on life while grappling with the inevitability of his demise.

All of these contradictions form the ground for *Aftersun*'s potent arresting imagery. Two scenes particularly stand out, each highlighting one or more of these contradictions with remarkable clarity. First scene is that of Calum immersing himself into the sea at night (figure 1). Here, Calum's immersion symbolizes the escalation of his inner crisis, a turmoil he desperately seeks to escape. Much like Klinger describes in her analysis of arresting images, this scene slows

down the narrative, presenting an eerie and captivating image that captures our attention completely.⁴ Initially, we anticipate Calum resurfacing after a brief dive. However, as the scene unfolds and Calum remains submerged in the darkness, a sense of unease creeps in. As we watch the waves crashing on the shore and the darkness embracing them with no trace of Calum's body, we are left to wonder if this moment signifies his potential suicide. The power of this scene lies in the contradictory expectations it provokes in the viewer. It stands for the moment where Calum's conflicting views on life and death reach their peak, presenting viewer with a situation leading to either outcome. This uncertainty, born from the peak of contradiction, holds us captive to the screen, fully absorbed in the narrative's twists and turns. The affectivity of this uncertainty is enriched by the scene not providing viewer with a resolution, another aspect of arresting imagery mentioned by Klinger.⁵ Calum disappears without any subsequent appearance in the shot, and the scene does not escalate further beyond his submergence into the darkness. His survival is only disclosed by his presence in the following scene with events between his plunge and his eventual return to the hotel left completely bypassed. What the viewer has witnessed in this scene is never discussed or revisited later in the film, which indicates the shot's primary purpose in mystifying the viewer.⁶ This lack of closure serves to heighten emotions and maintain suspense by highlighting the presence of contradictions without bringing any resolution to them. The deliberate omission of explanation or discussion about the scene encourages viewers to speculate and engage more deeply with the film's topic of Calum's balancing between life and death.

⁴ Klinger, "The Art Film", p. 24.

⁵ Klinger, "The Art Film", p. 24.

⁶ Klinger, "The Art Film", p. 24.



Figure 1: Calum rushing towards the sea before disappearing into the darkness.

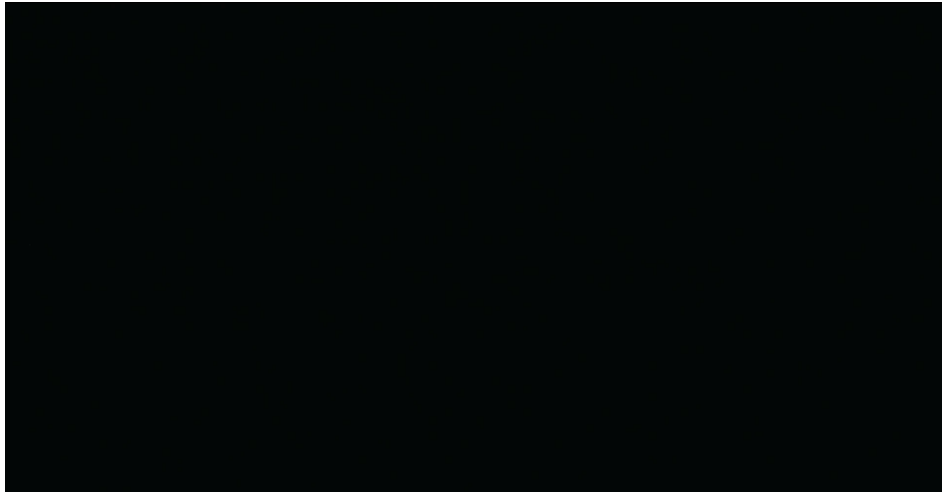
Another scene which draws together not one, but all the primary contradictions, is the continuous scene of Sophie and Calum meeting in a dancing room. This continuous arresting image is characterised by loud music, flickering light and a micro storyline which consists of grown-up Sophie trying to approach and embrace her father as he dances furiously (figures 2-4). The scene also serves as a closure for the whole film when Calum says his last goodbye to Sophie and enters the dancing room once and for all. This scene, emerging every now and then to disrupt the narrative, presumably signifies Sophie's efforts and progress in understanding her father as she examines video tapes and returns to their last holiday in her memories. As she remembers more and more, she approaches him closer and closer just until she tries embracing him. The flickering light, allowing the viewer and Sophie to see just bits and pieces of Calum's expressions and movements, points towards the missing pieces in the puzzle Sophie is putting together about her father. She can only think as far as the light allows her to see and she cannot stop him from dancing.

This continuous scene is a meeting point for all the contradictions which were mentioned before, and it leads the viewer into a rather paradoxical state. In this scene, Calum exists in a liminal state, simultaneously embodying both life and death. He appears vibrantly alive, defying all conventional notions of mortality, but he is only alive to serve as a metaphor for Sophie's understanding of him after his death. In this arresting image, Calum transcends the boundaries between life and death, providing partial resolution for the contradiction concerning his fluctuating inclinations towards living or taking his life. Whereas in other scenes he is seen alive but progressing towards suicide, in this scene he is seen alive while he is inevitably dead. This leads the viewer into a state of bittersweetness, allowing one to taste both, a bit of relief from seeing the contradiction peaking and breaking apart, but uncanniness by affectively engaging with dead Calum's moving and seemingly living body.

The paradox of interacting with Calum dead yet alive goes hand in hand with the significant shift in how time operates in this scene compared to the rest of the film. While earlier parts of the story played with time, moving between past, present, and present within the past, this particular moment seems to transcend time altogether. We are placed in a space where time loses its usual constraints, allowing us to witness an extraordinary interaction between the living and the dead, i.e., between Sophie and Calum, which defies all conventional understanding. This temporal disjunction intensifies and dismantles another fundamental contradiction within the narrative: the lack of unified time, which leads to a climactic moment. On one hand, being positioned to a non-temporal space provides relief to the constant shifts in temporality. On the other hand, the affective dimension of the film becomes reshaped by the fact that this resolution of another contradiction only intensifies the urgent awareness of Calum's death.

The affective depth of the scene is also generated by the scene representing the only real confrontation of our two primary screen surrogates, grown-up Sophie and Calum. Seeing them meet at the same age with Sophie's cultivated understanding of Calum's troubled past eliminates the need to switch between their viewpoints. There is no need to change between perspectives of a child and an adult anymore to understand both separately. Instead, we perceive them as a unified whole, comprehending their current experience together. This allows us to grasp the connection between Calum's suffering, leading to his death, and Sophie's newfound empathy. Ultimately, Sophie accepts Calum's perspective by embracing him, symbolising forgiveness, and mutual understanding. The resolution of the contradiction in perspectives brings again both sweetness and bitterness: sweetness in witnessing Sophie's understanding of her father's perspective, and bitterness in realizing this reconciliation only occurs within her mind.





Figures 2-4: Sophie trying to embrace Calum as he uncontrollably dances.

Ultimately, the sea sequence demonstrates how single arresting image can intensify the contradictory essence of an art film, captivating viewers and deepening their engagement with the affective dimensions of the artwork. In contrast, the continuous and distinctive arresting image of the dancing scene illustrates the film's potential to resolve its contradictions. Klinger argues that arresting images typically offer no resolution to the narrative, with their contradictory essence being central to their emotional impact.⁷ While this may hold true for isolated arresting images, it changes when such images form a continuous storyline within the

⁷ Klinger, "The Art Film", p. 24.

film, reflecting the inner growth of the characters. In *Aftersun*, the dancing scene breaks apart the contradictory essence of tension between past and present, Sophie's and Calum's perspectives, and Calum's conflicting views on mortality. However, even if resolution to the contradictory essence of an art film can after all be achieved within arresting imagery, the emotional aftermath remains bittersweet since the resolutions replace contradiction with the paradox of accepting the irreconcilable aspects of life and death, leaving viewers with a lingering sense of both closure and open end. Despite all resolutions in *Aftersun*, the main contradiction persists: Calum, however alive in Sophie's memory and thoughts, cannot be brought back to life.

Bibliography

Klinger, B. "The Art Film, Affect and the Female Viewer: The Piano Revisited." *Screen* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjl002>.

Filmography

Aftersun. Wells, Charlotte, director. A24 and Mubi. 2022. 101 minutes.