They were gentle, because of exhaustion, and considerate, because of a new respect for each other, and therefore, as happens between men and women, felt the fact of the strangeness—the fact that they were, essentially, strangers—more intensely than the first anonymous time. Frederica thought of Jacqueline, and felt—for the first time in her life—a stab of pure sexual curiosity about another woman, and then a stab of jealousy. She was interested in this. Maybe jealousy was an enormous part of normal sexual behaviour—it was certainly in novels—and therefore significant. You do not know another person, even when his sleeping face on the pillow, very close to your own, has a small, pleased smile on its mouth (A. S. Byatt, *A Whistling Woman*).

In the moment when A.S. Byatt writes, “She was interested in this,” her protagonist, Frederica, shifts from a bodily register to a cerebral one. Of course, *A Whistling Woman* does not oppose these registers, but connects them in the very passage from body to mind that takes place as Frederica responds to and reflects on her sexual curiosity and erotic jealousy. But what is most significant in the above is how the passage that Frederica undergoes from one state to another is catalyzed by the experience of interest she has. By attending to that experience, Byatt’s *A Whistling Woman* shows how a state of interest is a means of reframing everyday life—figured here through the deeply normal image of a sleeping face with a pleased smile—as an object of contemplation.

Moments such as this one are precisely Dixon’s concern in his essay, “How Interesting: Interest and the Quotidian in Art Cinema.” Building on the insights of an interdisciplinary range of scholars, Dixon brilliantly and carefully explores how contemporary art cinema interests us. Interest, he argues, is a largely cerebral feeling, an affective state in which we take cognitive pleasure at playing critic, at exploring rather than resolving ambiguities (at the point of resolution, interest vanishes). Art cinema in particular excels at stirring up this mental feeling by looking at everyday life through an aesthetic lens. Put simply, art cinema prompts us to see the interest of our own day-to-day lives by projecting them in their boring plainness on a movie screen.

Dixon couples his argument with a style to match. One of the most striking features of “How Interesting” is prose both patient and plain, in the best senses of those adjectives. Slowly but surely, Dixon moves from sentence to sentence, and section to section, making concrete what in the hands of
many other students, and even professional scholars, would have remained an elusively abstract and frustratingly disembodied idea. And the result of Dixon’s simultaneous stylistic and argumentative patience is an essay that stays with you, making itself felt whenever, wherever, you call something “interesting” again.

—Joel Burges
Two friends leave a movie theater, the night is dark, and their faces are mostly hidden. I thought the film was really good, says one. I thought it was really interesting, says the other. What is the second person trying to convey, exactly? Are they in agreement, did they both find the movie “good”? Or is the second deliberately avoiding agreeing, choosing instead to use one of the most vague words in the English language? Even as he’s saying it, he may not know. It is my belief that when we call something interesting, we are responding to an intellectual stimulation—that we find something cognitively enticing and curiosity arousing. In film, and art cinema more specifically, the depiction of the quotidian is a powerful appeal to our sense of the interesting. And ultimately, what makes the quotidian interesting in art cinema is how it recontextualizes everyday life as aesthetic experience.

Our sense of what is interesting, however, is hard to pin down. As in the example above, claiming that something is interesting appears to be synonymous with any empty praise: decent, nice, cool, etc. In common parlance, we are often satisfied with this very shallow definition. We use it to avoid saying something negative; its vague nature allows us to use a word of praise without needing any clear evidence that would support it. But there are other times where a meaning seems to become clear. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, says that something is interesting when it is connected to importance (a definition now obsolete), or “having the qualities which rouse curiosity, engage attention, or appeal to the emotions.” (The OED also goes on to say that another usage of the word is to speak delicately of a woman’s pregnancy, by saying that she is in an “interesting situation,” a definition now archaic and also inapplicable to my argument here about aesthetics.)

There are other definitions of the word as well. In fact, the psychological community is very interested in defining interest. In Exploring the Psychol-
ogy of Interest, Paul Silvia classifies it as an emotion (Silvia 14). This is significant because emotions are distinct states of mind that have clear symptoms and origins that we can identify, and then use to help define what was before only a vague feeling (21). The modern psychological school of thought believes that things that an individual finds complex, conflicted, uncertain or novel trigger an emotional state of interest, while things that are found to be simple and familiar engender happiness (25). In a psychological study where participants were asked to rate their feelings after reading a short piece of fiction, readers found stories where the outcome was uncertain to be interesting, and stories with happy endings to be enjoyable (26). This is significant because, while classified as an emotion, interest seems to be derived from a set of adjectives much more cognitive and intellectual than those of other emotions (25). Complexity, novelty, and a state of uneasily resolved conflict are all more intellectually challenging concepts than simplicity and familiarity. Happiness is a state often associated with serenity, tranquility, and peacefulness, while the state of interest implies cognitive action, attention to the object, and intellectual focus. When we are happy, we relax and appreciate a moment, when we are interested in an experience, our brains do not relax; they examine and pay attention to the activity. Those things that are interesting according to the psychological community are so because they are generally more cerebral.

Sianne Ngai would agree with the majority of the above, but has some interesting qualifications to add as a scholar of the aesthetic. In “Merely Interesting,” she observes that there is no clear evidence needed to use the word interesting, or rather, there exist too many qualities that could elicit “interesting” as a response (Ngai 6). The concept of beauty, on the other hand, implies a sense of aesthetic harmony, or an attractive appeal to the senses or the mind. What is interesting lacks these guidelines. Things are interesting when they cause a reaction of interest in us (i.e., our curiosity may be piqued, we may become confused, intrigued, or otherwise drawn in). Ngai says that being interested is “not knowing exactly what it is that we are feeling and [experiencing] a feeling about this very feeling” (33). Most importantly, being interested entails the promise of further action; it calls for further justification, for further exploration of what has elicited the feeling of interest and a more accurate definition of your emotional response (22). This is not as clear a definition as it may seem. To be interested is to be confused and undecided, but more importantly to be on the way to resolving your state of confusion. To call something interesting is to signal that more information shall be forthcoming, that I am intrigued or put off and uncertain as to why—that I “want to play critic,” I want to explain my interest, justify my
reaction, and further develop it through aesthetic evidence and logical argument (39). Admitting interest is not asserting judgment in itself, but is instead a statement of intrigue and sufficient intellectual curiosity, conflict, or confusion to warrant additional scrutiny of the object before coming to a final judgment.

This sounds similar to the psychological definition, and it is. Ngai focuses on the subject’s response as an aesthetic one, and the psychological community focuses on the object that elicits such a response. And our day-to-day usage seems to be supported by both the aesthetic and psychological definitions as well. All three notice the cerebral nature of interest: that it is an emotion, but that it is one that is heavily intellectual. According to Silvia, objects that elicit interest embody complexity, conflict, novelty, and uncertainty, and Ngai tells us that the emotional state created is similar to its creators: conflicted, uncertain, complex and, while most of us have experienced the state of interest before, still relatively novel.

The definition of interesting that I plan to use throughout the rest of the paper is a combination of the above: something is interesting when it embodies or elicits the sensations of complexity, novelty, conflict, or uncertainty. This state of interest is brought forth by many different things: books, relationships, conversations, anything that puzzles and entices. But let’s return to our original example. Two friends leave a movie theater, one friend has found the film good, and the other has found it interesting. Now, it could have been nearly any movie that called forth these responses, but it is my belief that the response “interesting” is most typically brought forth by what is called art cinema. In contrast to what is known as classical Hollywood cinema, these films are typically and deliberately more novel, complex, and confusing, and thus clearly earn the above response. But they also frequently portray the quotidian and daily events of our lives, which, despite a common-sense reaction to the contrary, I also believe elicits the sensation of interest.

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First things first: what is art cinema, and why is it more interesting than Hollywood film?

Long still shots, protagonists that don’t care, and painfully boring plotlines where nothing seems to happen are all attributes commonly attributed to independent films. David Bordwell gives a very good definition of these kinds of movies in “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice.” First, he notes that “art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode,” the “classical narrative mode” meaning Hollywood film (Bordwell, “Art Cinema” 775). This is not so hard to swallow. Viewers accustomed to
Hollywood productions often react strongly to art film, saying that nothing is happening, or alternately, that nothing makes sense. This conflicted response is caused by art cinema’s attempt to reconcile its two competing ideals: realism and subjectivism (777). According to art films that elicit a response of confusion or boredom, very little happens in real life (hence the response that nothing is happening in the film) and the human mind is rarely rational (hence the response that nothing makes sense). While conventional Hollywood film believes in cause-and-effect narration and pursues a goal of engaging the audience through the use of the sensational, art cinema views narration, and especially the cause-effect dynamic, as mutable, making use of flash-forwards, surrealism, and in other cases, an extreme dedication to realism (775). This extreme realism is further developed by using “realistic—that is, psychologically complex—characters,” and by making no attempt to hide the artifice of the camera: art films don’t try to lie to you through cliché heroes and quick camera work (776, 779). Bordwell believes that this is because art cinema is less concerned with the minimal action on the screen, than the reaction of the characters and the audience. There is a focus on the individual and the human condition, and these are often approached with an air of passivity. But above all art cinema is about how things happen, not what happens (776, 779).

Focusing on how a story is told rather than on the details of the story itself is an inherently more intellectual journey. A typically modernist practice, focusing on the mechanics of the telling inserts another layer of complexity to viewing a film. Rather than just surrender to the contained universe of the plot line, we are constantly made aware of ourselves and our position outside of the film. This mental distance makes it much more difficult to forget that we are watching a film, that a man or woman decided which scenes and which events to show us, and eventually forces us to wonder why the director chose these scenes. This recognition of the artifice of the film engages our intellect and makes us think much more, and much more deeply, about art film than we may while watching a Hollywood production. This is chiefly why art cinema is more interesting than classical cinema. While art cinema dedicates itself to exploring the relationship between audience and film, thereby engaging our intellect, classical cinema seeks to minimize the distance we feel from the film, and instead of appealing to the intellect, appeals to our emotions. Classical cinema is not interesting, but emotionally powerful, clear, and enjoyable.

The above definition of art cinema is a negative definition for the most part: it is not classical Hollywood cinema. Luckily for us, David Bordwell also does an excellent job describing classical cinema, which explains most of
program in writing and rhetoric

our aesthetic experience of film. It is difficult to succinctly define the majority, and when doing so, one must always understand that there will be exceptions. Nonetheless, Bordwell identifies several key qualities of what he calls classical cinema. Those qualities are as follows: a dedication to story; little room for individual innovation on the part of the director; ease in understanding; clarity; a goal-oriented protagonist; a scene of reckoning, where the conflicting forces in the film usually face off and are reconciled; unity; realism, to a degree—in that nothing seems impossible, all the laws of the contained universe of the film are upheld, gravity still works (unless in space), and there is no magic (unless in a fantasy world); and, finally, a desire to hide its artifice—that is, classical cinema seeks to mask the fact that it is a created film (Bordwell, *Classical Cinema* 3, 16, 18). When all of these aspects come together, a seamless story is told as clearly as possibly, and the message and purpose of the film are easily delivered.

Despite making it as easy as possible for an audience to view a film, classical cinema is not entirely transparent. Bordwell argues that classical cinema still relies on the viewers’ intellects, but in a different way than art cinema does (Bordwell, *Classical Cinema* 7). In mystery movies there are frequently moments when the audience is required to think, to make connections, and to figure out “who-dunnit” from the clues given. But as mentioned above, art cinema makes an appeal to the intellect through unresolved ambiguities and the intrusion of artifice, where the most complex cognitive work required in classical cinema is usually involved in comprehending the story’s intricacies of plot development rather than the motives of the creator of the film. The narrative of the film is where it is easiest to differentiate between the two genres. If there were a graph of increasing conflict between the protagonist and his obstacle followed by absolute reconciliation, then it is likely that the film belongs in the classical genre. Conversely, art cinema frequently abandons plot altogether, instead progressing through distinct episodes or vignettes, each with their own narrative obstacles and sometimes without any at all.

But how is something that lacks plot interesting? Don’t we go to the movies to escape our dreary day-to-day lives, searching for something to disturb the monotony? How do films that deal with the mundane and ordinary instead of the sensational and extraordinary garner and hold our interest when any one would argue that explosions and car chases or tales of success and triumph are more interesting?

Well, actually, they’re not. Using our above definition of interesting—the correct one, I believe—car crashes and victory over obstacles are not interesting at all. There is no confusion and no uncertainty, and the conflict above is not the same kind of conflict as a determinant of interest. That sense of con-
conflict is when the film is conflicted itself, either through ambiguity or through clear contradiction. A classical film might clearly show that drug habits ruin lives, while a film more evocative of the art cinema mode might not come to any conclusion on the matter. In a standard narrative, the film is very clear that there is this sense of conflict in the narrative; the film is not itself conflicted. This type of conflict would be the conflict in the contained universe of the film. The protagonist wants to escape, but encounters narrative conflict when the police begin to chase him. What we may be feeling as viewers in response to such a narrative is enjoyment: we may enjoy seeing damage, movement, and the success of those characters we identify with, but it is a distinct emotion from interest. Classical cinema avoids stimulating the intellect abstractly, as is evident in the removal of the artifice of the film, the dedication to clear illustrations of each cause and effect in narration, and the nearly required unambiguous ending. Instead of playing with our intellect, classical cinema stimulates our emotions, and seeks to cause enjoyment rather than make us think.

To understand why classical cinema can’t both focus on our emotions and still remain interesting, it is necessary to look at how classical cinema affects our emotions. First, we have to recognize that while watching a film we do not believe that what is passing on the screen is “really” happening; the plot line and any response to it I may have occurs solely in the imaginary world of the film. Instead of full desires, I experience meta-desires or quasi-emotions elicited and contained by what is passing on the screen. For example, if I am watching Finding Nemo (2003), I have a desire that father and son be reunited in the world of the film. However, I do not wish that the script were changed so that father and son were reunited on the screen more quickly (Currie 186). My desire is not a product of the world that I live in, but the world of the film. If I am still watching Finding Nemo and feel sad because father and son are separated, it is not because the movie was made poorly. More accurately, I experience a meta-emotion of sadness. In the contained imaginary world of the film, I feel pity imagining a family split in such a way (Currie 187). This emotional reaction is a sort of empathy; by imagining ourselves in a different position than the one we occupy in real life, we develop emotions and desires to fit our new and only real-seeming situation. The fact that we experience pseudo-desires and meta-emotions while watching a film does not alone make a film uninteresting, however. While watching any example of art cinema we could experience the same sensation of almost-emotions in response to the characters and their situation, but in classical cinema, those emotions are often much stronger.

Meta-emotions are important to keep in mind when looking at why a
film is interesting because they are so closely tied to the sensation of identification with a character. Frequently, a sense of identification is the first thing you discuss with your friends upon leaving the theater. It is sometimes even the basis on which you judge a film. Berys Gaut defines identification as another kind of imaginary emotion, like the pseudo-desires described above. It occurs when we can imagine ourselves in the situation of a character, sharing their physical and psychological traits, and respond with a mixture of empathy and sympathy (Gaut 203, 207). She argues that we are more likely to identify with characters that have attractive traits, like beauty, street-smarts, or a strong wit, but we are also attracted to those characters that we feel sympathetic for: vulnerable characters, or characters who fall victim to unfortunate events (Gaut 211). Because both classical and art cinema use similar characters, we react with the same kind of emotions to similar stimuli no matter the type of cinema. However, our emotions are engaged to different degrees in the two genres, because of their different aims and appeals.

Bordwell establishes, rightly I feel, that the art cinema hero is a vulnerable character, and as mentioned above, psychologically more complex, thereby garnering some empathy for his plight. Often, however, he will just as soon lose our empathy when he shows himself to be unconcerned about his own fate. Disaffected and removed from the rest of the world, the protagonists of art cinema sometimes become characters who, while we identify with them, just as often become objects of scorn. Frequently, the response in the audience toward characters that remain stationary or refuse to act is the frustrated cry, “Do something!” On the contrary, those characters that have a strong investment in their own fate, and at the same time find themselves in truly pitiable or otherwise emotional situations, will garner much more empathy from an audience. Because classical cinema uses characters for which we feel more empathy, we feel a stronger emotional reaction toward it than we do toward art cinema. This relationship between the strength of emotional response to a film and the situation of a character is finally part of what affects how interesting a film is.

Curiously enough, while gaining an audience’s empathy, a character will lose its audience’s interest. While more and more of a character is explained, we grow closer and closer to him, which is great news for script writers and movie producers: fleshed-out characters create powerful emotions in their audiences. *Finding Nemo* is so popular not only because its characters are so adorable (drawn with big eyes and proportions like puppies) but also because they are in such a fully developed and pitiable situation. However, through this fleshing-out, there is less left to further question. Once we know a character’s entire back story we can no longer become interested in him, we will
have found out everything that puzzles and intrigues us. Nemo would be a very interesting character if his motives were unclear. If we never knew how or why he disappeared, we would be much more interested in him and his fate, and would intently try to figure it out, looking for evidence and clues to help fill us in. Nemo elicits empathy, however, because we know his fate, and know that it is a terrible one, one in which he is a victim to powers outside his control, truly pitiable and mostly blameless. We can see, then, that when questions are answered, interest dwindles. We would be more interested in a mysterious Nemo whose motives were uncertain, but instead are more emotionally attached to the one about whom we know so much. The sensation of interest is still the urge to ask why, to plunge back into something, to “play critic” and come to a conclusion. But once that conclusion is reached, we are no longer interested. In successful classical cinema, the trade-off is interest for empathy.

Further trade-offs include choosing a character easily identified with over an interesting one, which is indicative of classical cinema’s dedication to engaging emotions rather than the intellect. However, empathy and pitiful characters are not the sole emotional appeals of classical cinema. Classical cinema appeals to the masses because it also offers a thrill. As human beings, we enjoy risk, and enjoy experiencing risk both in real life, and in the meta-emotions of film. In *Exploring the Psychology of Interest*, the concept of a boredom drive is discussed, which would justify the way we seek risk as the fulfillment of a desire to alleviate our boredom (Silvia 50, Schiebe 58). Karl E. Schiebe, author of *The Drama of Everyday Life*, cites the evident examples in modern society that human beings are drawn to the dangerous in our society. It is a puzzling conundrum. As socially mindful and rational creatures, we fight against war, disease, and disaster, but as he points out, “ask yourself whether or not you consider the United Nations, the Pope, and the National Council of Churches to be boring” (Schiebe 61). His point is that there is something inherently perverse within us that enjoys disrupting the practical and familiar merely to see something new and different. Our Western culture is inherently confrontational. It flourishes in times of war and competition, and even the Socratic method and teaching in general are processes in search of conflict. In viewing film, then, our thirst for blood is no less apparent. We enjoy the meta-emotions of fear, thrill, and danger, just as we enjoy the meta-desires for conflict and resolution, but our attraction to risk is much stronger than our other attractions (Schiebe 61).

Miriam Hansen agrees that classical cinema appeals not to the cognitive but to the sensory, but doesn’t believe that it is limited to the sensation of danger (Hansen 71). Hansen argues that classical cinema is “concerned with
…the sensual, material surface…and [an] excess of situations over plot” (Hansen 61). It is through an appeal to our emotions, aided by the sensual surface of modern cinema, that the majority of classical cinema succeeds. But it is not only emotions of thrill that break the boredom drive, although it does so strongly. That “excess of situations over plot” is exemplified by the old Hollywood standby, the gag: the pratfall, the one-liners, the explosion, or the dance routine. Oddly though, car chases and pie fights don’t fit into Bordwell’s definition of a mode of cinema that is dominated by cause-and-effect narration. These sideshows are never purely narrative. It may be important for the story that Marlin, Nemo’s father, falls in with a bunch of sharks and somehow survives; this makes the situation more dangerous and risky, and also impresses upon Marlin’s character that he must find his son. However, there is no need, narratively, for those sharks to be comical apprentice-vegetarians.

In “Emotional Curves and Linear Narratives,” Patrick Keating explains the use of these unrelated appeals that dominate the genre that Bordwell defines as purely plot oriented. Keating argues that gags and sights—like vegetarian sharks—help to create enjoyable situations. People enjoy comedy, even when it has little to do with the plot of a movie (Keating 5). He subjugates the narrative of a film to the process by which a viewer’s emotions are controlled. In his argument, since a viewer’s emotional state is more important than his comprehension of the narrative, the typical plotline of miniature successes and failures on the way to final reconciliation is an attempt to engage our emotions rather than create a more plausible story. Without any responsibility to the narrative of a film, we enjoy movement, slapstick, and song and dance because they stimulate our emotions.

Finally, then, the division between classical cinema and art cinema is one of both technique and aim. Classical cinema seeks to gain viewers by entertaining them emotionally, providing them with sympathetic characters, clear plots and pleasing experiences. By doing so, by foregoing any appeal to the intellect and the interesting, classical cinema provides a foil for art cinema. We have seen the way in which classical cinema makes its appeals and avoids engaging the interesting. To say that art cinema merely does the opposite of classical cinema is not entirely precise, however. What is interesting must be engaged chiefly through the intellect, and art cinema does this by portraying the quotidian as an object, not merely of our daily lives, but one to be appreciated intellectually as an aesthetic experience.
On the surface, *American Splendor* (2003) seems to be an ideal example of art cinema. It opens with a very American scene: four boys are standing on a 1950's doorstep celebrating Halloween and looking for some candy. The first three are dressed as Batman, Superman, and the Green Lantern, but our hero is merely wearing his comfortable leather jacket and a dour expression. The housewife who answers the door is perplexed, “But what superhero are you?” The boy’s answer is emblematic of the film’s stance. “I ain't no superhero, lady, I’m just a kid from the neighborhood.”

In this and other moments, this film takes a very firm stance against, as our hero puts it so eloquently, “Hollywood bullshit.” *American Splendor* is the true story of Harvey Pekar, a lonely and depressed file clerk who starts a comic book detailing his daily adventures. His comic’s tagline is “Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff,” and he explains to his illustrator that we don't need to look to tales of extraordinary happenings and beautiful people to make art, that there is something repulsive and unappetizing in all that “idealized shit.” So he finds the humor in waiting behind old Jewish ladies in the supermarket, the melancholy in the tragic figure of his friendless boss, and the beauty in the falling snow over Cleveland. Throughout it all, however, he is very conscious of focusing on the mundane details of his true life, of not stretching the truth to envelop a happy ending or kitschy moral. In his comics, he gives it to us straight, showing us the way that the world really is, and, as the film documents through Harvey’s rising popularity, we eat it up.

Nonetheless, *American Splendor* remains a member of classical cinema. It is a story about alternative media, but is not what it documents. It is transparent and deliberate in its delivery, and, as a film, still relies on aspects of the sensational. After all, the linear narrative is what drives the film. It follows a somewhat celebrity, chronicling his love life, rise to popularity, and battle with cancer, all the while exploring his novel view of the world. The film relies on slick cinematography (the conventional method to disguise the artifice of film), never resting in one position for too long, and follows a distinctly causal narrative. Its themes are interesting; we feel confused and want to know more when Pekar first sets out to write a comic book about nothing more than his life as a file clerk. More frequently, however, the plot appeals to us emotionally: through his humorous first date, his comic books’ successes, and his own personal failures. Here, while describing an artist who explores the interesting, an act much more in keeping with art cinema, the film itself employs more classical methods.

The difference in methods between the two cinemas is clearly seen in Jim Jarmusch’s film, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), an outstanding alternative to
Hollywood glamour. It is clearly an independent film, striking any viewer as “different,” relying on long, still shots and little in the way of plot or action. While Harvey Pekar argues strongly for truth and reality in fiction, _American Splendor_ merely explores the theory using the techniques Harvey rebels against. _Stranger than Paradise_, on the other hand, adheres to both a representation of reality and an entreaty to the mind, while the modern media that Harvey hates depicts and makes use of the sensational. The opposite of the sensational, the truth and reality that Harvey searches for, is described by what I would like to call the quotidian. The use of the quotidian, and the dedication to the interesting that underlies it, is one of the key differences between art and classical cinema. _Stranger than Paradise_ plainly represents this difference.

_Stranger than Paradise_ is the story of three young, disaffected people. Willie lives in New York City and spends most of his time alone or with his best friend Eddie. From what we are shown he enjoys sitting listlessly on his bed, smoking cigarettes. He doesn't seem to work, nor does he do anything else with his time. The film opens when his mother calls. He is shocked to hear that he will have to put up his cousin from Budapest for ten days. He doesn't ask why she is coming, and he is never told; Eva simply arrives, and Willie is less than welcoming. At this point, we can clearly see the difference between _Stranger than Paradise_ and a Hollywood telling of the story. For the next ten days, little happens between the two. In fact, little happens at all. There are a series of scenes in sequence where the two do not move from their respective places in the apartment as the light changes, and the television drones on through the night. One year after Eva leaves, Willie and Eddie follow her to Cleveland, spend a week there in which little happens once again, and then go to Florida. There, Willie and Eddie pay little attention to Eva, going to the races instead, and she contemplates leaving. At the end of the film Willie, searching for Eva, is stuck on a plane bound for Budapest while Eva returns to the motel room and sits spinning her hat in her hands. There is a linear narrative in the plot here, time passes, and we follow it through the story. However, causality, that staple of classical cinema, is missing. We are never told “why.” Why does Eva come to New York and America, why does she have to stay with Willie, why does Willie live the way he does? These questions are never answered, but, as is typical in art cinema, they are never even asked. These questions play such a minor role in the experience of _Stranger than Paradise_ that an audience is rarely prompted to ask them. They must merely accept what they are given and experience the film on its own terms.

Leaving these questions unanswered contributes strongly to my interest in the film, but is not the only way in which art cinema garners interest. It
can also be accomplished through the cinematography of a film. *Stranger than Paradise* takes advantage of its cinematography to echo the film’s basic theme: that real life is boring, uncomfortable, and without both the gloss and the clear logic that is so prevalent in classical cinema. A typical scene involves a single shot showing an entire room that may stay for as long as the scene needs it: sometimes as long as several minutes. An example of this is the scene in which Willie and Eddie accompany Eva and her date to the movies in Cleveland. The camera is facing the audience, showing the four of them sitting together, both Willie and Eddie sitting next to Eva. The film they are watching, though we never see it, is a kung fu action movie. The shot stays still, not moving from the four of them as they eat their popcorn and watch impassively. The sounds of bodies hitting each other and shouts and cries in a foreign language can be heard, and the light flickers gently on each character’s face. There are few others in the audience, and little else to distract your attention. The scene, completely without dialogue, is almost five minutes long. It is an incredibly uncomfortable and almost painful experience for the viewer. Watching it, you are forced to identify with the four of them, trapped in an uncomfortable situation, not really enjoying themselves. For five whole minutes the camera doesn’t move. This stark rigidity and plainness echoes the mechanics of the plot of the film. Nothing is being hidden from the viewer because there is nothing to hide. There is very little even to show in the lives of these three young people. Bordwell identifies this aspect of art cinema as the documentary-like fixation on the factual (Bordwell, “Art Cinema” 777). The shot, like the rest of the film, merely presents everything it can, hiding nothing, and showing the little that there actually is, as it is.

This depiction of life, not as something glamorous but as something mundane, is an example of what I call the quotidian. Quotidian means daily, as in the everyday tasks, errands, trials, and tribulations one undergoes each day. To put it bluntly, the quotidian is often boring. There are no narrative fireworks, and when there are, they are dealt with in the most realistic manner possible. When winning the lottery, you are not immediately handed a bag of money. There are hoops to jump through, and decisions to make. The portrayal of the quotidian embraces this aspect of our reality. Other synonyms are prosaic, everyday, and normal, but for me, the idea of the quotidian captures the frustrating aspect that I find so present in our day-to-day lives, the feeling that nothing seems to be happening despite our cultural ambitions and desires to create change. A dedication to the quotidian is a dedication to real life, not the realism of classical cinema, where things must be plausible and logical, but an understanding that very often illogical things happen, and even more often nothing happens. The quotidian focuses on the
non-dramatic events that make up so much of our lives. It also embodies a refusal to turn life into the simple chain of cause-and-effect in which all ambiguity is resolved, recognizing each moment as no more important than any other trivial event in our lives. While arguably depressing, and certainly boring when found in real life, the quotidian is rewarding, and above all, interesting when it is incorporated as an aesthetic experience in film.

One of the clearest representations of the quotidian as interesting is the film *Killer of Sheep* (1977), in which we follow a depressed black slaughterhouse worker, Stan, merely existing for a week or two. We are shown the neighborhood kids playing and fighting, Stan struggling both to work and enjoy the company of his wife, and above all else we are shown the everyday life of black society in downtown Los Angeles. Nothing happens that is extraordinary. My favorite scene comes early in the movie, and is one of the few times that we see the protagonist smile. He holds a warm cup of coffee to his cheek, assumes a dreamy smile, and talks about how he loves the feeling of the cup, like it's a woman's body you're pressing your cheek into. This is one of the only moments of joy in the film. Stan's life is hard living in the ghetto of Los Angeles, and there are many things to be dour about. Throughout the film, we are shown many of these depressing moments. Stan spends a day off work going through the process of procuring an engine for a broken-down car, going from friend to friend, borrowing money, and then finally buying the engine only to insecurely fasten it to the bed of his friend's truck, at which point it rolls off in to the street and breaks. Later, Stan and a group are in a car going out to the country for a picnic. Unfortunately, on the way, the car gets a flat tire and they have to turn back. Nonetheless, Stan finds joy in the pleasure of a warm cup of coffee against his cheek. Throughout the film, these examples are shown only as fractured moments. They are never fixed into a chain of cause and effect; they instead form a tapestry of experience contrary to the linear progression of classical cinema and emblematic of the quotidian.

The scene in which Stan enjoys his coffee serves both as an example of the quotidian and as an example of the appreciation that we all have for those quotidian moments. Stan is a married man and, presumably, can lay his chin on a woman's body every night. Nonetheless, the simple pleasure of a warm mug can break his depression, and allow him to immerse himself in the feeling and his imagination. As a viewer, I find that this scene stays with me, and refuses to be taken for what it merely appears to be. At the same time, however, I am just viewing a man enjoy his coffee, something that I can see at any street corner in America. Indeed, the scene's power comes from its absolute normalcy. It is a typical moment, one we may all have experienced. But even
if we have not experienced this same situation, we find it special because it is so believable. The quotidian is powerful not because it manipulates our emotions through fireworks and scenes of reckoning, but because it speaks to our experience.

At first glance, then, the quotidian does not seem to be interesting. A perfectly normal, mundane act is not novel, it is not uncertain. There is no conflict or complexity in the above scene with Stan and his coffee, or in the movie theater with Eddie, Eva, and Willie. These are merely very normal scenes of average everyday life. So how do they elicit the need for further response from viewers? And how can we find the quotidian interesting when we live it every day? What evokes the sensation of interest is the idea of watching something so normal in a setting where we are prepared to view art. Something that is totally normal, something that we would be able to view by merely turning around in our seats in the theater, gains power when it is presented to us on a screen. This is where novelty, uncertainty, and conflict enter: through the recognition of artifice, one of the focuses of alternative cinema. We realize that we are watching something normal, but also understand that, because it has been shown to us in the context of our examination and consideration, we view it in a way different from the way we would normally. Accompanying the question of why this normal scene has been chosen is an increase in a desire to understand the scene. By introducing these scenes in the context of viewing art, we view these scenes as art, and so look at them differently, because they are presented to us outside of their regular context.

This recontextualization is different from any reframing that might occur in classical cinema. In classical cinema, any scene where a man drinks his coffee is usually embedded with meaning. Either the scene is used to reinforce the casual nature of the scene before disaster breaks, or it could be used as a defining character sketch. In art cinema, these instants are moments of the quotidian because they are left to our interpretation; they are given to us as aesthetic moments, free of the meaning that would be attached in the plot of a classical film. Aesthetic moments in general, while perhaps created without the intrusion of the intellect, are usually met with and appreciated intellectually. Very often people feel an emotional response to a work of art, but more often than not, I believe, a large part of that emotional response is interest. They feel interest because, if art were simple, if a painting elicited a single, clear response, there would be little need to continue to contemplate it and the work of art would fade from public consciousness and disappear. In the same way that learning the slight of hand behind a magic trick produces boredom and disinterest in the trick, where before wonder and curiosity ran rampant, decoding and completely understanding a work of art destroys, in
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a large way, its appeal. Art cinema reframes everyday moments into quotidian ones by taking them out of context, and making them moments of art. When these moments become artistic, and not plot oriented, we are allowed to interpret and value how and where the quotidian fits into our own lives. In an aesthetic frame, we do not struggle to assign meaning to everything; rather, we begin to appreciate the role of moments without causal significance.

For example, even though the film is an example of the classical mode, *American Beauty* (1999) becomes art cinema for a moment in this very way. In the film, there is a character, a young man, who sees the world as though it were being presented to him. He finds moments of art in the most quotidian happenings, like a plastic bag fluttering in the wind. While many of us have seen bags being blown in the wind, we do not see the value in them until they are captured, confined, and reproduced outside of their environment for our contemplation. As soon as we see the plastic bag shown in *American Beauty* on the television in the boy’s room, we are able to view it as art, and the blowing bag becomes interesting because it has been reframed aesthetically. Again, this reframing forces us to reevaluate and come to a new conclusion about this quotidian scene. In his essay “Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday,” Michael Fried paraphrases Wittgenstein, “only a work of art, precisely because it compels us to see it in the right perspective, can make life itself… available for aesthetic contemplation” (Fried 524). In the artistic recontextualization of the quotidian there comes a confluence of art and reality that demands our interest. It is the intrusion of artifice, the singling out of certain moments, that raises them in our perspective and makes them unique because of their normalcy, interesting because of their mundaneness.

The quotidian calls for further examination, is puzzling, confusing, and interesting not only because it is so out of place on a screen. We are used to being spoon-fed our heroes and morals, and art cinema doesn’t. The quotidian relies on the viewer to come to his own conclusion, a situation that becomes interesting when the conclusion is not immediately grasped. Because we see these events, or these kinds of events, daily, it is difficult to assign any meaning to them. Are we supposed to see the fluttering plastic bag as a sign of the pollution of the modern world, the fickle nature of capitalist economies, or as a metaphor for man, merely at the mercy of the elements? In most classical movies, these questions would be answered for us, and the dancing bag would arguably no longer be an example of the quotidian, but rather a kitschy metaphor. By keeping the bag a quotidian moment, the scene in *American Beauty* attains a much greater power. The quotidian gains an enigmatic nature when put on the screen because it has been reframed as an
aesthetic moment. This air of mystery and uncertainty prompts, of course, the sensation of interest, or, in other words, the response: “I’m not sure, give me some time, some more evidence, I’m not yet done with this particular moment.”

We return, then, to the concept of interesting. According to David McCracken, “genuine poetry is based on common (not extraordinary) incidents that will interest and therefore excite the mind of the reader” (27). I put it to you that the quotidian does precisely that. By encapsulating those prosaic moments, the quotidian is not only enigmatic and deserving of further evaluation, but also often a beautiful, touching, and good thing. This may seem contradictory. Sianne Ngai defined interesting as a purely neutral term, a state typified by an immediate inability to form a judgment but one implying a further search for evidence. But it is important to realize that the quotidian is more than merely interesting. When Stan puts his face to the mug, it is not only a response of confusion and interest, but also one of intense identification that we feel, understanding and empathizing with his condition, feeling our hearts touched in a way that is impossible to do through clichéd dance routines or fiery explosions. The representation of the quotidian is the only way to elicit our response to the quotidian in our own life, and by putting these moments in front of us as an aesthetic experience without the trappings of excessive meaning, we are allowed the opportunity to closely examine our own lives, as we are not when asked to enjoy a sitcom or tear-jerker.

Looking back at our two good friends leaving the theater at night, I would like to say that they are not in such disagreement as I may have led you to believe. For, finally, while perhaps meaning much more than merely good, the individual that responds with “interesting” is to a degree agreeing with his friend. We cannot be interested in something that we truly devalue. We would not spend time with something that we disliked. Calling something interesting, assigning it the quality of soliciting our further attention, therefore, is in itself a commendation. For the fact is that we enjoy playing critic. Being interested in something allows us to use our imagination and our reason at our leisure. Unless our friend is deliberately deceiving us, is using a (hopefully no longer) vague term to avoid showing his true opinion, he is in agreement. The movie was good. Both friends will leave the theater, will perhaps go for ice cream, but will most probably enjoy discussing and critiquing the film, as they explore the determinants of their particular feelings of interest.
WORKS CITED


