Margaret and the Victorians

ALICIA MIRELES CHRISTOFF

KENNETH LONERGAN'S *MARGARET* IS A POST-9/11 FILM AND, IN some sense, a Victorian one. The film (shot in 2005, released in 2011) asks what it means to imagine oneself as the center of the world and the center of a story, and what it would mean instead to understand everyone's story as equally important, visible, and audible. The film revolves around a Manhattan high school student, Lisa Cohen (Anna Paquin), and her daily life after she witnesses the death of a stranger in a shocking accident that she helped to cause: a collision in which a city bus hits, dismembers, and kills a middle-aged woman crossing the street. As Lisa struggles to understand the accident and her own sense of responsibility and guilt, the film asks, Does the bus accident belong to Lisa or to the woman who was killed? Just how much can you feel for another human being without appropriating or eclipsing that person's suffering? Repeated shots of the New York City skyline without the Twin Towers and of commercial airplanes flying overhead haunt the film, adding these questions: How does the small-scale disaster of the bus accident compare to the large-scale catastrophe of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath? How do the personal and the world-historical intersect, and can we care for them equally? Although these questions are posed within the framework of global-capitalist modernity, they are distinctly Victorian—a fact the film highlights through its inclusion of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spring and Fall" (written in 1880 and published posthumously in 1918), read aloud in full midway through. Despite its attempts to rethink the politics of representation in the age of terror, *Margaret* only provides Victorian answers.

While *Margaret* has yet to receive focused scholarly attention, an analysis of the film and its implications is perhaps more pressing now,

ALICIA MIRELES CHRISTOFF is assistant professor of English at Amherst College. Her first book, *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*, is forthcoming from Princeton University Press in fall 2019.

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in 2019—an era in the United States of both rampant Islamophobia and a growing popular awareness of the injustice of the ongoing wars in the Middle East that the 9/11 attacks were used to justify—than at any other time since the film was made. By placing *Margaret* in conversation with Hopkins's poem and with the film's wider network of nineteenth-century intertexts, including novels and operas, I show how the film demonstrates the continued pull of Victorian aesthetics and politics of representation on contemporary literature and film—and the cost of this persistence. At once emphasizing and occluding the far-reaching and long-lasting violence of formal and informal empire, *Margaret*, like many of its nineteenth-century literary predecessors, insists on focalizing large-scale questions through the coming-of-age story of a single female protagonist. The film registers, though, the perspectival distortions inherent to such a project through a series of formal disruptions—centered not just in sight but also, and primarily, in sound—that threaten the priority of the protagonist's story. In this way, the film asks, But why always Lisa? *Margaret* raises the question, so central to our political present, of whose lives we care for and why, and it interrogates in particular American representations of the Arabic-speaking world. But because the film inherits not only its questions but also its way of asking them from the nineteenth-century media forms that shape its aesthetic protocols and values, it is difficult to be satisfied with the film's response. *Margaret*, as feeling and provocative as it is, leaves us at a representational impasse when it comes to comprehending the wide scale of human suffering.

Sketching the literary history of that impasse, I show that *Margaret* belongs at once to a Victorian narrative tradition and to a larger body of post-9/11 American cinema and fiction, although its place in these categories has not yet been fully recognized.[1] Analyzing *Margaret* at this juncture—and alongside critical theory on representations of terrorism, counterterrorism, and war in the twenty-first century—helps us to better understand not only the film but also the afterlife of Victorian forms, which continue to shape contemporary literary and filmic production and, by extension, the very senses of Western subjects, restricting the range of lives we can see, hear, and mourn.

As Nathan K. Hensley, following a long line of postcolonial scholars, has recently argued, "every artifact of Victorian culture is an artifact of Empire" (6).[2] *Margaret*—shaped by realist protagonism (even in its attempts to resist it), the trope of hyperesthesia (feeling too much or excessive sensitivity), and an operatic soundtrack recruited for both its pathos and its anesthesizing effects—is an artifact of empire too. It deploys Victorian texts and forms—sometimes superficially, sometimes in a way that reveals a legacy more profound than it seems to know—to gain its quite remarkable emotional power. And yet I hope that this analysis, instead of regarding either Victorian or modern texts as having simple or irremediably fixed effects, might give us ways to recognize, read differently, and even dismantle some of the more pernicious political operations of these quintessentially imperialist forms. Reading *Margaret* as shaped by Victorian forms may help us start to recognize and read more acutely the global politics inscribed in Victorian "domestic" literature, as well as the "Victorian melancholy" that remains endemic to some twenty-first-century texts. I draw the phrase "Victorian melancholy" from Paul Gilroy, who defines it, in distinction from "postcolonial melancholia," as "the tendency to become sad and pensive in the face of the empire's demanding geopolitical responsibilities," a tendency exemplified in Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" (1867), which recognizes the "war and suffering" inherent to the "culture of empire" and yet "turn[s] away from those public concerns" to "seek consolation in . . . private and intimate places," using "roman-

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tic love and fidelity" to "offset the worst effects of warfare, turbulence and vanished certitude" (Gilroy 91). While this and other formulations of the politics of mourning (especially Judith Butler's work on grievability [*Frames*; *Precarious Life*]) inform my reading of the film,[3] this essay ultimately stresses a turn to the politics of sensation (imperial, postcolonial, settler-colonial) and to a more robust framing of care than the film alone is able to provide.

Margaret's title sequence, a fantasia of pedestrian traffic set to the wistful score of the Spanish classical guitar piece "Recuerdos de la Alhambra," encapsulates the film's problematics. It also signals its commitment to an aesthetic of documentary realism—one paired with melodrama, in the sense that the film relies heavily on music (*melos*) to produce its dramatic effects. After opening with traffic noises and a quick shot of buses and taxis rushing by (prefiguring the accident that will dominate the plot), the film turns to muted slow-motion images of pedestrians walking down crowded New York City sidewalks. The sequence at once asks us to take in the sheer multiplicity of purpose, direction, and personality one encounters on any given day on a heavily trafficked city sidewalk and softens the blow, turning the chaos of the crowd into choreography and street noise into melody, completely replacing the earlier city soundscape of automobiles, footfalls, and voices with a musical soundtrack. The film offers a protective aesthetic, at once presenting ordinary life in all its teeming fullness and safeguarding us from the sensory overload it creates. When the title sequence ends, we turn to our protagonist and lose sight completely of bodies that were, after all, just passing by. But the film makes this loss a necessary one. *Margaret* works to organize and frame, in both the filmic and theoretical sense of the word given to it by Butler in *Frames of War*, the kinds of lives and scales of suffering to which consumers of media in the United States are able to attend.

Margaret is the second feature film by Lonergan, a prolific New York playwright who has also found success as a Hollywood screenwriter (he wrote *Analyze This* [1999] and *The Gangs of New York* [2002]) and as a writer-director who has now made three critically acclaimed feature films, including *You Can Count on Me* (2000) and the recent box-office and critical success *Manchester by the Sea* (2016).[4] Lonergan's films share a concern for depicting everyday life in the wake of tragedy; the films are dialogue-heavy (Lonergan's ear for natural speech is remarkable) and feature large, talented ensemble casts. *Margaret*'s reception in 2011 was muted, largely because of legal battles between Lonergan and his producers over the length of the film that greatly delayed and limited the range of its theatrical release. Indeed, a 2016 *New Yorker* profile by Rebecca Mead presented Lonergan's struggles with *Margaret* as not only time-consuming and costly but also personally and artistically devastating. Despite the fraught postproduction of *Margaret*, however, many critics have admired the film as an unsung masterpiece, and I view it as the filmmaker's most formally ambitious work.

Margaret is Lonergan's only film that departs substantially, if briefly, from the conventions of intensified continuity: at key moments to which I devote special attention in this essay, instead of syncing up the sounds we hear with the on-screen action of the film's central characters, the film plays snatches of strangers' overheard conversation, creating a productive mismatch between sound and image. (As Mead reports, this conversation is actual dialogue that Lonergan overheard and transcribed in notebooks.) These formal breaks stage what Richard Brody, in his glowing *New Yorker* review, called "death by naturalism" (e.g., heightened realism), threatening to dissolve the organizing narrative in a return to the noise of the crowd, with its multiplicity of bodies, lives, and stories (qtd. in Lonergan, "Kenneth Lonergan Discusses").[5]

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Brody's assessment, an accurate description of the film's guiding conceit, echoes traditional theorizations of literary and filmic realism. As Tom Gunning puts it, narrative film must "overcome the initial resistance of the photographic material by creating a hierarchy of narratively important elements within a mass of contingent details" (17). While some amount of "contingent detail" can function, as Roland Barthes has famously argued, as a signifier of the "real" (e.g., 146), too much detail threatens to overwhelm the story, making telling lapse into showing. According to this logic, narrative helps to organize reality and make it more bearable.

Locating and naming a protagonist is the starting point of that saving narrative, one that the film both deploys and critiques. As the title indicates, names are central to *Margaret*. But this name does not belong to our heroine, as we might expect, but instead to the girl in Hopkins's "Spring and Fall," subtitled "to a young child." "Márgarét, áre you grieving," it begins, "Over Goldengrove unleaving?" The poem's older speaker asks Margaret why she is crying: for the leaves falling in autumn, or for a much larger loss? The reading of the poem by Lisa's English teacher (Matthew Broderick) both displaces Lisa as the title character of the film and replaces her there by identifying her with the poem's addressee. As the poem is recited, the camera focuses on Lisa and monitors her reaction, showing us how powerfully she too is addressed by the poem. The questions that "Spring and Fall" puts to Margaret about the connection between aging and feeling are central to Lisa's own coming-of-age story:

SPRING AND FALL
to a young child

Márgarét, áre you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Áh! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you wíll weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

In Hopkins's poem, aging is a kind of catastrophe: the slow but sure chilling of feeling. The poem's older speaker argues that what strikes the young Margaret as tragic—the leaves falling in autumn—will not always grieve her: "Áh! ás the heart grows older / It will come to such sights colder." She cries now, but later, as an adult, she will not "spare a sigh," even if there are thousands of leaves crumpled and decaying at her feet. The teacher's question—"Any thoughts? Lisa?"—immediately following his recitation extends the poem and solidifies its double address. Margaret, are you grieving over Goldengrove unleaving, or are you struck by an early intimation of your own mortality? Lisa, are you moved by the thought of the woman that was killed in front of you, or by the insight that you too one day will die? Lisa, is it Margaret you mourn for, or yourself?

The interpolated Victorian poem raises questions central to the film. Must sensitivity to tragedy diminish as we age? Can we care equally for the leaves, the "things of man," and our own mortality? Can we comprehend catastrophe on all its scales? The questions underlie a conversation between Lisa and the middle-aged Emily (Jeannie Berlin), the closest friend of Monica (Allison Janney), the victim of the bus accident, who died in Lisa's arms on the street. Lisa and Emily have come together to pursue an investigation of the bus accident, questioning whether the bus driver (Gerald Maretti, played by Mark Ruffalo) should be held punishable for Monica's death; Lisa was flirting with him from the sidewalk,

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or at least asking where he got his cowboy hat when, distracted as he pulled away from the stop, he ran a red light and hit Monica, who was crossing the street to a white-lit pedestrian walk sign. Emily and Lisa, who have been developing a friendship, have an argument when Lisa reveals something that happened at the accident: Monica seems to have confused Lisa for her deceased daughter, also named Lisa, "a young child" who died at age twelve. While our Lisa, Lisa Cohen, muses that this strange interaction could be imagined as a beautiful moment of communion for the dying woman, Emily is offended by what she perceives to be Lisa's insistence on inserting herself into the story.

LISA. I think [Monica] was confused, like, I think she thought *I* was her daughter for a minute. And then she was asking me to call her, like to tell her what happened, you know?, like she didn't remember she was dead. But, then it got confusing, because I said, "Sure, what's her name?" and she said her name was Lisa, and I said, "No, that's my name," because it took me a minute . . . I, I didn't realize we had the same name. [Long pause and cut to Emily, who remains silent. Cut back to Lisa.] But then when I found out her daughter was dead, ever since then, I've had this really strange feeling that, in some way, for those last five minutes, I kind of was her daughter, you know like in some weird way. Like, this obviously amazing woman got to be with her daughter again for a few minutes right before she died.
EMILY. [sarcastically] I see. And is she still inhabiting your body? Or did she go right back to the spirit world after it was over?
LISA. I didn't mean she was literally inhabiting my body! I don't believe in all that stuff at all.
EMILY. I don't give a fuck what you believe in.
LISA. Oh my God! Why are you so mad at me?
EMILY. Because this is not an opera!
LISA. What?!
EMILY. I said, this is not an opera!
LISA. You think I think this is an opera?
EMILY. Yes!
LISA. You think I think this is *dramatic*?!
EMILY. I think you're very young.
(2:21:04–2:22:19)[6]

The confusion of names and objects of mourning re-sounds "Spring and Fall," recited an hour earlier in the film or, for Lisa, heard a few weeks ago in class. The argument between Lisa and Emily, like the poem, asks how aging affects our ability to care. The debate is heightened visually by the shot/reverse-shot technique that keeps the two women in separate frames. As the fight continues, Emily argues that feeling *more readily* does not mean feeling *more*:

LISA. What does that [being young] have to do with anything? If anything, I think it means I care more than someone who's older, because this kind of thing has never happened to me before!
EMILY. No. It means you care more *easily*. There's a big difference. Only it's not *you* that it's happening to!
LISA. Yes, it is! I mean I know I'm not the one who was run over by a *bus* . . .!
EMILY. That's right, you weren't! And you're not the one who died of leukemia, and you're not the one who just died in an earthquake in Algeria. But you will be, you understand me? You will be. And it's not dramatic, and it's not an opera. . . . [W]hen you get older and don't have a *big* reaction every time a dog is run over, then we'll find out what kind of person you are. (2:22:19–2:23:05)

We might imagine Lisa's response to be a reading of the poem that places her in the position of Margaret. Being young means "I care more than someone who's older, because this kind of thing has never happened to me before!": I, with my fresh thoughts, can care for the death of others. If Lisa positions herself as Margaret, Emily is closer to the speaker of the poem, addressing "a young child" from the perspective of middle age, the fall to Lisa's spring. Emily introduces the vital question of the scale of suffering and the problem to which it is persistently linked in the film: Orientalism and its occlusion of Arab and Islamic lives. Lisa Cohen is not Monica who died in a bus accident, nor Monica's daughter Lisa who died of leukemia at age twelve, nor, as Emily's

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rhetoric makes her slip into saying, "the one" who died in an earthquake in Algeria. While no more is said on the subject, Emily seems to be referring to the 2003 Bourmerdès earthquake in northern Algeria, which killed far more than "one" person—closer to 2,266, in fact. Whom can we care for? The film politicizes the poem's questions or, rather, reveals that they were politicized from the start. You are not the one who died, Emily says—"but you will be": "And yet you wíll weep."

As the final words of the opening and closing couplets show, the poem begins by making Margaret the subject of mourning, "you/you," but ends by making her the object that is mourned "for/for." Indeed, in the final lines Margaret is made into both subject and object of her grief in a prospective mourning of her own life, which is, possibly, the unspoken source of her tears:

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

Margaret is herself ghosted here, doubled in her projected death but also, and perhaps even more eerily, in her projected later life, her youth's afterlife, the era, supposedly, of aged uncaring.

Meredith Martin notes that the poem "springs and falls in and out of a more traditional alternating pattern," moving from a fairly standardized falling rhythm (like the even trochaic feet of line 7: "**By** and **by**, nor **spare** a **sigh**") into Hopkins's own metrical system of "sprung rhythm," in which a line's meter is defined by its number of stressed syllables alone rather than by its number of feet, making a poem's lines irregular in length and rhythm: "And yet you **wíll weep** and **know why**." According to Martin, "[t]he alliterative 'will,' 'weep,' and 'why,' demote the stress on 'know,' so that the line defers any stable knowledge of why the reader *will* weep" (51). The poem emphasizes an epistemological problem of mourning: we may never know for whom or what we mourn. The poet and critic Helen Tookey writes that "there are so many things perfectly expressed" in this short, compressed poem:

> [T]he simple sorrow of a child at the dying, falling leaves; the painful adult knowledge of the world's ways, and of death, and the painful knowledge too that [a] child will come to know this in his or her turn; and the feeling that the child is actually suffering from a sadness she can't yet understand or articulate; and the awful thought of the child's own mortality as well as of your own.

I love Tookey's list. But what strikes me is that the poem does not simply describe these various kinds of painful knowledge; it raises the haunting question of how to organize and rank them. It asks us to decide which knowledge is inscribed within which other, or which death is merely an allegory of another—questions that we would rather not ask. Of course, it also makes this task of prioritization impossible—in part by discrediting the authority of the poetic speaker who talks down to Margaret—but it urges it on us nonetheless.

"Spring and Fall" is provocative for the film formally as well as thematically: Hopkins's eccentric treatment of meter, which marks stress diacritically on the page, underscores the tension between sight and sound that *Margaret* (pronounced, perhaps, as two syllables rather than the three-syllable Márgarét) is also at pains to register and exploit, as it does in the noteworthy moments when the film experiments with sound to give us access to noncentral conversations. In the most extended of these moments, Lisa is having a heated conversation with an earnest would-be boyfriend about their relationship status—and yet, we are excluded from this moment of high teenage drama because we do not get to hear most of what they say. Their voices are drowned out by the other conversations taking place in the diner

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where the scene is set: two women in the next booth talking about how ugly a friend's dog is, a man answering his cell phone. The visuals and the audio seem to work against each other in this scene, which is composed of a single long shot (at about two minutes and ten seconds, it is the second longest in the film), an extremely slow, high-angle zoom from the corner of the diner that initially takes in a whole aisle of booths and their occupants but eventually closes in on Lisa alone (fig. 1). The increasing focalization of the camera is pitted against an opposing movement in the audio, in which background noise is amplified and brought to the foreground. Lisa is promoted by the camera but demoted by the soundtrack. Extradiegetic music—the tentative, but sustained, first notes of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* (1850), sound just cohering into stirring melody—contributes to the feeling of competing claims on the viewer's attention within the filmic soundscape. The conceit here is that a conversation just as important as Lisa's is happening in every booth of the diner and that if we were only able to stop and listen, we would find a story just as interesting and valid as Lisa's in each of them.

While it may be tempting to look at moments like these that punctuate the film as formal breaks, troubling classical cinema's demand for a seamless suturing of sound and image,[7] they are better understood as extensions of the film's realism—albeit wishful ones. In these moments, the concern for representing ordinary daily life is so great that the film threatens to lose track of its protagonist and her story, no matter how large they loom on the screen. While these moments may depart from the conventions of dramatic realism, they play up another one of its modes: a documentary aesthetic that signals the "density of profilmic reality" and the ability to register this density even in fiction film (Margulies 4). As Bill Nichols, building on David Bordwell, argues, "[s]ome things exceed the centripetal force of narration" in fiction film, creating an "excess" or "noise" that "cannot be absorbed within a theory of narrative comprehension" (141). *Margaret* lets us hear this noise by concretizing it—or, to be more precise, it lets us hear a stylized approximation of noise. The film stages the indexicality of cinema: its ability to capture, by virtue of being there, aspects of the historical moment in which filming takes place beyond what it "means" to show, "its material predilection for the accidental, the contingent" (Doane 83), its ability to make us feel that, in Paul Willemen's words, "what is being seen is in excess to what is being shown" (qtd. in Doane 83). But the indexicality here is precisely that: a staging of profilmic reality—of sound as noise, of script as accidental recording—and a staging of what Miriam Bratu Hansen calls cinema's "ability to subject the viewer to encounters with contingency, lack of control and otherness" (qtd. in Doane 84).

This aesthetic ideology is founded on Victorian tropes. Perhaps no lines in all of nineteenth-century fiction are cited as frequently as the famous "squirrel's heart beat" passage from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72). But they resonate here with a unique pertinence, pointing to an interest shared by the film in describing the promises and threats of heightened sensory perception.



Fig. 1
Screen capture from Lonergan's *Margaret*.

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In a description of what would happen if we could keenly sense "all ordinary human life," Eliot encodes the danger of a hyperrealist protocol that would give each life equal representation. With her pitch-perfect blend of sincerity and irony, Eliot writes:

> That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (194)

Margaret re-sounds these iconic lines as the film threatens to lose itself in a heightened documentary realism that tries to look beyond Lisa's individual tragedy and to register instead "the fact of frequency"—the ubiquity of human suffering. According to Eliot, the realist novel is a technology for heightening the senses, for "amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot" ("Natural History" 270). Its function is ethical, allowing for "an extension beyond the limitations of the self" and a "coming up against some form of otherness" (Albrecht 438). Lonergan picks up on "the fact of frequency" in both of its senses (the frequency of a sound wave and the rate of occurrence of tragedy): in the diner, it is the technology of the microphone that preternaturally heightens our senses, giving us access to otherwise unheard sound and to lives typically filtered out by the camera's more exclusive vision. And, indeed, we cannot seem to bear much of this "noise." The inclusion of other conversations underlines the film's indexical conceit: reversing the typical conventions for film dialogue that favor "intelligibility" over "acoustic fidelity" (Kozloff 120), it stages unexpected access to otherness, reminding us that Lisa's tragedy is one among many. But it renders this acoustic fidelity threatening to narrative itself. With keener hearing, we lose track not only of Lisa's story but also of the very possibility of story itself. Because if we could hear every conversation, every story, at once, we would not be able to make out a word of it. We would hear only a cacophony, a rush of sound in our ears—a roar.[8]

The problem of "the fact of frequency" and the realist concern of how to register it in a work of art—the tension between focus on a single protagonist and the opposing drive to include the lives (and suffering) of the many that, according to Alex Woloch, shapes narrative realism in the nineteenth-century novel and beyond—appear in the film's themes, in its form, and even in the story of its production and release. Although the film was shot in 2005, it was not released until 2011, and in between Lonergan got lost in the editing process and in a series of legal disputes concerning the length of the film. While the script ran to "roughly three hours of screen time," Lonergan's producers and his studio, Fox Searchlight, had insisted from the beginning on a finished product of no more than 150 minutes. A six-year standoff and several lawsuits resulted, as well as two different versions of the film: the two-and-a-half hour theatrical release and a three-hour-plus extended version of the film that was almost impossible to see before the film was released on DVD in 2012 (Lovell). The question of what to include in the film and what to cut, and of how long audiences are willing to watch and listen, of how much content they can take and how many stories they can follow, reiterates the questions of realist representation that Eliot raises.[9]

Gillian Beer calls hyperesthesia "the particular disease of the Victorian consciousness." The combination of the "ethic of realism—paying respect to things as they are" and the "ethic of sympathy descending from the Romantics" resulted for Victorians in "near intolerable pressure on the receptive or

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penetrating consciousness from the external world, the world of others" (100). If we could hear the leaves falling, the grass growing, a squirrel's heartbeat, all the stories of suffering, could our bodily frames bear it? Could the film frame bear it? As Brody warns, the danger of striving for "total plausibility" is that the film can cross over "suddenly and irretrievably" into incoherence (qtd. in Lonergan, "Kenneth Lonergan Discusses"). What Eliot describes in *Middlemarch* is not only the risk of realism but also the benefits of "stupidity."[10] Just as the limits of our senses shelter us from the impossibly loud roar on the other side of silence, sympathetic insensibility protects us from the painful knowledge of acute universal suffering. The passage tells us what we gain by remaining insensible to others' pain, by plugging our ears with a "wadd[ing]" of stupidity.

Given these demands, the nineteenth-century realist novel (and its modern incarnations) must become an instrument of sensitivity and stupidity alike, quickening our perception as well as offering a protective buffer against sensory and affective onslaught. *Middlemarch* and *Margaret* thematize the use of two such safeguards: narcissism and narrative, paired forms of stupidity that work to keep a single character at the center of the story, despite pretensions to a mode of realistic representation that would devote attention to as wide a range of characters as possible. The focal points for narcissism and narrative alike are the heroines of these stories, Dorothea Brooke and Lisa Cohen, each of whom must learn that, to grow up and become an ethical subject, she must not think the world is shaped around her story alone.

Middlemarch narrates the story of Dorothea's narcissism and its overcoming, charting her emergence from "moral stupidity" into a wider sympathetic consciousness (212). At a key moment in the story, the narrator turns away from Dorothea (who is, like Lisa, a privileged young white woman) to attend instead to the lives of others: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one . . . ?" (278). The narrator's midsentence self-interruption—"but why always Dorothea?"—becomes an aesthetic imperative dictating the form of the novel, and an ethical imperative too: look beyond Dorothea, look beyond the self. Lisa is also made to overcome her early narcissism, showing that the film follows a driving plot of nineteenth-century fiction (and its criticism) that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the moral pedagogy and erotics of "Girl Being Taught a Lesson" (125). *Margaret*'s formal breaks stage the same question as *Middlemarch*'s narrator. We see this clearly in a scene midway through the film when the camera and microphone pull away from Lisa to scan instead the lives of her neighbors, demanding a wider distribution of narrative attention. In their family apartment, Lisa and her mother begin to talk—but why always Lisa? Interrupting its own story, the camera cuts away to an atypical exterior shot that pans across the apartment building and its windows, peering into other lives.

And yet, for all its turning away, the film inevitably returns to Lisa, so that if *Margaret* chastises Lisa for her narcissism, seemingly emblematized and punished through the bus accident she helps to cause, it also interrogates its own focus, asking if Lisa's self-centeredness is ultimately any different from the film's own centeredness on her. During Emily and Lisa's argument, Emily angrily denounces the way Lisa seems to be making Monica's death into her own drama: "I'm a *human being*. Monica was a human being. So was her daughter and so is your mother. We are not supporting characters in the fascinating story of your life." But what Emily says is only partially true. In a movie named for Lisa (or her analogue), the line is also a joke: the other women *are* supporting characters.

"This is not an opera!" Emily repeats the line twice. But the film's operatic soundtrack, and two scenes set at the Metropolitan Opera,

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might have us thinking otherwise. At the climax of the legal plot, Lisa, furious that the suit for criminal negligence against the driver may result in a payout but not an admission of wrongdoing, storms out of the lawyer's office. From a bird's-eye view we see Lisa burst out of the tall downtown office building to blasts of the aria "A cenar teco," from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. If life is not an opera, how do we place the soaring music that tells us it is? The music has two opposing effects, mocking Lisa's dramatic self-importance and bolstering the power of the scene. Opera may expose Lisa's narcissism, but that does not stop the film from using it to shape a unified story around Lisa and to heighten its dramatic pitch. In the diner scene, the musical notes from *Lohengrin* do not simply add noise but also organize it: the narrative thread that is almost lost in chatter is picked up again by melody. The operatic soundtrack guarantees not only sonic coherence but also an adherence, after all, to Lisa's life, tempering the too-much-ness of the traumatic sounding of the lives of others with the music of its central story.

While the film gestures to a larger world beyond Lisa and beyond New York City, we never get to see it on-screen. We do, though, look up, in a series of repeated shots that interrupt the narrative by simply turning the camera to the sky. Periodically, the camera tilts up to catch the ceaseless flight of commercial airplanes above the New York City skyline. These shots signal just how present the trauma of 9/11 still is for New Yorkers, and, even more pressingly, they juxtapose personal and world-historical trauma. Paired with Wagner or with Nico Muhly's original score, the shots strangely blend aesthetic calm—the tranquil music, the clear blue sky—with fearful vigilance. While critics have recognized *Margaret* as a post-9/11 New York film, pointing in passing to these shots in their reviews, the extent of the film's response to terrorism has not yet been fully explored. This is what I would like to address in closing, arguing that here too we can see just how much the film inherits from Victorian realist conventions and narrative forms. Touching on the United States' place in a larger geopolitical scene, the film remains deeply ambivalent about how to understand 9/11 and how to frame the relation between local and global trauma.

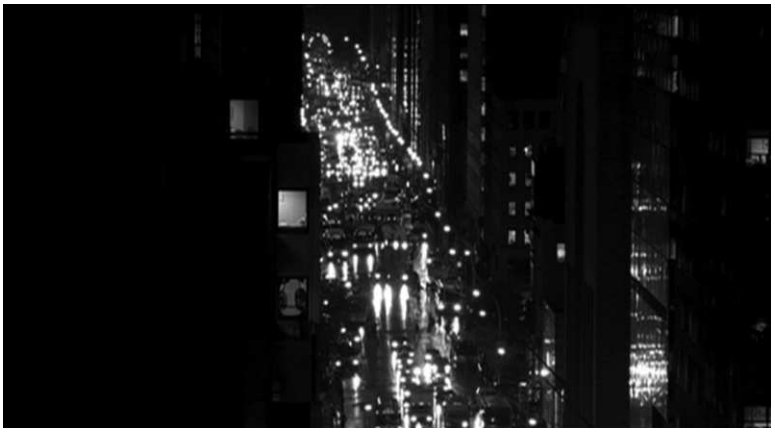


FIG. 2
Screen capture from Lonergan's *Margaret*.

In some respects, *Margaret* resonates with literary and filmic works from the same period that suggest a decentering perspective is necessary to dislodge the "post-9/11 national rhetorics of grief, homeland, pain, terrorism, and security" that have kept American exceptionalism firmly in place in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks (Byrd xviii). In particular, I think of *11'09"01 – September 11* (2002), a portmanteau film conceived by Alain Brigand that includes eleven short films by filmmakers from eleven countries charting reactions to the 9/11 attacks across the globe,[11] and of Karan Mahajan's novel *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016), which places 9/11 in a larger network of terrorist attacks and anti-Muslim violence in the United States and in India in the 1990s and 2000s and shows us many smaller-scale attacks from the perspectives of both the bombing victims and the perpetrators. And yet while *Margaret* also commemorates and decenters the New York City attacks, unlike

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these other works it remains domestic and hyperlocal, tied to the Upper West Side—its decentering efforts staged rather than actual.

On one level, *Margaret* wants to affirm the real link between intimate and global terror. A sudden rupture of the fabric of ordinary experience, the bus accident cannot help psychologically and emotionally re-sounding—for Lisa, for the other New Yorkers who watch Monica die on the street, and perhaps for the viewer—the surreal experience of being an onlooker to the World Trade Center attacks as a resident of the city. The felt connection between the bus accident and the terrorist attacks is solidified by audiovisual links between two scenes later in the film, when an extended shot of New York City traffic on a dark, rainy night (a reference to the bus accident) transitions into another that tracks an airplane's flight through a twilight sky (a reference to the World Trade Center attacks), *Lohengrin*'s prelude playing continuously throughout. In the first of these scenes, while Lisa is taking a cab home from Monica's funeral service, the perspective shifts from inside the cab to a bird's-eye view of cars streaming down one of New York's wide one-way avenues. The camera pans up the street and slowly zooms out, revealing a long column of traffic, car after car, block after block, a sea of yellow headlights reflected on the wet black pavement. Up and up and up, the shot becomes vertiginous, revealing a long column of lights like a glowing tower (fig. 2). In the second scene, the camera slowly turns up from street level to the sky at twilight, watching a plane grow bigger and bigger as it approaches from the distance and tracking it as it flies directly overhead. Visual continuity between these moments is created by uniform camera movement that pans up at the same rate in both shots and by the initial inclusion of a pedestrian traffic light in the lower left-hand corner of the frame (fig. 3). City traffic, a tower, an illuminated walk sign like the one that lit Monica's path across the street before she was hit by the bus, an airplane overhead: the scenes link the vulnerability of a body crossing a Manhattan street with the vulnerability of all bodies on the ground when a terrorist attack is always potentially looming, when at any moment a plane could veer off course into the side of a skyscraper.

Margaret's tranquil skies and undisturbed skylines negatively evoke a set of images etched into our minds by news-media coverage of the 2001 attacks, "the endlessly repeated footage of passenger jets aimed at the World Trade Center" (Jacobus 202). For Mary Jacobus, images played over and over again—an airplane crashing into a tower, "the dizzying, slow-motion collapse of the Twin Towers"—staged and restaged trauma for American viewers frozen in front of their television screens (202). These images of "urban capitalist disaster" were then looped into a larger cycle of violence, exploited to mobilize the "so-called war on terror, with its bellicose and patriotic rhetoric" (215).[12] The film shows how the confused sense of responsibility Lisa feels for helping to cause the bus accident drifts, in the film's visual logic and its story, into the guilt of being an American in the post-9/11 years—that is to say, the guilt of having possibly helped to incite and participate in a series of unjust wars and a larger



Fig. 3
Screen capture from Lonergan's *Margaret*.

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system of imperial violence, military occupation, and exploitation of labor and resources that long predates 2001.

The film most directly explores the World Trade Center attacks in a classroom debate scene. Lisa and her private-school classmates—described as "white secular Jewish" students with, in Lonergan's problematic wording, "a sprinkling of black and Hispanic kids" (*Margaret: A Screenplay* 20)—respond to the teacher's prompt: "What is the frame of reference for the average Arab on the street?" Lisa's classmate Angie, who explains that her mother's family is from Syria, argues that "Americans have no idea how much people hate them all over the world, okay?" Lisa responds heatedly and turns the conversation to 9/11, arguing that "we have a pretty good idea how much people hate us" because "they blew up our city." Angie protests against Lisa's charge that the terrorists were "sick monsters" who killed three thousand people for "no reason," responding to the anti-Arab racism in Lisa's charge and declaring, "[M]aybe they think they had a reason." The debate devolves into a shouting match:

LISA. Why are you defending someone who murdered three thousand people?
ANGIE. I'm *not*! Why are *you* defending a country that unilaterally invaded two Muslim countries *and* supports the Israeli occupation of Palestine?
LISA. Oh, come on!
ANGIE. And drops *bombs* on women and children and then calls other people terrorists for doing the exact same thing?!
LISA. Cause it's not the same thing!
ANGIE. Yes it *is*! (34:07–35:39)

Angie's charge is that Lisa, able to care so acutely for "her" city and for victims of terrorism there, is unfeeling when it comes to terror perpetrated abroad. A scene that occurs just before the reading of "Spring and Fall" may help to build that case.

Lisa, sitting at her kitchen table, turns up the radio to drown out the sound of her mother talking on the phone, and we hear a news report about a nineteen-year-old female suicide bomber in Jerusalem. A dispatch from the wider world is used to blot out domestic drama, functioning as noise. Yet it turns out Lisa was listening, as we learn later, when she uses the suicide bomber as evidence in a second classroom debate (on whether teenagers should run the world). Before we visually cut away from the kitchen, audio from the next scene begins: "Spring and Fall," the teacher reads, "to a young child, by Gerard Manley Hopkins." The sound bridge links the poem with the news, layering the report of the young woman's suicide bombing over the sounds not just of Lisa's life but also of the poem's story of Margaret's life. The film makes us hear these three lives in concert, briefly giving them equal weight. They are, after all, not only sonically or symbolically resonant but also materially codetermining. And yet the film makes its own priorities clear. Each of these lives—like so many leaves, things of man, and fallen worlds—will become part of a single story: It is Margaret we mourn for. We hear murmurs of suffering elsewhere, a rumor of war abroad, but all we see, listening to the news or hearing the poem, is Lisa.

Margaret presses questions on us about how scales of experience as disparate as the interpersonal and the geopolitical, the domestic and the global, fit together and how we can respond as feelingly and ethically to one as to the other. But the way the film raises these questions limits the scope of its response. The film takes what Elaine Freedgood argues is a "quintessentially Victorian" representational and ideological tack: it turns "an actual historical problem" into "part of a newly constructed unchanging human condition" (48). Here, the problem of United States–Middle East relations, including terrorism and counterterrorism, the occupation of Palestine, and the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with all their attendant terror, guilt, and destruction, becomes part of

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the problem of coming of age. And this coming of age is a racialized-cum-universalized and heteronormative one at that: Lisa develops into adulthood and into her newly inhabited sexuality (despite and through her fraught romantic and sexual relationships in the film, each of which is shown to be vexed by disparities in power and consent), and so presumably will Márgarét. But what about the anonymous nineteen-year-old suicide bomber's coming of age? As Jasbir K. Puar argues, not only are discourses of terrorism "intrinsically gendered, raced, sexualized, and nationalized," they also "demonstrate the production of normative patriot bodies that cohere against and through queer terrorist corporealities" (121). Lisa's "normative [white] patriot" body "cohere[s] against and through" the corporeality of the suicide bomber, queered not only by the use of her racialized body as a weapon, "in a truly ballistic sense," to quote Achille Mbembe (qtd. in Puar 129), but also by her differential access to a normative Western narrative of development: she will not be named or addressed by the film; she will not live to experience the era of aged uncaring.

Freedgood is clear about the stakes of the Victorian move that the film arguably makes: "In rendering a problem transhistorical, and thereby spiritual and psychological and, above all, individual, its solution [is made to lie also in] the realm of individual interiority" (48–49). *Margaret* could be condemned for ignoring collective suffering and instead taking refuge in the techniques of Victorian (capitalist-imperialist) storytelling, seeking the solution to real and pervasive suffering in its testing of Lisa's individual ability to feel for others. Viewers are put to a limited test in turn: can we feel for Lisa, despite her narcissism, and for her suffering, which, despite her dramatic way of expressing it, is nevertheless real? Here, it is as if our ability to care for Lisa might bear on the "actual historical problem" of imperialistic United States military policy and its discounting of Muslim and Arab lives.

In an essay on the discursive formation of disaster (including terrorism), Suvendrini Perera raises a question similar to the film's: "How are suffering, damage and disaster produced and made visible across different sites, and how are they made to *count*, to matter?" (33). Perera argues that Western media, in the long tradition of European philosophy, tends to conceive of disaster as happening "somewhere else," in "geographies of danger" such as "the Third World [and] the global South" that are constructed as inherently unstable places. This conception of disaster sustains the "illusion" of a divide "between a wild, undomesticated and disease-ridden nature, the locus of bare life, 'out there'" and "a civilized, scientifically superior and sanitary space that is the privileged home of the West," a divide that maps "racialized geographies on to the spatial demarcations of 'East' and 'West.'" If the 9/11 attacks disrupted these tropes, bringing "Eastern" terrorism "home" to United States soil, the ensuing wars have tried to reinstate them. Perera argues that "somewhere else" (like the Middle East) is "discursively and representationally rendered as *somewhere else*" precisely by the "enframing technologies of theatre, screen, and spectacle" (38). *Margaret* is among those technologies, sharpening the imaginary differentiation not only between here (Manhattan, Hollywood, the United States, the West) and somewhere else (Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, the East) but also between "those who are the subjects of their own suffering" and "those who simply suffer" (36). While in "Spring and Fall" Margaret is both the subject and object of her own grieving, *Margaret* tells the story of how Lisa comes to be subject and object of her own suffering too, assuming the rights of the girl whose name gives the film its title. But suffering abroad, which remains strictly offscreen and outside the visual frame, becomes the territory of "those who simply suffer" and are never named, of those who, like the suicide bomber, never become true subjects of the film or of their own suffering.

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Margaret uses Victorian realism's representational techniques to gesture to a world beyond Manhattan but also to foreclose access to that world, rendering it as somewhere else, somewhere unrepresentable.

And yet, it may be something to care for Lisa after all—but if, and only if, our focus on her reveals the fundamental "interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations" that would lead to more expansive ways of caring and grieving (Butler, *Frames* 19). This is what Butler calls the differential distribution of "precarity," meaning not simply the precariousness common to all life but the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames* 25). Precarity determines both the suicide bomber's heightened exposure to death and the Western tendency to think of her life as more disposable than Lisa's. *Margaret*, when read searchingly—when read with and through its Victorian intertexts and the condition of colonial precarity that has shaped them—illuminates modern-day precarity and its historical sources. But whether the film can imagine forms that would instead enable caring for and valuing life "elsewhere" remains, I think, an open question.

Margaret ends in the theater, at the iconic Metropolitan Opera in Lincoln Center, but it carefully links this site to terror, tourism, and "disaster capitalism" (Klein). Earlier, in another of the film's overheard conversations, we hear a discussion of a stranger's afternoon's plans: "OK, so Ground Zero, then we'll meet you guys at the theater" (2:17:42–46). The strategically renamed Ground Zero has become a tourist destination and, as its pairing with "the theater" suggests, a staging site where a certain kind of suffering is put on display and made available for consumption. Attending a performance of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) with her mother seems to complete Lisa's education in suffering. As the film cuts back and forth between the onstage performance and Lisa's reaction to it in her red velvet seat, we see and hear the opera's famous barcarole, "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour," a love song performed by two women. Lisa is increasingly moved by the undeniably stirring performance. Tears well up in her eyes, and she takes her mother's hand. The melody builds and Lisa breaks down. She reaches for her mother, and the two hold each other, crying, as the song ends and the film fades to black. Lisa, why are you weeping? The opera allows Lisa to reconnect with her mother and, apparently, to mourn, although we do not quite know what she is mourning for: the story on the stage, Monica, herself, her own limitations, the victims of the 9/11 attacks, the victims of American wars abroad, the suicide bomber in Jerusalem, the lives the bomber took with hers, the sheer frequency of human suffering, mortality itself. But we do know that the performance onstage has somehow allowed her to come into that suffering.

Whether or not Lisa's grief at the opera is an adequate response to the tragedy all around her is difficult to judge, as it is difficult to judge if this is an adequate ending to the film. What we do know is that *Margaret* turns, once more, to a nineteenth-century form to shape its own narrative. Borrowing the affective power of the opera's music, this conclusion feels at once moving and unsatisfying, failing to resolve the questions the film has raised. *Margaret* shares a great deal with nineteenth-century realism: its documentary impulse, its melodrama, its didactic voice, its emphasis on the importance of the domestic and the personal as a route to ethical action, and, above all, its extraordinary ambivalence about its own politics of representation. Like much nineteenth-century narrative realism, the film merely intimates a sense of tragedy beyond the borders of the individual life, the story, and the nation. It wants to tell us that there is some connection between the local and the global, the personal

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and the geopolitical, but it also seems to insist that it is impossible to articulate just what that connection might be.

Attending to the history and politics of the senses, Asma Abbas argues that we need to ask not only "how we sense and attend" but also "how our senses, access, and attention are themselves sculpted." Doing so, she hopes, "may disarm us by forcing us to acknowledge our complicity in making, defining, and producing suffering, damage, and disasters in the way we do." *Margaret*, attuned to nineteenth-century narrative forms, sculpts our senses to feel for Margaret, for Lisa, and for the particular forms of aestheticized suffering available to them. Doing so, though, it may not only disattune us to other forms of suffering—warning us that feeling for others is ultimately a form of fatigue for the sentient subject and a source of incoherence for realist narrative—but also, perhaps, make us complicit in producing "suffering, damage, and disasters" elsewhere. Can we care? This, it turns out, may simply be the wrong question to ask.

Notes

I am grateful to the many friends and colleagues who have thought about the film with me and who have read drafts of this essay. I would like to thank in particular Aviva Briefel, John Cameron, Pooja Rangan, Timothy Van Compernolle, and Antonina Griecci Woodsum for their generous and formative contributions.

1. Several recent critical works inform my sense of post-9/11 American cinema, especially the collections *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture, and the "War on Terror"* (Birkentstein et al.) and *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11* (McSweeney), as well as McSweeney's monograph *The "War on Terror" and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. I am placing *Margaret* in a larger body of work that includes, among many other genres and titles: direct representations of the 9/11 attacks, in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) and Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006); war films like Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012); films on post-9/11 domestic life, like Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011), adapted from Jonathan Safran Foer's 2005 novel of that title, and especially those that focus on Arab American life, such as Hesham Isswai's *AmericanEast* (2008); and films that interrogate the link between anti-Arab and Islamophobic discrimination and terrorism, like Joseph Castelo's *The War Within* (2005) and Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), adapted from Moshin Hamid's novel of the same title (2011).

2. Hensley is interested in the special capacity of literary forms to process the contradictions of historical experience—for the Victorians, the "fundamental paradox of liberal empire" with its ideal of peace (at home) and the reality of constant war (abroad [2]). For Hensley, the "central impasse of Victorian modernity," the coexistence of law and harm, is "negotiate[d]" in and through the "resources of literary form" (5). But literary forms may reify rather than modify impasses, especially when they are codified and moved across centuries. My essay asks whether *Margaret*'s ability to encode the contradictions of American subjects' simultaneous knowledge and disavowal of modern imperial violence allows for new "negotiations" of thought—and new possibilities for care—or rather reiterates Victorian forms' now falsified solutions.

3. Cheng has explored the politics of melancholia in the context of the history of the United States, a nation that, she argues, is structured by its "racial exclusions" and, moreover, "traumatized by its betrayal of its own democratic ideology (the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, segregation, immigration discrimination)" and by its exploitation of Mexican and Chinese American labor (11).

4. For more on Lonergan's playwriting career, see his interview with Rachel Kushner in *BOMB* (Lonergan, "Kenneth Lonergan").

5. As Brody puts it in a preamble to his *New Yorker* interview of Lonergan, "A little background: in my capsule review of the film, I wrote that the extraordinary practical and material focus of *Margaret* threatened 'death by naturalism.' I didn't mean to insult a film I love, but to suggest that the danger of a film that displays total plausibility lies in crossing the line, suddenly and irretrievably, into utter implausibility. It's a danger that Lonergan dared to face in pursuit of a grand artistic ideal" (Lonergan, "Kenneth Lonergan Discusses"). See also Brody, "*Margaret*" and "Movie."

6. The transcriptions of dialogue from the film are my own; I am attempting here to render the nuances of the filmic performances instead of relying on Lonergan's printed script.

7. Altman, for instance, famously argues that the convention in classical narrative film that the camera should be pointed at the speaker and that other sound, like music and background noise, should be simultaneously reduced is so iron-clad that it amounts to an "ideology of synchronized sound" (69).

8. It would be useful to place the "roar . . . on the other side of silence" in conversation with Byrd's theory of

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"colonial cacophony" (xxxvi), the clamor of competing claims to oppression created by historical and ongoing "U.S. settler colonialism" and "settler imperialism" (xix). Indeed, while I focus on the film's representation of the Middle East in this essay, *Margaret* signals its connection to a wider imperial and neoimperial network, brought to the fore, for instance, by the Colombian character Ramón (played, curiously, by the French actor Jean Reno).

9. The problem of exhausting the audience reverberates in the reception of Eliot's long novels, as Dames has shown. His work also illuminates the film's reliance on opera: *Margaret* prominently features Bellini's *Norma* (1831) and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* (1881), and its soundtrack includes Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) and Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1850). Dames shows that Victorian reviewers frequently compared Eliot's long novels to Wagner's long operas (which Eliot herself attended and wrote about). The works are formally linked by "a practice of elongated temporal length and insistent complexity, a length without breaks or breathing room, that is both theoretically exhilarating and practically exhausting" (124–25). *Margaret*, which has also been criticized for being too long, diffuse, and demanding, clearly claims a place in this extended media history.

10. My thinking on sensitivity and stupidity is informed, respectively, by Sperlinger and Ronell.

11. Ken Loach, in his contribution to the project—a short film representing the United Kingdom—focuses on the preexisting significance in Chile of Tuesday, 11 September, the date of a devastating United States–backed military coup in 1973. The other directors who contributed films to *11'09"01 – September 11* were Youssef Chahine, for Egypt; Amos Gitaï, for Israel; Alejandro González Iñárritu, for Mexico; Shôhei Imamura, for Japan; Claude Lelouch, for France; Samira Makhmalbaf, for Iran; Mira Nair, for India; Idrissa Ouedraogo, for Burkina Faso; Sean Penn, for the United States; and Danis Tanovic, for Bosnia-Herzegovina.

12. Davis succinctly states the far-ranging consequences of this rhetoric: "it was not until George W. Bush proclaimed global war on terror in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, that terrorists came to represent the universal enemy of Western 'democracy.' . . . The use of the war on terror as a broad designation of the project of twenty-first-century Western democracy has served as a justification of anti-Muslim racism; it has further legitimized the Israeli occupation of Palestine; it has redefined the repression of immigrants; and has indirectly led to the militarization of local police departments throughout the country" (79).

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