Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Idle, Hattie (2025) The “Empty Centre” of Paris: Logics of Exclusivity in the Tourist Romance. Frames Cinema Journal.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/16345/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: http://dx.doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v22.i0.2992

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

The "Empty Centre" of Paris: Logics of Exclusivity in the Tourist Romance

Harriet Idle

DOI: https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v22.i0.2992

Frames Cinema Journal
ISSN 2053-8812
Issue 22 (2025)
http://www.framescinemajournal.com

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. To view a copy of this licence, visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Copyright © the author

Frames Cinema Journal, Issue 22 (2025)

The "Empty Centre" of Paris: Logics of Exclusivity in the Tourist Romance

By Harriet Idle

This article contends with the cinematic form of the tourist romance, investigating how it represents and ideologises urban space through its appropriation of the figure of the *flâneur.* I discuss here how this subgenre of the romantic comedy is fundamentally bound up with concerns over space, mobility, consumption, and discursive boundaries between inside and outside. I suggest that the figure of the urban *flâneur* subject is mobilised within this genre as a fantasy of white, bourgeois subjectivity who transforms and takes ownership of city space through means of his romantic encounters, therefore enacting what I suggest is the genre's endemic spatial logic: a necessarily exclusionary logic which hinges on upholding raced, classed, and gendered power structures. However, while conversations on the tourist romance have largely revolved around dominant US forms, I instead seek to widen the scope of study by analysing a film within the broader global genre which unsettles this understanding of space and the *flâneur* itself – South Korean auteur Hong Sang-soo's Parisian romance *Night and Day* (2008).

Before situating my discussion of Hong Sang-soo within the tourist romance tradition, I first briefly wish to mark a differentiation from the classical mode of the tourist romance which originates in the post-war period, which has been studied closely by scholars like Diane Negra (2001) and Vanessa Schwartz (2007) and include films such as *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen 1955) and *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli 1953). However, I outline here a theory of the tourist romance's exclusionary logic as it appears in this 'nervous' mode, one

Copyright © the author

popularised by Woody Allen's European-set romances such as *Everybody Says I Love You* (1996) and *Midnight in Paris* (2012), alongside works by other US auteurs such as Richard Linklater. This mode is ostensibly defined by its formal and ideological opposition to the perceived inauthenticity or superficiality of the classic Hollywood romances. [1] Rather than the quaint artificiality of Hollywood studio sets, primary inspiration is instead drawn from European art cinema, notably the French New Wave or Italian neorealism. As such, a great deal more focus is placed on realist approaches to urban representation. I therefore suggest that the mode of the 'nervous' tourist romance bears significantly upon our understanding of Hong's film here not only because they share similar artistic influences – most notably the films of Éric Rohmer - but because the nervous mode lays greater claims to realism and 'authentic' representation of urban encounter. Thus, it proves rich ground to excavate the more covert forms through which exclusionary spatial logics manifest within the genre.

The literary figure of the urban *flâneur* – detailed by the French poet Baudelaire and later theorist Walter Benjamin – is particularly vital within the vocabulary of the nervous tourist romance. It is a figure employed in these films to evoke a form of masculine European cultural heritage more elite than the feminised, 'inauthentic' tourist subjects of the mainstream Hollywood romances. The symbolic transformation from tourist to *flâneur* is essential to the romantic urban fantasy of the nervous romances, as it is the way through which they gain access to hidden or exclusive knowledges of city space usually reserved for locals. Thus, this article moves to briefly contextualise how the cultural and urban histories of Paris undergird the nervous tourist romance's specific characterisations of 'tourist' and '*flâneur* 'as forms of urban subjectivity. The cinematic *flâneur* has been associated with a psychological positionality of alienation or isolation; as I will argue here, however, it

Copyright © the author

operates within the generic framework of tourist romance not as a psychological condition but as a symbolic ideal. These films narrate a subject's romantic transformation from 'tourist' to '*flâneur*': a racialised and classed fantasy of ultimate freedom, knowledge, and ownership. The tourist romance's appropriation of New Wave aesthetics – and the evocation of the *flâneur* figure – creates a space through which American whiteness can be reconstituted by means of retreating into a nostalgic, idealised past and rediscovering a romanticised European cultural heritage. Yet the films of the French New Wave also enacted their own exclusions and erasures within the urban spaces of Paris, often erasing the presence of postcolonial migrants and non-white bodies, reflective of "interior colonialism" occurring in post-war France. [2] David Scott Diffrient notes that, in the same way that the 'snapshot' properties of a picture-postcard capture only one static frame of a given landscape, "their form and expression...is contingent upon framing." [3] He stresses that such exclusionary framing, the "structured absence of racial and ethnic difference" from the film's composite of Parisian urban life, is employed as direct recourse to what he calls the "empty centre" of Paris: "a dream image of Old Paris that has evaporated into the wisps of an era all but forgotten by an indigenous populace in the throes of industrial modernization." [4] Theorising this "inner/outer", or inclusion/exclusion dialectic, within the context of the tourist romance film, we can view the urban fantasy space of the tourist romance film as an attempted reconstitution of this "empty centre" specifically for the benefit of the foreign tourist. By means of erasing racial, cultural, or class difference within Paris's inner city, the tourist romance covertly privileges affiliations with a white, bourgeois subjectivity as a method of claiming the *flâneur* 's access to an otherwise unattainable romantic fantasy of Paris. [5]

Copyright © the author

Through my concluding reading of South Korean auteur Hong Sang-soo's 2008 film *Night and Day* – arguably a tourist romance film, but one not usually framed in such terms – we can see these processes at work more clearly. *Night and Day* evidences a reflexive exploration of the systematic erasure of racial and class difference from city space, which is inherent to the US form but typically obscured by it. While *Night and Day* in many ways maintains the tourist romance's fantasy vision of Paris, it also holds an uneasy textual negotiation with those dimensions of global cities that romance narratives centred around foreign tourists and the middle-class often overlook – undocumented migration, economic inequality, racism, violence, and class conflict.

Hong Sang-soo's films are not typically studied alongside popular genres; rather, they tend to be framed within the canon of Korean auteur cinema that scholars like Jinhee Choi and Kim Kyung-hyun describe. [6] They highlight Hong's remarkable uniformity regarding characters and subject matter (films about "a man chasing a woman, foolish decisions, embarrassing conversations, and lots of drinking" [7]) as well as his formal proclivities – complex, puzzle-like narratives, constant use of repetition and doubling within the narrative, use of zoom shots and long takes, and so on. [8] These formal characteristics have lent themselves to a number of psychoanalytic and political readings: both Kim and Choi, for example, argue that Hong's inert, impotent male characters reflect a broader "crisis of masculinity" in post-military era Korea. [9] Hee-seung Irene Lee and Marc Raymond, by contrast, draw upon the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Deleuze to characterise Hong's male characters as highly self-reflexive, 'essayistic' critiques of his own positionality as an artist. [10] Similarly, Hong's work is frequently analysed within a wider global canon of auteur cinema, with scholars noting narrative and aesthetic influences from other Asian New Wave artists of the

Copyright © the author

era, such as Tsai Ming Liang or Wong Kar-Wai, or with the European New Wave auteurs, particularly French filmmaker Éric Rohmer. [11] Marco Grosoli, in particular, has noted how Hong's formal and narrative trademarks – his love of stories about misplaced desire and awkward romantic connections, his representation of morally-complex protagonists, his "cold and abstract humour" – all form part of his "Rohmerian filiation." [12] Despite the clear transnational dialogues and intertextuality within his work, however, Hong is rarely put in conversation with global genre texts. Sueyoung Park Primiano is one of the few scholars to re-consider Hong's films along the terms of romantic comedy, as she astutely notes that they "both reject familiar romantic comedy conventions and embrace the popular genre." [13]

What I am interested in here is not whether *Night and Day* is or isn't a romantic comedy, but rather how the film's own representation of Paris, and of the male tourist/*flâneur* in Paris, might then produce an understanding of how the tourist romance functions on a global scale – one which is not currently accounted for in scholarship solely focused on the Euro-American films. *Night and Day* is a limit case that tests the very form of the tourist romance itself. In its convergence of "Nouvelle Vague-ish" narratives and aesthetics with the romantic comedy, *Night and Day* enacts a similar project to that of the Euro-American films – a nostalgic longing to reconstruct the "empty center" of mid-century Paris in the modern city. [14] *Night and Day's* depiction of Paris is made more complex, however, by its simultaneous desire to expose the more negative aspects of global mobility for raced subjects, whilst also maintaining the types of structured gazes (white, male, and bourgeois) which grant access to the nervous romance's spatiality.

Copyright © the author

Paris and Tourist Cinema

While the tourist romance is a form that is by no means solely defined by a relationship to the city of Paris, or even to Europe, Paris is my specific focus here because of its persistent association with cinematic romances since the post-war period. It is the city that is still the most often commodified as an object for the foreign tourist, the most widely circulated within global popular cinema, but it is also a city whose fraught history of erasure, oppression, and violence produces points of tension with this romantic imagination.

Although Paris has been settled since before the Roman Empire and has seen cycles of prosperity and deterioration, it was Baron Haussman's radical "creative destruction" [15] in the nineteenth century, the razing and reconstruction of vast areas of the medieval city, that arguably consolidated Paris's status as a modern, innovative, and fashionable capital. [16] One of the vital successes of this reinvention – one that arguably anticipated neoliberal imperatives of urban redevelopment a century later – was Haussman's reconfiguration of urban space to privilege a specifically touristic gaze, to "reconstruct the city itself as a spectacular image." [17] Paris's "belle époque", the nineteenth and early twentieth century boom in cultural activity which championed the city's charms, helped consolidate its global–reputation as bohemian, sublimely beautiful, and romantic. This epoch was importantly shaped by American tourists and ex-patriates, formed as part of a bourgeois impulse to visit a city which "welcomed looking." [18] Some of the most famous were the "lost generation" of American writers – Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound – whose bohemian lifestyle of café-dwelling and artistic collaboration solidified Paris's status in the American imagination as a haven for creative expression. [19] Paris was also alluring for African American writers and musicians, who settled here after World War I, feeling a

Copyright © the author

greater degree of freedom than back at home, in part due to Paris's reputation for cosmopolitanism, liberty, and its history as a centre of political revolution. [20]

Paris's perceived tolerance of diversity remained integral to the romantic fantasy of the city, despite it being arguably superficial in reality: as Charles Rearick notes, this 'revolutionary' or progressive reputation tends to gloss over Paris's connection to the nation's "ugly history" of colonialism and the city as a site where violent acts of xenophobia, such as the 1961 massacre of Algerians, have taken place. [21] For Americans, however, Paris became an object of immense fascination through the mass reproduction of the city's image in advertisements, guidebooks, posters, fashion magazines, photographs, popular music, and cinema, all of which endorsed Paris as the capital of romantic love, as a "place of beauty, romance, and pleasure." [22] The latter point gestures to the start of Americanised tourist gaze, enacting a certain ignorance or exclusion of specific kinds of histories within the city in favour of others – Paris memorialises some revolutions and violently suppresses others, it welcomes immigrants from America but not its former colonies. This can help us contextualise the types of spatialised exclusions at work in the tourist rom-com.

Although varied in their approaches, scholars have largely theorised the workings of a few interconnected factors which vectorise the complex relationship between Paris city space, romance, and tourist subjectivity: the reconstruction of the city as itself an object of touristic spectacle, the emergence of the distinctly Parisian literary and cinematic concept of *flâneur*, and the social changes in the nineteenth and twentieth century that enabled both the emergence of the fashionable female body of the Parisienne and city's reputation for

Copyright © the author

tolerance, bohemian lifestyles, and sexual freedom. [23] Vital for the romantic mythology of the city since the nineteenth century was not just the physical transformation from a medieval, narrow, cramped urban layout to a city of lush green parks, wide boulevards, and open squares, but also the emergence of the *flâneur* as a new type of urban figure to traverse these spaces. First identified within the literary works of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* claims the *flâneur*, a detached observer who is free to admire and catalogue the activities he sees on the city streets, as the archetypal figure emerging from the conditions of urban modernity. [24] Baudelaire's *flâneur* was not only an "archetypal Parisian" but also invariably male, contrasted against the prostitute or streetwalker as the female wandering figure. [25] As Kaitlyn Greenidge argues, the *flâneur*'s characteristic ability to blend into the crowd, to observe the city without himself being observed, is due to the inherent privilege and anonymity that maleness and whiteness afford. [26]

Flâneur and tourism as two forms of urban spectatorship share a great deal of characteristics. Both are, as noted by Hazel H. Hahn, defined by their "mobility and curiosity." [27] But whereas the *flâneur* is posed as distinctly Parisian, an encapsulation of an informed, intellectual observer, the tourist is the *flâneur*'s foil – the foreigner, or 'provincial', whose spectatorship is seen as rapid, superficial, "vacuous." [28] Although Hahn associates the derision of the tourist figure with a French sense of superiority over English culture, what is also suggested is the implicitly xenophobic motivations of the tourist/*flâneur* dichotomy. The *flâneur* maintains his privileged position, his access to the city, and the ability to unveil the city's philosophical mysteries by means of his maleness, his whiteness, and his identification with a specifically Parisian lifestyle. Many of the pursuits of modern tourism in Paris (both in terms of physical and cinematic tourism) endeavour to cultivate an experience of the city

Copyright © the author

beyond the denigrated perception of the foreign tourist and instead enact the *flâneur*'s ownership and intimate knowledge of its streets and public spaces, to replicate a romanticised 'true' Parisian experience, and to "to mingle with the anonymous crowd, to come across little-known sites in chance encounters." [29] The *flâneur*'s assumed whiteness is, as Richard Dyer has famously observed, central to his claim to anonymity and 'unmarked-ness'; the white man claims universality, speaks for all human experience as opposed to just for his race and his gender, the default from which all others deviate (and whose bodies are discursively marked) – in this way, the *flâneur* "secures a position of power." [30] Drawing from as far back as the Lost Generation, the urban fantasy of Paris has become structured around this very transformation from tourist to *flâneur* (or, in the case of the female tourist, into an object of spectacle in the form of the alluring and fashionable figure of the Parisienne). In other words, the transnational spatiality of Paris as a romantic city is necessarily both an imagined space and an imagined kind of racialised and gendered subjectivity.

Corresponding to these dichotomised spaces and subjectivities – local and foreign, tourist and *flâneur* – I suggest that there are therefore two branching forms in which the tourist romance film manifests: firstly, the rom com "postcard" aesthetic mode, a largely feminine register characterised by built studio sets, musical sequences, and with a focus on painterly compositions and colours [31]; secondly, the 'nervous' romantic mode, a more masculinised approach to the genre commonly associated with American independent filmmaking traditions, which is heavily influenced by European cinematic forms as opposed to other artforms, and which usually de-values "prettiness" in favour of realism, ambivalence, and authenticity [32]. This dual-pronged formulation of the US tourist romance's spatiality is applicable across multiple cities of Western Europe: Vienna in *Before Sunrise* (Richard

Copyright © the author

Linklater, 1995), for example, or Rome in *Roman Holiday* (Billy Wilder, 1953). Yet the urban fantasy of Paris in particular, as the "romance capital of the world", has been by far the subject of most interest. In both modes, Paris functions as an object of sublime touristic consumption, a fantasy space where great importance is placed on nostalgia and the claiming of ennobled European cultural heritage through the invocation of French artistic forms – primarily paintings, music, ballet, literature, and cinema. In these films, Europe becomes a "staging ground for nostalgic fantasies of whiteness" in which white Americans can escape to an abstracted past, their "imaginary homelands", and are transformed by its romantic possibilities – usually resulting in the formation of a heterosexual coupling [33]. The two modes are inherently invested in the privileged access to the city that is granted by white bourgeois subjectivity.

At the same time, however, a great majority of Parisian tourist films within the nervous mode have often seen a more ambivalent treatment of Paris. [34] In these films, the city's cinematic histories are self-reflexively evoked as a way to confront the characters with their own romantic delusions, to have them discover the fault lines between fantasy and reality, between a nostalgic fantasy of 'Old' Paris and the modern realities of the global city. Yet they are ultimately reluctant to discard either rom-com narrative convention or Paris's romanticised aesthetics altogether, instead often upholding both Paris's potency as a magical space of idealised romance and the privileged position of the romantic couple within it.

Such spatialised tensions between real and imagined Paris are constructed (and ultimately reconciled) in rather an extreme fashion in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*: the

Copyright © the author

film follows a successful but creatively unfulfilled screenwriter, Gil (Owen Wilson), who takes a trip to Paris with disparaging fiancée Inez (Rachel McAdams) but finds the modern city, and current partner, shallow and uninspiring. While writing a novel about a man who owns a 'nostalgia shop' – a detail that itself is a kind of winking meta-commentary about the commodification of an imagined past – he is unable to be productive until, at midnight, he stumbles back in time to 1920s Paris. There he converses with his idols – Hemingway, Stein, the Fitzgeralds – and falls in love with a beautiful Parisienne (Marion Cottillard). Allen's film is undoubtedly a glorification of Paris and its cultural legacies, with its dreamy cinematography "mirror[ing] the admiring and monumentalizing gaze of the appreciative tourist." [35] While the American tourist fantasy is indulged for both Gil, as Allen's persona, and the viewer (particularly in the love plot between an American visitor and a seductive, beautiful Parisienne), it also criticises it as ultimately unobtainable. Gil's 'hero's journey concludes with him realising that he cannot continue retreating into his nostalgic fantasies but should instead enjoy the present-day city and its romantic possibilities. As a contemporary American tourist in Paris, Gil must wander through both the real city and its unreal fantasy spaces to disillusion himself of his desire to live in the Paris of an idealised past and of his current romantic relationship. Thus, his dalliance with Adriana is left in the past, and he starts anew by breaking his engagement with Inez and embarking on a fledgling relationship with a modern-day Parisienne (Lea Seydoux) (see Figure 1).

Copyright © the author



FIGURE 1—Dreamlike wanderings in *Midnight in Paris* (2011)

The way in which the protagonists of tourist romances like *Midnight* have a doubled experience of Paris as both a 'real' and romanticised city mirrors broader accounts of global tourist experiences in the city. In recent years, for example, "Paris Syndrome" has been introduced as a term to describe the experience of many Japanese and Chinese tourists who experience alienation, disillusionment, and sometimes even severe anxiety and depression when confronted with the real city compared to the romanticised image conveyed to them by various mediated images. [36] Dung and Reijinders's work "Paris Off-Screen: Chinese Tourists in Cinematic Paris" finds that the rom-com genre in particular seems to be the primary agent in the idealisation of Paris in Asia as "a dreamland filled with romantic possibilities... [an] idealistic image for the tourists to fulfill the needs of romantic escapism and for extraordinary experiences." [37] Within the body of scholarship surrounding Paris and the rom-com genre, the great majority has focused exclusively on the relationship between France and the US. Yet what phenomena like the Paris Syndrome demonstrate is that Paris tourist romance narratives proliferate and circulate globally. [38] In the last few decades, increasing numbers of foreign visitors to the city hail from East and South Asia, most notably India, China, Japan, and South Korea [39]: John Urry's third edition of his

Copyright © the author

influential study, *The Tourist Gaze* (2011), notes this phenomenon as part of the "globalising of the tourist gaze." He argues that multiple tourist gazes "have become core to global culture", with modern tourist practices forming part of a complex 'global hybrid' of "infrastructures, flows of images and people...that spread across the globe and reshape and re-perform what is 'global.'" [40] Urry's recognition of this returned gaze invites us to reconsider dominant understandings of the cinematic tourist romance as a primarily white Western endeavour.

It is surprising, then, that scholars have been disinclined to theorise films outside of the Euro-American axis as part of a *global* tourist romance genre – especially when films like *Night and Day* share such a similar interest in self-reflexivity towards romance, and towards genre itself as the nervous romances like *Midnight in Paris.* Such omission might be symptomatic of both a US-centric tendency within rom-com studies itself and certain residual snobbish legacies of global art cinema discourse, whereby the genre is assumed to be too inherently commercial, mainstream, or simplistic to coincide with auteurist works. However, it is indeed the case that when looking across global cinemas, Paris is posed as a more complex site of desire and conflict. Similarly, the dualistic categories of urban mobility and spectatorship, split in terms of 'tourist' and '*flâneur*', become significantly troubled. Both domestic French cinema and global cinema's depictions of diasporic, immigrant, or postcolonial subjectivities in Paris rarely coincide with the rom-com at all. [41] Films like Senegalese *Touki Bouki*, *L'afrance* (Alain Gomis 2001), and Taiwanese *What Time is it There?* (Tsai Ming-liang 2001) configure Paris as simultaneously an object of immense desire (both aspirational and romantic) and a space in which their subjects' very presence forces them into a state of surveillance, alienation, and abjection. [42] The superficiality and detachment of the tourist

Copyright © the author

gaze is displaced with the alienated, fractured diasporic (or migrant) experience of the city: as Dorottya Mozes notes about the practice of Black *flânerie*, the non-white (and female) *flâneur*, without the safety of such privileges within urban space, must negotiate "the homelessness, dislocation, alienation, and objectification of the Black subject." [43] In the context of Asian New Wave art cinema more broadly – the tradition from which *Night and Day* emerged – the male *flâneur* is similarly configured as the alienated, fractured subject of urban modernity. Interestingly, Jinhee Choi argues that the male *flâneur* of South Korean cinema is fundamentally unable to attain the romantic love and connection he constantly searches for within the city; thus, he is a figure in fact antithetical to the generic logic of the romantic comedy. [44]

As the brief discussion above makes clear, the Euro-American modes of the tourist rom-com do not account for the experience of non-white or non-Western conceptions of urban *flânerie*, nor reflect the entirety of global film traditions that engage the tourist gaze. What my concluding analysis of *Night and Day* intends to demonstrate here, then, is a clearer understanding of the racialised and classed dimensions of the genre's construction of urban space that are not necessarily revealed by standalone readings of the transatlantic films.

Night and Day

Night and Day concerns middle-aged painter Sung-nam, who has fled to Paris from Seoul to avoid prosecution for the possession of marijuana. Leaving his frantic wife behind, Sung-nam stays in a run-down guesthouse for Korean visitors and wanders the streets of Paris, in the process meeting an ex-girlfriend who introduces him to a community of Korean expatriate

Copyright © the author

artists. Sung-nam's dalliances with these female artists (including his married ex-girlfriend and a young art student, Yu-jeon) display a stark cynicism and viciousness towards "sentimentality and idealized love" and to the rom-com form itself. [45] Sung-nam is, in many ways, a typical Hong Sang-soo protagonist; however, his obsessive and neurotic behaviour towards women and constant desire to secure his own sense of bourgeois masculinity also importantly align him with the male *flâneurs* of the Euro-American nervous romances – particularly Allen's on-screen personas such as Gil Pender in *Midnight in Paris*. Further, there are also clear points of reference to Éric Rohmer's *Moral Tales* series, especially the Paris-set films such as *The Bakery Girl of Monceau* (1963) or *Love in the Afternoon* (1972). While both *Night and Day* and the US nervous romances draw significant stylistic inspiration from French New Wave films more broadly (including Rohmer's other Paris-set romantic comedy films such as *Rendevous in Paris* [1995] and *The Aviator's Wife* [1981]), Hong's most close referents are the films in which love stories are framed as moral dilemmas as opposed to romantic ones. *Night and Day* moves away from 'romance' as the main organising logic of male desire, and instead poses it in terms of sin, lust, and carnality: the married Sung-nam's encounters and dates with the various Korean expatriate women are framed as the hero's trials, him trying (and failing) to resist temptation and remain faithful to his wife. As part of these, the film features recurring motifs of religiosity and Sung-nam's obsession with sin: he takes naps on the pews of a church; he reads a passage of the Bible to his ex-girlfriend about casting out sin in order to try and dissuade her from having an affair with him; he notes in one of Yu-Jeon's paintings that the subject "looked like a sinner".

Copyright © the author

In this way*, Night and Day* arguably unveils what is usually obfuscated within the spatial construction of the tourist rom-com. Its central 'hero' Sung-nam (Yeong-ho Kim) desperately strives to transform himself into the white, bourgeois *flâneur* subject through his walks and encounters in Paris – and thus 'redeem' himself – but is under constant threat of failing, of becoming too closely associated with the types of subjects made invisible through the tourist rom-com's structuring of space – such as "sinners", criminals, the homeless, the informal workers, and the undocumented immigrants. Despite being himself a member of a global bourgeois class, Sung-nam is displaced from the kind of privileged subjectivity claimed by the white tourist subjects of the Euro-American nervous romances, and thus cannot be transformed into the *flâneur.* Instead, both his racialised Otherness and the circumstances through which he comes to Paris (being on the run from the police) place him in close physical proximity to migrant and working-class subjects.

This sense of liminality informs much of the aesthetic regime of *Night and Day*. For example, the squalid and cramped interior of the guest house for Korean migrants (in which Sung-nam rents a bunk-bed in a room with 10 others) is juxtaposed against its beautiful, Haussmanian exterior and the picturesque Parisian cobbled streets and sidewalk cafes surrounding it. The discrepancy between interior and exterior surfaces visually reinforces the discrepancies between the sanitised, romantic spaces of tourist Paris and the unseen, hidden spaces of the immigrant. The film's roving, improvisational style of cinematography means that the camera is frequently diverted away from the landmark, the picturesque, and the bourgeois, and instead directed to the ground levels, to the city's hidden spaces: we see the quaint cobbled pavements mired by dirt and grime, including Sung-nam's (and our, the viewer) gaze lingering on the sight of a dead bird on the road, or a sanitary worker brushing dog shit off

Copyright © the author

the kerb. Similarly, Hong having elected to shoot the film digitally as opposed to on 35mm film means that the filmic texture is much less dreamy and aestheticised. Unlike the smoothed-over quality of the film stock typically used by tourist rom-coms like *Midnight in Paris, Night and Day's* digital sharpness ensures that Sung-nam's flâneurial wanderings are captured with more uncompromising and unflattering detail (see Figure 2).



FIGURE 2— Sung-nam in Paris in *Night and Day* (2008)

Throughout the film, Sung-nam is often placed within surroundings that shift between bourgeois aesthetics and the aesthetics of transience and deprivation: he lives in cramped hostels and carries a plastic bag holding his possessions, but also looks on longingly at a group of French men and women eating oysters in a Parisian restaurant. The latter shot is particularly potent in crystallising the inside/outside dialectic – and its relationship to a masculinised sense of power and ownership of space – that this film plays upon: as Sung-nam strolls on one of his many walks around the streets of Paris, carrying his plastic convenience store bag and wearing his scruffy, ill-fitting shirt, he stops upon this picturesque scenario of the two couples having lunch. This shot is framed from the interior, with Sung-nam walking

Copyright © the author

into the centre of frame, aligned with the table that holds the extravagant display of oysters, and in-between the two couples on either side; he is here excluded outside of the restaurant, only able to peer in through the window. Notably, all members of the couple are white. Sung-nam, on the other side of the window, gazes intensely at what could be encapsulated as a typically Parisian scene (and indeed a *romantic* scene), thus adopting the positionality of the tourist in this moment. Yet the composition frames Sung-nam as uneasily situated within this positionality. Here he is aligned with the tourist gaze, but also, in his exclusion from the privileges of whiteness, is not yet able to claim access to the romantic spaces of the city, nor to the subjectivity of the *flâneur.*

The kinds of unstable, or precarious, gazes that characterise the racialised subjectivity of the tourist/migrant – but not the tourist/*flâneur* – are reflected not just in the film's construction of space, but also in the narrative itself. Unusually for the Parisian tourist romance, the film depicts the experiences of migrant struggle. On arrival, Sung-nam tries to find temporary work, but the only option available to him without a valid working visa, he is frankly told, is to become a janitor or a mover. While the white, middle-class, American writers and artists that populate the nervous tourist romances take their transnational mobility for granted, with their legal status to live and work in Paris never in question, Sung-nam, as a raced subject in Paris, is more rigidly policed. He cannot stake the same unquestioned claim on a bourgeois profession and lifestyle that he has always enjoyed at home, and instead is forced into more informal or precarious work.

Copyright © the author

However, despite his status as an undocumented migrant and criminal, Sung-nam is ultimately able to gain access to a privileged gaze over Paris during the course of the film and can experience it as a romanticised, homogenised fantasy space. Yet to achieve this, the film envisions Paris as an overtly white space, contrasting the protagonist's own Otherness. While modern Paris is incredibly ethnically diverse, *Night and Day* erases other non-white bodies almost completely. The community of Korean expatriates within which Sung-nam finds refuge appears as the only othered figures against a white majority: Sung-nam's spontaneous encounters on the streets of Paris – such as with the young couple he observes buying cigarettes at a local store, or his ex-girlfriend that he spots crossing the street near the *Boulevard Saint-Germain* – are exclusively with Koreans. The only interactions Sung-nam has with non-Koreans are his wordless, longing gazes at the two white couples from outside a restaurant window, and at the young white man whom Sung-nam envies for "having a house and a car". In this way, the film in fact seems to work within, and not against, the surreal fantasy construction of rom-com Paris as a space of racial homogeneity.

Night and Day not only retains the nervous tourist romance's construction of Paris through its exclusion of racial difference, but also re-entrenches it through its construction of gender. The film's romance plot enacts a re-assertion of a masculine, bourgeois ownership of Parisian city space through both Sung-nam's practice of *flânerie* and his courtship of women. Sung-nam has frequent encounters with attractive women on the city streets, and the spaces he visits are often adorned with erotic imagery of the female body at which he can level his fetishising gaze; during a visit to *Musée d'Orsay* with a female companion, the pair linger on a hanging portrait of nude female genitalia – Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). As Youngmin Choe observes in her own analysis of this scene, the shot is

Copyright © the author

composed almost as a mise-en-abyme in which Sung-nam takes the position of the *repossoir* figure (the device through which the viewer's gaze is directed into the composition). This gaze upon the painting, and upon Paris city space more broadly, is a deforming and misogynistic one for Choe; the film thus favours a masculinised line of perspective of the city not only through Sung-nam as *flâneur* but also at the level of filmic composition itself. [46]

The film stresses Sung-nam's practice of *flânerie* as both a sexualised form of voyeurism and an explicit seduction technique – for example, his desperate attempts to meet Yu-Jeon on the street outside her apartment building in hopes of gaining access to her tiny *chambre de bonne* apartment. There are also explicit sequences of sexual fantasy within the film, including a dream sequence in which Sung-nam, highly aroused by the sight of Yu-Jeon's feet, enters her apartment and sucks on her toes as she sleeps. His fixation on her feet becomes a potent symbol in the context of the film's emphasis on mobility, transience, and walking within the city. This sexual fantasy betrays Sung-nam's desire to violate and take mastery of the female object of desire (being that she is unconscious, and thus without any agency), with the object being in fact both Yu-Jeon and also the city of Paris. His aggressive pursuit of Yu-Jeon ultimately results in a trip away to the French seaside, where they finally sleep together. In their hotel room, Sung-nam pressures Yu-Jeon into sex even though he failed to buy a condom; once his fantasy has been actualised, however, Sung-nam abandons her to return to his wife in Korea, despite Yu-Jeon telling him that she might be pregnant. In this final act of seduction (even to the extreme possessiveness of potential impregnation), *Night and Day* uncomfortably renders – even makes grotesque – the masculinised, bourgeois logics of ownership that have typically underpinned the nervous tourist romance's urban fantasy as a whole.

Copyright © the author

Conclusion

Night and Day's use of generic convention, its nasty re-staging of a romance plot in the vein of the Euro-American tourist romance, can be read as not merely narrative reference or pastiche but rather a self-reflexive interrogation of the very power structures that have always existed under the surface of both the nervous romance's fantasy construction of Paris and its distinction between tourist and *flâneur* subjectivities. The film questions if these kinds of positionalities and, indeed, the very romantic fantasy of transforming from one into the other, can reasonably be re-established once both the city and popular genre texts themselves have been thrown into a global frame.

What is at stake in reading a film like *Night and Day* as a part of the global tourist rom com genre, I have argued, is acknowledgment of how the genre itself functions spatially and ideologically as a cinematic framework that constructs a fantasy image of a city which is inherently exclusive to certain subjects. This exclusivity is created – and naturalised – in especially insidious ways in the 'nervous' mode popularised by US indie romances, as its central transformation narrative of the foreign tourist subject into the sophisticated *flâneur* is predicated upon racialised, classed, and gendered forms of urban subjectivity that determine the boundaries of "inside" against "outside", "authentic" against "inauthentic".

This article has stressed how the city of Paris holds particular significance within the global tourist romance and therefore lays out most clearly these processes at work. Through my focus on *Night and Day*, it has also highlighted the need for film scholarship to revisit and critique the form of tourist romance itself through a global lens and better understand the

Copyright © the author

ways in which it constructs a spatiality that imposes a rigid script for how to gaze at, move within, and experience the city.

Notes

[1]The nervous romance as a whole has been theorised as a masculinisation of a predominantly feminine genre; Frank Krutnik's influential discussion of the nervous romances of the 1970s points to the interest of male auteurs such as Woody Allen in formulating a more ambivalent, cynical approach to modern romance in response to second-wave feminism's perceived destabilising of masculinity (Krutnik 1990, p 63–64).

[2] Ross 1996, 112-13.

[3] Diffrient 2015, 591.

[4] Ibid., 596.

[5] Ibid., 606-7.

[6] Choi 2010; Kim 2004; Kim 2011.

[7] Lee 2015, 152-3.

[8] See Choi 2010; Lee 2015; Kim 2004; Unger 2012.

[9] Choi 2010, 175.

[10] Lee 2017; Raymond 2014.

[11] Choi 2010, 184-5.

Copyright © the author

[12] Grosoli 2010, 98-9. Hong has made his fascination with French art cinema even more visible through his frequent collaborations with arthouse film star Isabelle Huppert in films such as *Claire's Camera* (2017) and *In Another Country* (2012), with the former film's name taking direct inspiration from Rohmer's 1970 film *Claire's Knee;* his connections to Éric Rohmer's oeuvre have in fact been so strong that the Asian Film Archive even curated a curated programme titled "Twin Tales: Hong Sang-soo and Éric Rohmer" in 2025 ('Twin Tales: Éric Rohmer and Hong Sang-soo', Asian Film Archive, Jul 2025).

[13] Park-Primiano 2020, 54.

[14] Grosoli 2010, 95; Diffrient 2015, 596.

[15] Harvey 2007.

[16] Schwartz 2007, 97.

[17] Ibid., 57.

[18] Ibid., 135, 166.

[19] Bell and Shalit 2010, 9.

[20] Schwartz 2007, 169; Bell and de Shalit 2011, 11.

[21] Rearick 2011, 195.

[22] Ibid., 202.

[23] DeJean 2014, 473; Chase 2007, 66

[24] Buck-Morss 1986.

Copyright © the author

[25] Friedberg 1993, 30; Gunning 1997, 42

[26] Greenidge 2020, 212.

[27] Hahn 2014, 204.

[28] Hahn 2014, 195–96.

[29] Ibid., 201.

[30] Dyer 1997, 9.

[31] See Schwartz 2007; Negra 2001; Handyside 2004.

[32] See Deleyto 2009; Galt 2011.

[33] Negra 2001, 90.

[34] Included with this trend are films as early as Richard Linklater's *Before Sunset*, Julie Delpy's *2 Days in Paris* (2007), Hong Sang Soo's *Night and Day* (2008), and portmanteau film *Paris, Je T'aime* (2006), but it has proliferated in the 2010s; films such as Taiwan's *Au Revoir Taipei*, the USA's *Midnight in Paris*, *Under the Eiffel Tower* (Archie Borders 2014), and *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach 2012), Britain's *Le Weekend* (Roger Mitchell 2014), Hong Kong's *Paris Holiday* (James Yuen 2015), Japan's *I Have to Buy New Shoes* (Eriko Kitagawa 2012), Belgium's *Emma Peeters* (Nicole Palo 2019) and *Lost in Paris* (Dominique Abel 2016), and India's *Queen* (Vikhas Bahl 2013), *Befikre* (Adidtya Chopra 2016), and *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (Karan Johar 2016) all depict a somewhat conflicted view of both Paris and modern romance itself.

[35] Fusco 2013, 312.

Copyright © the author

[36] Dupain and Novitskaya 2015, 325, 336.

[37] Ibid., 292.

[38] Humbert 2013, 17.

[39] 'France Posts New Tourist Record despite Yellow Vest Unrest,' *France24,* 2019.

[40] Urry and Larsen 2011, 21-22.

[41] As Mary Harrod notes, the rom-com genre in France still largely privileges white characters, although contemporary films such as *Un bonheur n'arrive jamais seul* (James Huth, 2012) and *Samba* are part of a more recent cycle that attempts to address these divides (Harrod 2015, 208). On the whole, however, films focused on Parisian immigrant subjectivities tend to depict the darker or more violent aspects of the city's globality, posing Paris's romantic image as a site of liberty, justice, and political revolution at odds with its history of colonialism, oppression, and systematic exclusion of marginalised subjects from its inner city (See Will Higbee 2015).

[42] In *Touki Bouki*(1973), for example, the Senegalese couple's aspirations for a glamorous Parisian lifestyle are constantly thwarted by their struggle to come up with the money to pay for the voyage from Dakar to Paris. Thus, economic disadvantage (a legacy of colonial oppression) is stressed as the systemic barrier preventing them from the ease of travel and border-crossing that the tourist enjoys.

[43] Mózes 2020, 35.

[44] Choi 2015, 71.

[45] Lisiak 2015, 839.

Copyright © the author

[46] Choe 2023, 244.

References

Bell, David A., and Avner de Shalit. *The Spirit of Cities: Why the Identity of a City Matters in a Global Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Betz, Mark. "Wandering Women: Decolonization, Modernity, Recolonization." In *Beyond the Subtitle*, N-New. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Brickman, Barbara Jane, Deborah Jermyn, and Theodore Louis Trost. *Love Across the Atlantic: US-UK Romance in Popular Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering." *New German Critique*, no. 39 (1986): 99–140. https://doi.org/10.2307/488122.

Chase, Alisa G. "What Paris Reveals: The Sartorial and Sensual Transformation of American Girls." In *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation*, edited by Dana Heller. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Choe, Youngmin. "Paris in Korean Cinema: Fraudulence and the Female Form in Hong Sang-soo's *Night and Day* and Kim Ki-duk's *Wild Animals*." *Positions: Asia Critique* 31, no. 1 (February 2023): 229–54.

Choi, Jinhee. *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.

Copyright © the author

———. “Seoul Flâneur? *Breathless* and *Café Noir*.” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 7, no. 1 (2015): 57–72.

Croll, Ben. “*Emily in Paris* and *Monsieur Spade* Lead the Charge for France-Focused Shoots.” *Variety*, May 8, 2024. https://variety.com/2024/film/focus/france-film-production-emily-in-paris-franklin-1235994437/.

———. “France Lures International Productions Via Incentives, Amenities.” *Variety*, October 29, 2023. https://variety.com/2023/artisans/global/france-lures-international-productions-incentives-amenities-1235772516/.

DeJean, Joan. *How Paris Became Paris: The Invention of the Modern City*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. https://go.exlibris.link/knhh4wST.

Deleyto, Celestino. *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

Diffrient, David Scott. “Collecting Views and Visions of the City: Episode Films, *Paris vu Par*, and ‘Postcard Cinema.’” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 7 (2015): 589–610. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2015.968758.

Dung, Yun-An, and Stijn Reijnders. “Paris Offscreen: Chinese Tourists in Cinematic Paris.” *Tourist Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013): 287–303. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797613498164.

Dupain, Claire, and Olga Novitskaya. “Paris Destination Image from the Point of View of Asian Tourists.” In *ISCONTOUR 2015 – Tourism Research Perspectives*, edited by Roman Egger and Christian Maurer, 2015.

Copyright © the author

"France Posts New Tourist Record Despite Yellow Vest Unrest." *France 24*, May 17, 2019. https://www.france24.com/en/20190517-france-tourism-record-number-visitors-tourists-despite-yellow-vests-paris.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Fusco, Katherine. "Love and Citation in *Midnight in Paris*." In *A Companion to Woody Allen*, edited by Peter Bailey and Sam Girgus. London: Wiley, 2013.

Galt, Rosalind. *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Greenidge, Kaitlyn. "Sex in the City: The Black Female Flâneur in Raven Leilani's *Luster*." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (2020).

Grosoli, Marco. "Moral Tales from Korea: Hong Sang-soo and Éric Rohmer." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 3 (2010): 95–108.

Guha, Malini. *From Empire to the World: Migrant London and Paris in the Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Gunning, Tom. "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)." *Wide Angle* 19, no. 4 (1997): 25–61.

Harrod, Mary. *From France with Love: Gender and Identity in French Romantic Comedy*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

Harvey, David. "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (2007): 22–44.

Copyright © the author

Higbee, Will. "Diasporic and Postcolonial Cinema from the 1990s to the Present." In *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, edited by Raphaëlle Moine et al., 136–161. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Hahn, H. Hazel. "The Flâneur, the Tourist, the Global Flâneur, and Magazine Reading as Flânerie." *Dix-Neuf*, March 2014.

Handyside, Fiona. "Beyond Hollywood, into Europe: The Tourist Gaze in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953) and *Funny Face* (Donen, 1957)." *Studies in European Cinema* 1, no. 2 (2004): 77–89.

Humbert, Brigitte. "Nostalgia and Modernity in Two Recent 'Paris' Films." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30, no. 1 (2013): 16–24.

Kim, Kyung-hyun. *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

———. *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Krutnik, Frank. "The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals: The 'Nervous' Romance and the Comedy of the Sexes." *The Velvet Light Trap,* no. 26 (1990): 57.

Lee, Hee-seung Irene. "The Ethics of Becoming a Subject: A Reading of Hong Sang-soo's *Right Now, Wrong Then*." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 9, no. 2 (2015): 141–54.

Lisiak, Agata A. "Making Sense of Absence: Tsai Ming-Liang's Cinematic Portrayals of Cities." *City* 19, no. 6 (2015): 837–56.

Copyright © the author

Marston, Kendra. "The World Is Her Oyster: Negotiating Contemporary White Womanhood in Hollywood's Tourist Spaces." *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 3–27.

Martin-Jones, David. "Branded City Living: Taipei Becoming-Paris in *Yi Ye Taibei/Au Revoir Taipei* (2010)." *Asian Cinema* 25, no. 1 (April 2014): 15–31.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. "Aviation, Tourism and Dreaming in 1960s Bombay Cinema." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 129–55.

Filmography

Night and Day (2008) Hong Sang soo [online]. South Korea: Sponge Entertainment

Touki Bouki (1973) Djibril Diop Mambéty [DVD]. United States: World Cinema Foundation.

What Time is it There? (2001) Tsai Ming Liang [online]. United States: WinStar Cinema.

Midnight in Paris (2011) Woody Allen [online]. United States: Song Pictures Classics.

Before Sunrise (1995) Richard Linklater [DVD]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Before Sunset (2004) Richard Linklater [DVD]. United States: Warner Independent Pictures.

Roman Holiday (1953) William Wyler [DVD]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

An American in Paris (1951) Vincente Minnelli [DVD]. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

The Bakery Girl of Morceau (1963) Éric Rohmer [online]. France: Les Films du Losange.

Copyright © the author

The Aviator's Wife (1981) Éric Rohmer [online]. France: Les Films du Losange.

Rendezvous in Paris (1995) Éric Rohmer [online]. France: Les Films du Losange.

Love in the Afternoon (1972) Éric Rohmer [online]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

L'afrance (2001) Alain Gomis [online]. France: Cine-Classic.

Everybody Says I Love You (1996) Woody Allen [online]. United States: Miramax.

Biography

Harriet Idle received her PhD in Film Studies at University College Dublin in 2025, where her research focused on the romantic comedy genre, urban space, and contemporary global popular cinemas. Her work on romantic comedy has appeared in *The Velvet Light Trap* and, most recently, in an edited book collection on Holiday romance films. She is Programme Manager of Samizdat Film Festival, a Glasgow-based festival dedicated to films from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

Copyright © the author