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Exploring cinematic stress:

A comparative study of *Boiling Point* and *Good Time*

ABSTRACT

This comparative study analyzes how stress is created through the mise-en-scene and characters in the two feature length films *Good Time* (2017) and *Boiling Point* (2021). The analysis has the aim of achieving an understanding of how the films use these techniques to create suspense and realism, thereby effectively generating mental and physical symptoms of stress for the viewer. The paper features an extensive analytical chapter which looks at different aspects of mise-en-scene through subsequently divided subchapters, and is followed by an outlook into the emotional role of the film's characters and their environments. Altogether the analysis creates a broad, yet specific examination of how the techniques are used in tandem to create a naturalistic, immersive viewing experience which places large emotional stress on the viewer.

Keywords: Stress, empathy, realism, appraisal, projection

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and method

The contemporary cinema of the 2010's and onwards continuously moves towards further commercialization and conventionality, aiming to capture as much of the commonplace audience's attention and making the films easy to digest. As with all things inherent, many filmmakers instead aim to question the often benign and conformed narrative of the traditional Hollywood blockbusters and thereby may even try to make the viewer feel uncomfortable and self-conscious through the themes and stories they showcase. Two prominent examples of recent films that work to unsettle their audience are Josh and Benny Safdie's *Good Time* (2017) and Philip Barantini's *Boiling Point* (2021), which utilize a broad repertoire of filmic and narrative techniques to consciously stress the viewer. The two films differ in their plots and themes, and are also distinctly different when it comes to both visual and auditory style.

Despite their differences, *Good Time* and *Boiling Point* have managed to impress and affect numerous critics with their immersive and stressing elements. In Tim Grierson's review of *Good Time* in *Screen International*, he describes the film as "powerfully immersive" and praises its ability to balance the gritty, fast pace with its grounded and naturalistic acting and cinematography.[1] In another review published in *Sight and Sound magazine*, Adam Nayman characterizes the film as a disorienting viewing experience, where the actions and consequences of the characters are very true to life, and allow for a "certain spaciousness for audience retention".[2] *Boiling Point* features the same gripping, fast-paced narrative, which Mark Kermode describes as an "utterly immersive, conjuring the raw experience of an inexorably accelerating panic attack."[3] Because of my personal viewing experiences of the films alongside the strong critical notations towards the films' stressful and anxiety-inducing atmospheres, I have decided to analyze how these two films expose the viewer

[1]Grierson, Tim. 2017. 'Good time': Cannes review. *Screen International.*
https://www.proquest.com/fiaf/docview/1902484762/8E7243D32A85478BPQ/3?accountid=12187
[2]Nayman, Adam. Dec 2017. Good time. *Sight and Sound, 27*, 67.
https://www.proquest.com/fiaf/docview/1970569649/65F5EFEE8FA64A3BPQ/2?accountid=12187
[3]Kermode, Mark. Boiling Point review – Stephen Graham is on fire in nerve-jangling night in hell's kitchen. *The Guardian*. 9 Jan 2022.
https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/jan/09/boiling-point-review-stephen-graham-restaurant-drama-single-take

to feelings of stress through the viewer's self-projection onto the characters, thereby inducing stress that relates to the films' characters and their environments. The analysis will be based around the following research questions: Through which visual and audiovisual elements is stress created and portrayed in *Good Time* and *Boiling Point*? How do these elements relate to the characters of the films? And finally: How do these techniques combine to convey the feelings of stress towards the audience?

This paper consequently has the purpose of defining and analyzing the different filmic and thematic aspects that help create the stressful feelings present in the films, and then comparing the differences and similarities between the two. This is done to identify and analyze how and why the filmmakers have utilized different cinematic and narrative elements to create feelings of stress, thereby comprehending why these films and their stories are so stressful to experience. I have decided to split this paper into a total of four chapters which each contain subchapters that look into specific details and examples in both films. The first chapter contains the introduction where I will briefly be summarizing the two film's plots. The familiarity with the films' plots will be helpful to the analysis as it will concern a lot of individual scenes and character moments scattered across the plots of both films. Here I will also be looking into the themes featured in the films and briefly look into how they are brought in through the characters and settings.

Following the introduction we have the analytical main text of the paper, which starts with chapter two, where I will analyze and compare the different elements of mise-en-scene in the two films. Here I will focus on analyzing the aesthetic and auditory styles of the two films, and how they both manage to create senses of stress through immersive, naturalistic and sometimes even claustrophobic sensations. In the subchapters I will analyze and look to define the aesthetic and audiovisual profiles of the two films respectively, and subsequently explore if and in that case how the two styles create different senses of stress, by comparing the visual style in everything from color grading to framing to create a starting point from which the emotional dynamics then can be analyzed. One of the main problems faced in this part of the analysis will be to compare the films' editing, since *Boiling Point* is shot in one, continuous take. Therefore I will rather be looking at the pacing of the stories and how it combines with the cinematography to affect the viewing experience. After the aesthetic analysis, I will look to examine the sound and music usage in the two films, where the surrounding noise and music is combined with natural, documentarylike dialogue,

to further immerse the viewer in the gritty and crude atmosphere of the films. In the third chapter I will rather be focusing on the characters and themes from the film, where I will make a more detailed analysis of the emotional states the characters are put in over the course of their respective plots, where further emphasis will be put on the characters and their surroundings, especially how their naturalistic and humane traits make them more relatable, which in turn increases the immersion in their feelings of stress. The analysis will be done through a breakdown of the two films' cinematic and auditory profiles. By defining and comparing the results of the respective studies, I will be able to develop and contextualize them in the fourth and final chapter, where I will also briefly discuss the results and conclude the paper.

1.2 Theory

To be able to analyze the themes and their correlating emotional responses in *Boiling Point* and *Good Time* we first and foremost have to define the broad term "Stress", which this paper centers around. The WHO defines stress as "...a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation...". According to the Mind foundation stress can lead to mental symptoms like feeling overwhelmed and anxious, as well as physical ones like a raised heartbeat and feeling faint.[4,5] Stress can be caused in numerous ways, but when it comes to this analysis I have chosen to focus on causes which can arise through cinema. According to Mind, stress can be caused from feelings of pressure and worry, as well as through feeling overwhelmed and powerless.[6] These causes of stress can be applied to films and their characters by the viewer through empathy and self-projection, which will be defined later in this chapter.

A large part of the theoretical framework that I will use to examine stress in *Boiling Point* and *Good Time* is found in Tarja Laine's *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*.[7] Laine discusses the role of sympathy and empathy for on-screen characters and how it creates

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[4]WHO. Stress. *WHO*. 21 Feb 2023. https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/stress

[5] Mind. Signs and Symptoms of Stress. *Mind*. Mar 2022.
https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/signs-and-symptoms-of-stress/#HowStressCanMakeYouFeel

[6] Mind. Causes of Stress. *Mind*. Mar 2022.
https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/causes-of-stress/

[7] Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. Bloomsbury Academic. New York City, New York. London, England 2011.

suspense as the viewer relates to the characters. Laine sees sympathy as being primarily used on protagonists who are "unswerving heroes", which is not necessarily applicable to the often morally gray characters in *Boiling Point* and *Good Time* due to their actions not always being morally good.[8] Therefore I will rather be utilizing the similar, but different term of empathy, which Laine instead defines as a broader, more instinctive feeling that comes from spontaneously projecting ourselves onto someone else (including fictional characters), and feeling their emotions as our own.[9] I will be utilizing the concept of empathy in my analysis as it is essential for the transmission of the stressful feelings of the characters to the viewer. In his book *Emotion and the structure of narrative film film as an emotion machine*, Ed S. Tan refers to Theodor Lipps psychological research, and his notation of how one's total immersion in an object is "characteristic of total empathy".[10] This immersion is defined through the term "projection", which I will also be making frequent use of when analyzing the relationship between the characters' emotions and the viewers'.

Tan and Laine also write of the term "appraisal", which R.S Lazarus defines as a cognitive process that uses a person's perceived environment and its properties to mediate with their own personal beliefs.[11] Laine defines an affective appraisal as an instinctive reaction to an event which causes a bodily, pre-semantic reaction.[12] Tan argues that the emotional value of the appraisal has to "contain certain critical meaning features", that can then be used to build the emotional response to an event.[13] This is further established by Laine as being equally relevant when researching cinematic emotions due to the affective appraisal being the immediate, instinctual response to something occurring, and is brought upon us by our self projection onto the characters on screen[14] After the affective appraisal has been semantically and hermeneutically interpreted, it results in emotional evaluations of the appraisal, which join together to form feelings through recollecting and forming a memory of the appraisal.[15]

[8]Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. 46
[9]Ibid. 49
[10] Lipps, T. (1906). *Leitfaden der Psychologie Leipzig*, Germany: Engelmann, in S. Tan, Ed. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine.* Routledge, New York. 2013. E-book.
[11]Lazarus, R.S. *FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS TO THE EMOTIONS: A History of Changing Outlooks.* University of California. Berkeley, California. 1993. 6
[12]Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. 2
[13]S. Tan, Ed. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine.* E-book.
[14]Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. 2
[15]Ibid. 2

According to Tan, one of the strongest catalysts for emotional stimulus through film is realism, as he means that it helps to identify and clarify processes of appraisal that may otherwise be difficult to interpret.[16] Tan discusses the importance of the photographic and emotional realism that comes from the film medium, and how the depth and surroundings of the filmic imagery help the viewer emotionalize and immerse themselves in the film.[17] Therefore, realism will be an important point to look at during the analysis as both films excerpt realism through numerous cinematic aspects. Kermode's review of *Boiling Point* describes the film as a raw and immersive experience, which is enhanced through the photography and pace of the story. *Good Time* is described as equally realistic and gripping by Eric Hynes in his review of the film in *Film Comment*, as he brings up the documentary-like realism that shines through the photography and how it is combined with the subjective closeups that emphasize the characters. This also brings the term naturalism into the frame, as the characters in both films are placed into situations which reflect and focus on their social and individual context. In the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies, Anette Kuhn and Guy Westwell have defined naturalism in film as being a near synonymous term with realism, but that the distinction comes from the film creating a perception of reality which is apparently real without needing much depth in the production of realistic characters and environments.[18] This formal analysis will be centering around the theoretical framework of how empathy and projection are produced through realism, subjectivity and naturalism and how that is achieved through the usage of mise-en-scene and the characters' actions and personalities. This is done with the goal of gaining as good of an understanding as possible of the emotional dynamics between the films' characters and how those emotions are then projected onto the audience.

When analyzing the formalistic elements of the films, I will also be utilizing Malte Hagener and Thomas Elsaesser's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, which features a more structural approach by looking at film theory and its correlation to the human body and its senses. I will be particularly looking at the sixth chapter; "Cinema as ear" while analyzing the sound and music in the films, as the chapter examines the role of acoustics and space in film through both a historical perspective as well as through a more spectator-focused view, which I will primarily be

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[16]S. Tan, Ed. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine.* E-book.
[17]Ibid
[18]Kuhn, Annette & Westwell, Guy. A dictionary of film studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020

using in this paper. Elsaesser and Hagener regard the role of sound as being instrumental to the filmic process, and discuss its use together with cinematography and editing to create a "three-dimensional, spatial perception" for the spectator to project themselves upon.[19]

These mentioned sources form the terminology and theoretical base of this paper, with their specific focuses being spread across both the more structural and emotional aspects of the analysis. I will also utilize other sources such as interviews to get a further understanding of the films' production, relating to the audiovisual filmic techniques that will be analyzed (more specifically when it comes to the visual analysis), as well as when examining the emotional situations of the characters and how that creates stress through empathy. Despite using other sources, I will continually use and come back to the theoretical structures and keywords to keep a consistent, structured theoretical groundwork for the analysis.

1.3 An introduction to *Good Time*

Josh and Benny Safdie's neon lit, gritty thriller *Good Time* (2017) tells the story of Connie Nikas (Robert Pattinson) who goes on a frantic, desperate quest through New York City's underworld to get his mentally challenged brother Nick (Benny Safdie) out of prison. We are first introduced to Connie in the film's opening scene as he interrupts Nick's uncomfortable meeting with a psychiatrist, bursting in to get his brother out of there and coming with him to carry out a careless bank robbery. The stolen money, which was primed with a dye pack, gets the brothers detected by a passing police car, which leads to a chase which results in Nick being arrested. Connie goes to a bondsman to get Nick out of prison, but too much of the money is ruined to pay Nick's bail, which forces him to go on a tumultuous journey to gather the needed $10.000.

Throughout the course of the evening Connie continuously keeps grasping at every opportunity to get his brother out of jail. He first decides to try and break Nick out of the hospital, as he's been in a violent fight in the detention center cafeteria. He gets his bandage-covered brother out of the hospital and talks his way into staying over at the house of an older woman who he met on the bus on the way. He eventually gets into a sexual encounter with her granddaughter Crystal,

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[19]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. New York: Routledge 2015. 130

but they are interrupted by screams from the room where Nick is staying, and Connie realizes that he's freed the wrong prisoner. Instead, we get to meet the parolee Ray, who tells Connie of an incident at an amusement park where he left a bag of money from a robbery along with a bottle of LSD-spiked sprite, which Connie sees as an opportunity to get the money needed to free Nick. The trio travel to the amusement park, where Connie and Ray run into a security guard who they beat unconscious. The police eventually arrive at the park and arrest Crystal. Connie, posing as a security guard, tells them he doesn't know her, and she is taken away. The film's climax takes place in Ray's partner Caliph's apartment, who is going to buy the acid from them for $15.000. After Connie fails to negotiate the deal he runs off with the bottle and gets arrested. Ray tries to climb down the building to get the bottle, and as Connie is taken into police custody he sees Ray fall to his death from the building. The film ends with Nick being brought into a group meeting for other troubled individuals, where he eventually gives in and joins the activities as the credits start to roll. The film's fast-paced plot is all tied together by the synth-filled, hazy score by Daniel Lopatin, also known by Oneohtrix Point Never (OPN), which gives the film one last edge of uniqueness compared to many other thrillers and heist filmDespite not being a big box office success on release, *Good Time* was a critical success, earning a 91% critical rating on the review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes, along with a 7.3 IMDB rating, despite its uncomfortable events and grimy look.[20,21] It was also nominated for the 2017 Palme d'Or and has received a large amount of positive reviews from critics.

1.4 An introduction to *Boiling Point*

Similarly to *Good Time*, Philip Barantini's *Boiling Point* centers around one single, turbulent evening. This one is however set in the fine London restaurant Jones and Sons during christmas eve, the busiest day of the year. We follow head chef Andy Jones (Stephen Graham) and his team of staff as they navigate a stressful evening, all in one, continuous, riveting take. *Boiling Point* is

[20]Rotten Tomatoes. Good Time. *Rotten Tomatoes.* 2023. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/good_time
[21]IMDB. Good Time. *IMDB.* 2023.
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4846232/?ref_=nv_sr_srsg_0_tt_7_nm_1_q_good%2520time

dependent on one thing to make its characters and plot all come together: stress. From the moment Andy walks on screen he is upset, talking to his separated wife on the phone. He arrives at work, and is immediately met by a health inspector who has downgraded the sanitary rating of the restaurant from a maximum score of 5 to a 3, mainly due to the poor administrative work from Andy because of his disorganized personal life and struggles with alcohol. The staff then move on to having a meeting about the coming evening, with Beth (the restaurant manager played by Alice Feetham) revealing that there will be a visit from Andy's old colleague, celebrity Chef Alistair Skye (Jason Flemyng), whom Andy owes a substantial amount of money. With the stakes already raised for the stressful evening ahead, the tension starts to rise between the kitchen personnel and the serving staff. The tumultuous environment eventually collapses in on itself through a hurtful altercation between Beth and sous-chef Carly (Binette Robinson) prepare steak for a few guests even though it isn't on the menu for the evening.

In the middle of all the turmoil between the staff, Alistair Skye arrives, and upon serving him, Andy realizes that he has brought along food critic Sara Southworth to the dinner, raising the stakes even further. Andy is made to sit down with the two for a glass of wine, and Skye eventually starts demanding money from him. Andy eventually returns to the kitchen and informs the staff about the arrival of the critic, which sets the stress levels at a new high in the kitchen. All of a sudden the film's climax hits as one of the guests gets a serious, nearly lethal allergic reaction from her food, and we eventually come to realize that it was Andy who was responsible for the incident which caused the reaction. This winds up leading to a fight nearly breaking out between one of the angered cooks and Andy, who eventually returns to his office, where he takes cocaine and drinks liquor before he tries to return to work where he passes out as the screen fades to black.

After its initial release in 2021, *Boiling Point* was met with strong critical acclaim which can be seen through its 99% approval rating on "Rotten Tomatoes" along with a solid IMDB rating of 7.5.[22] [23] The film has been nominated for numerous british awards, where a lot of nominations have been concentrated on the filmic qualities like cinematography and sound. After its premiere at

[22]Rotten Tomatoes. Boiling Point. *Rotten Tomatoes.* 2023. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/boiling_point_2021
Young, N. (2021). 'Boiling point': Karlovy vary review. *Screen International.*
http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/boiling-point-karlovy-vary-review/docview/2563776549/se-2
[23]IMDB. Boiling Point. *IMDB.* 2023.
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11127680/?ref_=nv_sr_srsg_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_boiling%2520po

the 2021 Karlovy Vary film festival, Neil Young commends the film's daring camerawork, pacing and more specifically the acting. He describes the ensemble of characters as pivotal to the film's thematic imprint on the audience, and the one-take as being "appropriate and organic" to capture the aesthetic, spatiality and pacing of the film.[24]

Chapter 2: Stress through mise-en-scene

Realism can be used as a strong catalyst for the viewer's ability to project themselves onto the environment and characters.[25] *Boiling Point* effectively uses filmic realism and naturalism through the work of director Barantini and DOP Matthew Lewis, whose cinematography creates a chaotic, gritty and even claustrophobic environment around the characters. By focusing the cinematography on the characters and the stress they are put under, the viewer's feelings of empathy are directed onto the characters, which consequently generates a sense of stress for the viewer as they project themselves onto them. *Boiling Point* immerses the audience into a fully operational restaurant kitchen and the mental states of its stressed, overworked personnel that stem from their workload and the tension between them. The struggles and stress of the kitchen are projected onto the viewer through the heightened realism from the natural lighting which accentuates the environment as it changes with the camera, moving from servers to cooks and cleaning staff throughout the restaurant. What really brings the aesthetic and spatial profile of the film together to make it so immersive and stressful is the one-take aspect. The film being shot in one take creates a stress-inducing and mesmerizing environment for the viewer, with the fast paced, constant stream of information being delivered through escalating documentary-like dialogue. The naturalistic dialogue and environments are combined with the character-focused, claustrophobic camerawork, which brings every aspect of the mise-en-scene together to create an immersive, constant stream of appraisals which overwhelm the viewer and create strong sensations of stress.

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[24]Young, N. (2021). 'Boiling point': Karlovy vary review. *Screen International.*
http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/boiling-point-karlovy-vary-review/docview/2563776549/se-2
[25]S. Tan, Ed. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine.* 2013

In an interview in the journal "Book of Man", Barantini explains his reasoning behind the film being shot in one take as for the film to be: "more of an anxiety-inducing feeling. And I think my experience in working in kitchens that it's like all one take. It all happens in this one night, and you've just got to be on this same train as everybody else."[26] According to the same interview, a lot of the characters and themes from *Boiling Point* are brought from Barantini's own experiences working in kitchens, especially the main character of Andy, who is partially based on his own struggles with alcoholism and its effect on both his professional and personal life.[27] This brings a lot of personality to both the characters themselves, but also through the environment pictured on screen, which enhances the realism, and thereby the immersion in the film. A lot of the film's dialogue is also improvised and largely comes from the cast rehearsing on what felt "natural" and was largely based on bullet points gotten during the rehearsals.[28] The sheer personality and self-insertion put into the film by Barantini alongside screenwriter James Cummings creates a solid base for a naturalistic, immersive and stressing viewing experience.

2.1.1 Creating stress through cinematography – *Boiling Point*

To start off the analysis of the mise-en-scene I will be examining the film's BIFA-winning cinematography, which is pivotal to achieving the captivating, naturalistic feel of the film.[29] To keep the high pace of the one-take intact, the camera has to move alongside the characters through the environment without breaking apart from the pace and spatiality of the environment. Practically, this was done through placing the camera on DOP Lewis's back, while continuously switching out the storage cards throughout the filming process as they were unable to contain the full long take on their own.[30] The creative team went to the location during opening hours to plan out the routes for Lewis to follow, and choreographed the actors and crew to make them stick to the blueprint for the shooting.[31] Altogether, this led to *Boiling Point* being shot at a high pace, and due to it not

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[26]The story behind Boiling Point. *The Book of Man. 2022.* https://thebookofman.com/mind/culture/boiling-point/
[27] Ibid
[28] Ibid
[29]Gant, Charles. How the 'Boiling Point' team landed Stephen Graham and shot the film in one continuous take. *Screen Daily*. 22 Mar 2022. https://www.screendaily.com/features/how-the-boiling-point-team-landed-stephen-graham-and-shot-the-film-in-one-continuous-take/5168240.article
[30]The story behind Boiling Point. *The Book of Man.*
[31]Ibid

having any cuts, the camera is also continuously moving around the characters and interacting with the environment which enhances the naturalism and immersion of the film through verisimilitude, meaning that the depiction of the surroundings is "congruent with the audience's expectations"[32], therefore not distracting from the suspense created through the cinematography.

Practically speaking it is difficult to incorporate many special effects and unconventional cinematographic techniques due to there not being much space to move around as well as through there not being any transitions nor cuts between characters and story beats to work with. Lewis did however find ways to frame the characters using their natural environment, like Andy going to the freezer after the bust up between Carly and Beth. As he goes to close himself off from the stressful environment we still see him through the plastic drape that covers the door, showcasing to us how he cannot hide from his responsibilities which cause him so much anxiety and stress. This subtle detail is one of many that is used to showcase Andy's mental state over the course of the film, and is essential to develop him as a character. Getting to understand Andy's motivations makes him feel more realistic, which Tan writes of as a key element to heighten the sense of immersion as the cinematography makes the viewer feel physically present in the scene.[33] This allows for the viewer to project oneself onto Andy and thereby feeling the stress that he feels in the scene.

To further place focus, and thereby more sympathy on the characters, it is also important to look at how framing is used throughout *Boiling Point*. The framing intentionally aids the viewer's gaze and focus, which leads to stronger empathizing and self-projection onto the characters. As mentioned, the camerawork is important to help establish and personify the many different characters we meet during the runtime of the film. Despite the constant motion and shift between the characters, Lewis manages to capture them through centralizing them in frame to direct focus onto them. This centralizing is a key framing motif that is instrumental in keeping the viewer's immersion and empathy towards the characters throughout the film by directing their attention.[34]

It is also important to look at how characters are framed and shot during dialogue scenes. When cross-cutting is no longer possible due to the one-take aspect, the task becomes to showcase both character's responses to the conversation while still allowing for the information to flow freely

[32]Kuhn, Annette & Westwell, Guy. A dictionary of film studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020
[33]S. Tan, Ed. *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine.* E-book.
[34] Bordwell, David, Thompson, Kristin & Smith, Jeff C. *Film Art: an introduction*. Twelfth edition, International student edition. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education. 2020. 192

to the audience. This is important to help the viewer continually keep their focus on the characters, thereby empathizing with the stress they are feeling. This is approached in different ways depending on the context of the conversation, and also depends on the characters who are involved. During longer conversations, as one between Andy and Alistair Skye, the camera is given time to move between the two using a combination of both medium close-ups and regular close-ups to focus on either the information or the character's response to it, depending on what is most important for the audience to understand the emotional context of the situation. When moving between the two, Lewis continually captures both characters through a medium shot, giving a very dynamic feel to the camerawork which keeps the viewer engaged despite the hectic environment. By placing focus on the contents of the conversation and focusing on Andy's reaction to Skye pressuring him to pay him back the money he owes him, the viewer is again able to further empathize with the situation and project Andy's stress onto themselves.

A framing motif which is consistently used with Andy during conversation (especially with one of his superiors, whether that be professionally or morally), he is often shifted to the side, with his adversary being put into the center of the frame. This continually shifts throughout the film, very much in tandem with the actions of Andy and his morality. When he converses with Carly about his son and him moving into his new apartment, they split the frame equally from the front, giving the two equal space to move and speak. When the two clash at the end of the film however, with Andy at fault – he is moved further and further away from Carly until she eventually is placed in the center of the frame with Andy out of focus. These details help establish the relationships between the characters, and progress throughout the film to help direct the viewers' attention towards the intended subject for the audience, but subtly, allowing the immersion of the one-take and its quick pacing to be kept intact. While the framing is key to guiding the audience's attention, it can also be used to emphasize the characters when they are experiencing stress. This is often done through close-up shots of the characters, whose constant usage creates a character-focused viewing experience, which together with the environment creates an anxiety-inducing, claustrophobic mise-en-scene where the viewer is forced to focus on the character's stress as there is nothing else in the frame.

2.1.2 Portraying stress through a naturalistic environment

Alongside the camera movements and framing, the usage of lighting and color in tandem with the cinematography is instrumental in creating an environment that portrays the stress of the characters. As the entirety of *Boiling Point* is shot in one location it largely keeps the same color pallet throughout the course of the film. As the plot progresses we are however introduced to several situations in which lighting and color helps set the scene in a detailed manner, as it helps reflect the state of mind of the characters alongside the plot points that said scene contains. The first scene of the film uses the darkness around Andy to introduce him as he is having an argument with his ex-wife over the phone. As he arrives at work the lighting is instead yellow and bright. Using different warmth and levels of darkness can help portray how Andy feels in these situations as it mirrors his stress levels. The darkness in the initial scene reflects his struggles with his family as he is speaking to his ex-wife on the phone. When he enters the restaurant they stop their conversation and the lighting becomes warmer as he enters a new space, where he experiences a different form of stress through work and the tension between him and his colleagues.

Reflecting the characters' stress levels and emotions by shifting the lighting and color scheme is an effective way to subconsciously affect the audience's "three dimensional spatial perception", which Elsaesser and Hagener argue is what makes a film into a deeper personal experience rather than simply being an object to be observed by the viewer.[35,36] The technique of using the light and color to represent the atmosphere and stress levels of the characters is used several times during the film, using both the indoor and outdoor surroundings. Around the film's midpoint for example, we follow the dishwasher Jake as he goes out to take out the trash. He exits the restaurant and enters the darkness outside. The surroundings are no longer filled with the same environment, nor the people, and the audience is given a small break from the stressful atmosphere of constant camera movements and close-up shots that permeates the rest of the film.

A third and final example of the light representing the stress levels of a character can be found at the end of the film, with Andy in his office. Here the dim lighting and shadow is used to reflect his inner feelings as he moves in and out of shadow, as well as through the lighting once again

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[35]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 140
[36]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 140

being more cold and contrastful when Andy is not around the pressure of working in the stressful environment of the kitchen, instead being left alone with his struggles of addiction and depression. When he has called his ex-wife, finally deciding to take care of his addiction and take care of his family, he walks out of his office to a bright hallway, representing how he has taken a big step towards making things better. The final shot of the film then follows, with Andy walking through a door into a dark room close to the kitchen which is lit in orange – the same color as the kitchen. This reflects how Andy is unable to escape his stress because he is trapped between his personal and professional struggles. Here he eventually moves into full shadow and collapses, completely fading to black eventually which symbolizes his problems becoming too much for him. The simple and effective usage of these elements combined with the cinematography creates an immersive viewing experience whose appraisals the viewer can start to puzzle together into emotional evaluations after the film. There is practically no time to do so during the film as there is barely any time to do so because of the stressfully frantic pacing, leaving the viewer feeling overwhelmed and anxious from the emotional stress even after the film ends.

2.2.1 Creating stress through cinematography – *Good Time*

Like *Boiling Point*, *Good Time* has a distinct, gritty cinematography that creates a realistic, urban environment which allows for an equally naturalistic base on which the characters and their stories are allowed to play out in an engaging and immersive way. The Safdie brothers and cinematographer Sean Price-Williams have however chosen a different aesthetical approach to frame their story and its components. The natural light in *Boiling Point*'s restaurant is switched out for a dark, bold and colorful imagery that works alongside the film's gripping pace to take the viewer on a stressful ride through one long, anxiety-ridden evening which never seems to stop getting worse. Similarly to *Boiling Point*, the aesthetic profile often symbolizes the characters' emotions and makes them more emphatic, therefore making it easier for the viewer to project the stress of the character's onto oneself. While *Good Time*, and especially its characters – are very realistic and humane, the main focus of the cinematography does not always seem to be to create a naturalistic environment for the viewer to immerse themselves in, but instead to create an

emotional overload, similar to how *Boiling Point* continually builds suspense by increasing the stress levels until it becomes too much for the characters, resulting in conflict. By putting the characters in precarious, stressing situations like this they become very humane and emphatic, therefore making their stress shine through to the audience as they project themselves onto the characters.

The tumultuous and chaotic plotline of *Good Time* is one that can be hard to interpret due to its high pace and frequent distressing events which build up to create immense suspense to Connie's journey. The cinematography still manages to keep the story grounded, especially because of the evocative and naturalistic photography which uses a lot of close-ups to focus on the characters to create senses of claustrophobia for the audience, causing stress while also focusing on the characters. Alongside the focal lengths and framing being key to directing the focus onto Connie and the rest of the characters, the bright, neon-colored lighting is often used to accentuate the grainy, rough environments and the events that take place between them. As mentioned, the film moves at a harrowing pace, which is pivotal to build up the stress levels of the audience as the plot progresses. Though *Boiling Point* utilizes its one-take to create tension, *Good Time* manages to almost feel like it is a one-take, with fast-paced elliptical editing that brings the viewer along on Connie's journey without being given time to stop and think about what is really going on.

Good Time was shot during a short, 35-day period where the Safdie brothers and DOP Sean Price-Williams focused on making the film evolve into a surrealistic, nauseating experience which has a distinct on-screen energy.[37] To create said energy, Price-Williams shot the movie on 35mm film, which creates a distinct grainy look to the images, correlating to the gritty plot and its characters and surroundings, which differs from *Boiling Point* which is shot on 6k digital.[38] In an interview with Kodak for their motion picture blog, Price-Williams states the importance of using film to capture the genuine and naturalistic performances, as: "...film sees what is in front of you on set; it's alive".[39] According to the same interview, the evocative yet realistic tone of the film was

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[37]Kodak. DP Sean Williams goes gonzo with 2-perf Kodak 35mm on the Safdie Bros' psycho-crime feature 'Good Time'. *Kodak*. 22 May 2017. https://www.kodak.com/en/motion/blog-post/good-time
[38]Ibid
[39]Ibid

largely achieved through not giving the actors any specific marks, rather letting them be free and creative when being filmed.[40]

The spatiality of the frame being largely controlled by the actors helps bring them into focus naturally due to the camera constantly being focused on them. As the film largely centers around studying human character, this focus is amplified through a large usage of close-up shots, even extreme ones – that highlight characters when they are put under stress and are forced to make decisions, making the viewer empathize with the character in focus. A prominent example of this can be found in the film's opening scene, where Nick is in a meeting with a psychiatrist. The premise of this scene is one of the films most limited in terms of tension, but the camerawork and naturalistic performances still manage to put the viewer in an instant state of discomfort through lingering closeups of Nick, who is visibly stressed. Though the viewer does not know much about Nick, the documentary-like, shaky camera moves close to him, as we see tears forming in his eyes. The acting and camerawork combines to build sympathy for Nick, as he is a character who is not necessarily immoral. Therefore he is easier to sympathize with because of his good-hearted nature, which Laine means makes a character less superficial – therefore making his stress more impactful when projected upon the viewer.[41] The same technique of closeups and a constantly moving camera is used throughout the film to different effects, and the claustrophobic feel of the mise-en-scene creates an invigorating yet harrowing feeling that gradually increases with the plot, encumbering the viewer and stressing them. Price-Williams describes the intention of using this camerawork as to create a "surreal nightmare", which uses very expressive and creative visuals to mirror the psychology of the characters.[42]

Along with the closeups, Price-Williams also uses a lot of handheld camerawork, especially during tense scenes that contain action or aggressive dialogue. Despite the shaky camera, there are few cuts during these sequences, and the focused framing keeps the viewer's attention on what is most important to understand the characters and their motivations without losing the stress levels created through the suspense and pace of the film. This connection to the characters builds over the

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[40]Kodak. DP Sean Williams goes gonzo with 2-perf Kodak 35mm on the Safdie Bros' psycho-crime feature 'Good Time'. *Kodak*.

[41]Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema*. *Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. 46

[42]Kodak. DP Sean Williams goes gonzo with 2-perf Kodak 35mm on the Safdie Bros' psycho-crime feature 'Good Time'. *Kodak*.

course of the film, and thus helps the characters seem more humane and real as we get to know them, increasing the empathy for the audience. The closeups can even be used to build empathy for the characters despite their actions being immoral. A prominent example of this is when Connie and Ray run into the security guard at the theme park, where Connie tackles him and savagely beats him bloody and unconscious. While this is all happening the camera shakingly cuts back and forth between a closeup shot of Connie's face and his fist as he strikes the guard. After the last punch the camera lingers on Connie for a moment, and we see him wiping his face off and looking away from his victim on the ground. Focusing on Connie's perspective makes the audience empathize with his actions despite the immorality of them, and make the stress and anxiety that Connie feels project onto the viewer anyway, as Connie is portrayed as a more flawed, humane main character rather than an antagonist.

2.2.2 Amplifying the stress through the environment's color and lighting

While *Good Time*'s camera movements and framing focuses the viewer's attention on the characters' and thereby allowing for a deeper sympathy and projection of their stress onto the viewer, it is also conveyed through the naturalistic environment around the characters by representing their stress levels. This is done through the bright, neon colors of *Good Time*, which contrast the darkness of the night, mirroring the expressive cinematography. The gritty surroundings are framed by a natural, dim lighting that enhances the realism of the film's story and characters. As the film develops over the rough timespan of 24 hours, we are met with scenes taking place across both day and night. Most scenes are however shot in dim light or darkness, with most daytime scenes being shot indoors in seedy environments like hospitals and prisons. The low-key natural lightning found in these environments is often created through a sparse use of light sources, which creates shadows and is combined with the close-up framing to create the claustrophobic feel of the environments. Here the contrast between light and dark also plays a big role as it highlights the shadows and characters further, both emphasizing them and their surroundings, which leads to further immersion. The difference in lighting and color between the environments is also important to help set the tone and feel for the atmosphere of the film. The neon lighting used in

many scenes also embodies the urban environments. The first example of this is in the bail bonds office where Connie goes at the start of the film. The room is lit with a purple neon UV-lamp, which permeates the scene, amplifying the naturalistic, raw environments. The neon is mainly diegetic, and is consistently used in stressful scenes to enhance the emotional state of a character and their situation, creating visual contrast to help the viewer direct their attention to the characters and empathize with them, thereby feeling their stress.

The few scenes showing Nick's time in police custody are mostly lit more bright, contrasting the darkness outside, but still manage to keep the rough look of Connie's journey through the grainy film stock and high contrast. These techniques are combined with the cinematographic ones mentioned previously during a voiceover segment where Ray tells Connie of his previous escapade at the arcade, where he is high on drugs and alcohol while being stressed by the imminent arrival of the police. Ray is framed up close, with his eyes in the center of the frame. The camera jolts back and forth, crosscutting between Ray and his arcade game as the bright, neon lights around him are contrasted with the darkness of his dilated pupils and the looming shadows. Here the neon lighting is again constantly present and elevates the tension in the scene.

Alongside the lighting, the color grading too plays a large role as it makes a big difference in directing the viewers' focus alongside framing. The colors in *Good Time* are largely desaturated, with the overall look being cool and hard, further emphasizing the gritty and rough atmosphere. The muted, cool lighting is also used to change character's skin tones which is notably done in scenes where traumatic and obscene actions are carried out. The scene where Connie beats the security guard is once again a good example of this, where the desaturation of his skin tone is contrasted against the darkness in the background, making the audience detach from his actions while still focusing on his motivations. This again aids in humanizing Connie alongside the cinematography, and lets the viewer empathize with him despite his actions which leads to a feeling of stress being projected onto the viewer because of Connie's desperate situation.

2.3 Why does it work?

Now that we have defined the visual style of *Good Time* and *Boiling Point* and how it is used to create stress – it is important to look at the now defined, specific characteristics in cinematography and light/color usage of each film and see how they correlate between each other to achieve the same suspense and stress. Firstly, the naturalistic surroundings of both films clearly shows through the cinematography, with the understanding of the two main characters of Andy and Connie and their motivations being pivotal to creating a gripping narrative alongside the emotional complexity of the characters. Both films feel very realistic, almost documentary-like upon viewing, and using said realism and naturalism to build and capture the atmosphere and surroundings around the characters become central to the cinematography to help build the tension and stress that is felt through the characters and their environments.

Both films are lit with low-key lighting which builds a lot of contrast between light and dark, which helps the audience focus on the characters. Despite the similar contrast, the two differ largely in tone as the temperature and hardness of the lighting vary substantially from scene to scene in *Boiling Point*, more often than not being warmer and softer (as the interior of the restaurant). This may stem from the film being shot in one location, and the focused effect still comes through very clearly despite this. The reason behind it may be less formalistic, as it is largely due to the characters and their actions being so different. While Andy is struggling with addiction and stress, he is still respectful and morally good compared to Connie, whose actions are toned down using the hard, desaturated lighting to make him appear more jagged and rough.

While the emotional themes of the films are similar in terms of the pace and personality in the camerawork, the atmosphere and visuals are distinctly different stylistically. While *Good Time* is shot on 35mm film to create a grainy and stimulating image, which emulates the realism in the characters and their surroundings – *Boiling Point* is rather shot on 6k digital, giving a distinctly clear and detailed imagery to the film.[43,44] While *Good Time* achieves an appropriately rough and expressive visual style through its usage of physical film, the digital camera in *Boiling Point* is just as effective in capturing the realism and personality in the kitchen of Jones and sons. The high quality

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[43]Kodak. DP Sean Williams goes gonzo with 2-perf Kodak 35mm on the Safdie Bros' psycho-crime feature 'Good Time'. *Kodak*.

[44]The story behind Boiling Point. *The Book of Man*.

digital imagery captures the naturalistic environments and characters, and creates a strong sense of verisimilitude together with the actors which allows for further immersion and a stronger ability to empathize with, and thereby project oneself onto the characters.

As mentioned, both films also use closeups to direct the audience's attention to the characters and their stress. While *Good Time* may consist of more closeup shots during dialogue and tense scenes, *Boiling Point* matches its personal nature through using the environment, effectively cramming the characters, and the viewer along with them – into the stressful climate of the kitchen. Both films follow a continuous, fast pace which builds the tension throughout the film. While Connie has a clear goal to strive for in *Good Time*, Andy's motivations are not made as clear from what we get to see from him in *Boiling Point*. Throughout both films we eventually do get to know the main characters very well, watching them centrally, from up close as they make harsh, sometimes even dangerous decisions to get what they want. The continuous use of the claustrophobic, constantly moving camera works to convey sympathy and empathy towards the characters through the understanding of their motivations.

2.4 Creating stress through sound and music

When it comes to setting tone and atmosphere, one can only do so much without the inclusion of sound. Elsaesser and Hagener quote Mirjam Schaube who writes of the importance of sound usage as it is an essential part of creating a "three-dimensional orientation" which allows for a greater

element of immersion which can be used to inflict stress.[45] This immersion largely stems from the fact that the ear senses not only the things we can see on screen, but also the things we cannot, allowing for a further level of engrossment and immersion in the medium.[46] The increased immersion that follows because of the sound and music is central to creating stress as it creates another dimension of perception, which allows for more appraisals. The increased emotional exposition can be used to overwhelm the viewer emotionally, causing further stress. Alongside the visual techniques mentioned in this paper, the sound can also act as both a diegetic and

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[45]Mirjam Schaub: Bilder aus dem Off: Zum philosophischen Stand der Kinotheorie. Weimar: VDG 2005 : 76. In Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 131
[46]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 131

non-diegetic medium that Elsaesser and Hagener argue acts as a "central element of perception, knowledge and experience", which allows for the filmic engagement to be perceived on a deeper level – relating to the "inner self" of the viewer.[47] In *Good Time* and *Boiling Point*, the sound and music are consistently used to convey the tense, frenetic atmosphere of the plot, its characters and their surroundings, which helps build suspense and tension through another dimension of perception – as well as being used in a more naturalistic way to convey the realism of the characters and environments which allow for greater empathy onto the characters, resulting in the projection of their stress onto the viewer.

2.4.1 Stress through naturalistic sound in *Boiling Point 24*

Boiling Point utilizes an ambient, naturalistic array of sounds to help engage the viewer in the surroundings. Because of the film mainly taking place in the Jones and Sons' restaurant kitchen, the constant sounds of the guests and personnel talking is intertwined with the clanging and sizzling sounds of cooking. The ever-present noise immerses the viewer further into the film, enhancing the naturalistic atmosphere and bringing the viewer closer to the characters through the environment. Another effective tool used is silence. While the surrounding sounds of the restaurant help enhance the claustrophobic and overwhelming nature of the film, the most stress is brought when the background is less noisy, or even quiet. During Carly and Beth's confrontation, which is the result of the constant stress and tension between the characters in the film, the ambient sounds are toned down, focusing on the snappy dialogue between the two, and in the final scene in Andy's office all that can be heard is him speaking to his wife on the phone, with the kitchen and all its guests being shut out. The silence emphasizes the contents of the dialogue and gives the characters the entirety of the audiences' attention, creating emotional stress through the viewer's projection onto the characters rather than stressing them through an overload of the tense, anxious appraisals from the constant flow of information and background noise that the film otherwise uses.

The lack of a feature soundtrack also helps with the immersion throughout the film, and is instead replaced by the ambient noise and dialogue from afar. The only music present in the film

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[47]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses.131

(except background noise) is Sam Fender's "Poltergeists", whose instrumental piano starts playing after Andy collapses onto the floor, and the screen fades to black. After a few keys are played, the film's titles boldly flash onto the screen, and Fender's lyrics start, with the first mirroring Andy's personal struggles with: "This is where I make my stand" – symbolizing his fight against addiction and personal stress. The melancholic, eerie melody of the song also echoes a lot of the film's themes of pressure and personal sacrifice.

2.4.2 How *Good Time's* pulsating soundscape amplifies stress

Contrary to the atmospheric soundscape in *Boiling Point*, the sound and music in *Good Time* is heavily related to the characters and plot, and play an integral part in creating the film's frantic, stressful atmosphere, aligning with the quick pacing. As mentioned, the score is produced by Oneohtrix Point Never, whose synth-packed, pulsating soundtrack builds throughout the scenes and reflects the narrative and themes, largely so through the characters. In tense, action-packed scenes, the music often builds throughout the scene until the tension breaks, where the distorted, percussive music actively works to create a sensory overload, causing stress by disturbing the viewer's three-dimensional orientation.[48] The rough, urban environments and themes are also mirrored through OPN's soundtrack, which has a gritty, distorted sound that goes along with the synthesizers.

The environments are also mirrored through the sounds of the city around the characters, with traffic, and dialogue between extras being loud and present around the action. During the police chase sequence after the bank robbery, the score is intertwined with the running and panting of Connie and Nick as they run from the police, increasing the percussion and volume of the synthesizers until Nick is caught by the police. The soundtrack then continues into the following montage of him in police custody, and Connie in the bail bonds office. Overlapping the score with different scenes also allows for a fuller, more immersive atmosphere. This is also complemented with diegetic music which is present in many scenes, especially those containing action and more tense themes. This again ties into the realistic, gritty environments and allows for contrast with the

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[48]Elsaesser, Thomas and Hagener, Malte. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 131

score which again allows for further capacity to project oneself onto the environments and characters.

2.4.5 How do the different auditory approaches convey stress?

Overall, both *Good Time* and *Boiling Point* make use of sound and music to increase the tension and immersion in the films, and thereby enforcing the sense of stress and unease that follows. While the background noise in *Boiling Point* acts as a catalyst for the viewer's interpretation of the stressful environment, it is not necessarily character focused. Because of the absence of a soundtrack, the usage of silence is instead prevalent in important character moments, with the background noise being toned down like when Beth phones her father after her confrontation with Carly – or in Andy's conversation with his ex-wife in his office. Just as in *Good Time*, the sound levels can also be increased and distorted to build tension during more action-packed sequences. Though *Boiling Point* does not feature much action, the stress levels and tension in the scene are increased by more background noise being noticeable, and by the characters' lines of dialogue overlapping each other, in a naturalistic, documentary-like way. This technique is also used in *Good Time*, where the fast-paced dialogue helps in overloading the viewer with information alongside the already quick pacing and editing – creating further feelings of stress. The usage of sound is, as Elsaesser and Hagener put it – pivotal to the overall level of immersion that is achievable through the film medium as it allows for the cinematic experience to take place inside the body rather than just being present on the surface level due to the "oscillation between two and three dimensions" it allows for.[49]

The effect of heightened tension provided by the atmospheric noises of the restaurant kitchen in *Boiling Point* is rather replaced by OPN's score in *Good Time*, as it too relates to the character's state of mind and stress levels. The role of the percussion-heavy and synth-filled score serves the same purpose as the background noise in *Boiling Point*, but allows for a more intense auditory experience due to its increased ability to encompass the viewer and their senses with an extra layer of sound which is not achievable with the stylistic choices made in *Boiling Point*. The

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[49]Elsaesser, Thomas och Malte Hagener. Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 140

immersion that comes from the film's one take aspect would likely be impaired by the inclusion of a score or soundtrack. The stressful atmosphere that is reached by the relentless stream of natural noise and dialogue still works to the same extent, and the combination of the claustrophobic camerawork and noise instead opts for a more realistic, humane experience that grabs the viewer's attention and allows for a great level of immersion despite the lack of a soundtrack.

Chapter 3: Stress through immersion in the characters

No matter how technically brilliant a piece of cinema is, the story cannot achieve its full potential in being told and interpreted without being complimented by well-written characters with motivations and personalities that are suitable to the situations presented to them through the plot. To achieve levels of suspense and immersion that make the audience really feel what they are watching, one must also take the importance of human nature into account. Take Alfred Hitchcock's classic example of suspense: …"Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us [...] The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it [...] In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!"[50]

The emotional impact of the danger is however trivial compared to one where the audience have gotten to know the characters who are "sat around the table" and can identify with them, thereby caring for them and allowing for stronger feelings of empathy – which unravel in stress in films like *Good Time* and *Boiling Point*. As mentioned, it is key for the filmmakers to create characters who we as an audience can project ourselves onto, taking on their problems and state of mind as our own. In *Good Time* and *Boiling Point* we are faced with two protagonists who appear rather unlikeable at first glance. Andy being a disorganized, overworked chef with a struggling relationship to his family, and Connie being a low-life criminal who uses others without giving them anything in return. These characters are however made relatable enough to empathize with

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[50]Alfred Hitchcock. Alfred Hitchcock: A ticking bomb. *MUBI.com*. https://mubi.com/specials/hitchcock

despite their flaws through the audience getting to focus on them in important moments which gives a greater understanding to them and their motivations. A greater understanding for the characters creates feelings of sympathy, which Laine writes of as being stronger than those of empathy as they are consciously targeted towards the characters, on a deeper level.[51] That relatability is then used in these films to induce stress and unease in the viewer which achieves a greater level of emotional evaluation that lingers long after the film finishes.

3.1 Empathy and understanding for the main characters

In *Good Time*, Connie acts recklessly, manipulating and lying to achieve his goals. Despite his immoral acts, he is still a character that one can attach themselves onto, working as a form of anti-hero. This is largely due to his quest being centered on helping Nick by getting him out of prison. While this is a situation that Connie himself has caused through manipulating and using Nick for the bank robbery, he still acts out of love for his brother, which the audience can empathize with despite the immoral measures he takes to save Nick. We do however get to know that Connie has been in prison himself and that after his traumatic experience there, he will stop at nothing to get his brother out of the same situation, no matter the consequences. Here the audience is presented with a dilemma: While Connie goes on his quest to save Nick, he does it because of his own experience in prison. He understands that it is his fault that Nick is in the situation he is, but during the course of the evening his "selfless" acts instead starts to become self-serving, as when Ray tells him about the valuable acid that is still at the arcade, which causes Connie to get sidetracked and lose focus on his real mission due to the potential to make even more money in the process. Despite this, his initial motivation is still morally good as he is "saving " his brother from a situation which he caused himself.

Connie's backstory is also essential to understanding his character and why the viewer relates to him despite his actions. Because of his time in prison he has become self-centered and has learned to take care of himself. While his flaws may be of his own doing, we also understand that he is traumatized and has gone through a lot to become the man that we get to see in *Good Time*. The

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[51]Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*. 46

isolation Connie has faced in prison would have forced him to think and act selfishly, which would then have a direct impact on his thinking and actions in the film. Because of his past trauma he and his actions become more relatable and understandable even though they may be immoral at times, all spurred onwards by his "valiant" journey to save Nick. The understanding of Connie's motivations and his backstory make him an inviting and interesting subject for the audience to project themselves onto, making the stress and desperation he experiences throughout the film shine through and affect the viewer. Connie and his past trauma makes him a more realistic character because of how much it shows his humanity, and how complex he is. He is not a strictly good or bad character, which makes him so much more naturalistic and real. Therefore, we empathize with Connie. Not because he is a good person, but because he really feels like a person, with flaws just like any other.

Just like we sympathize with Connie because of his humanity, we also do with Andy in *Boiling Point*. Andy's personal struggles of addiction, stress and workload mirror a lot of people's personal struggles and make him a very relatable character. He however differs a lot from Connie due to his story being a lot less self-centered, therefore making Andy a more sympathetic character. Andy is not a criminal, and does not seem to have narcissistic traits like Connie. Instead he is more passive, seemingly due to the long-lasting nature of his issues. He has clearly dealt with his depression and addiction for a long time, and the anxiety of hiding his emotions at work is felt through the screen and it is one of the main catalysts that make his character so relatable and immersive for the audience, with his stress projecting itself onto the viewer. Alongside Stephen Graham's raw and naturalistic performance as Andy, there is also a lot of depth to the character behind the scenes due to Philip Barantini largely basing the character on his own experiences of anxiety and addiction while too working as a chef. His own experiences bring even further depth and realism to what Andy and his colleagues go through, and act as a further level of depth for immersion and projection for the viewer. Conclusively, we can see that a large part of Andy and Connie are so identifiable and relatable due to how realistic they are. The realism from their characters is consistently intertwined with the naturalistic, gritty environments and supporting characters, which together create a complete immersive experience. The films' naturalistic portrayal of emotional stress overwhelms the audience, making them project themselves onto the characters through the empathy that stems from the immersion in the characters and environments.

3.2 Stress through their surroundings

In *Good Time*, Connie is racing against time to save his brother from being imprisoned and maybe even killed. In *Boiling Point*, Andy and his crew are fighting to keep their career and personal lives afloat, and even though we in both films only see roughly an hour and a half of their lives, the characters provide us with so much in such little time. During *Boiling Point* we meet a large selection of story arcs and events that have the potential to result in important story beats. This is essential to creating stress through keeping the tension as there are a multitude of problems going on behind the scenes at all times, especially those that are character based. These character moments create stress both through sympathy for the characters, but also help to overwhelm the viewer emotionally as there is nothing one can do to help the characters and their struggles. A short scene at the start of *Boiling Point* shows an emotional altercation between the pastry chef Emily (Hannah Walters) and her intern Ollie (Alex Heath) whose scars of self harm are revealed when she forcefully rolls his sleeves up. Ollie's struggles are only on screen for a minute, but linger around for the entirety of the film, building on the stress and anxiety that Andy and the rest of the staff struggle with.

The realistic and naturalistic tone of both films does not only come down to their formalistic cinematic aspects, but also a lot in terms of directing and casting. In both *Good Time* and *Boiling Point*, a large portion of the scenes are shot without giving the actors many marks and directions to follow.[52] The freedom and creativity this hands to the actors in *Good Time* creates naturalistic, immersive surroundings, and is also apparent through certain actors and extras being cast off the street or simply playing themselves, as with the policemen in the mall chase or the bail bondsman Eric, who were asked by the Safdies to act as themselves – improvising and giving very naturalistic performances.[53,54] The background characters are for the most part just bystanders due to the film mainly being shot without any permits, which allows for genuine reactions and

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[52]Kodak. DP Sean Williams goes gonzo with 2-perf Kodak 35mm on the Safdie Bros' psycho-crime feature 'Good Time'. *Kodak*.
[53]Ibid
[54]IMDB. Eric Paykert. *IMDB*. 2023. https://www.imdb.com/name/nm9192805/

increasingly immersive surroundings which amplify the feelings of stress.[55] The improvisation in *Boiling Point* has a similar effect as it too helps bring the environment to life and thereby present a more atmospheric and stressful viewing experience. As Barantini's direction and screenplay is based on his own experiences, his own involvement and knowledge also shines through the characters and environments to further the realism, and through that – empathy and projection of stress onto the audience.

4. Conclusion

During this analysis I have examined and discussed the usage of mise-en-scene and emotional dynamics to create stress in the films *Good Time* and *Boiling Point*. I have mainly focused on the films' abilities to create stress through the viewer's self-projection onto the characters. Because of this I have largely focused the analysis on how immersion is created through naturalism, as it is one of the main catalysts for the viewer's self-projection. The cinematography and sound design also creates stress through sensory disorientation and constant stream of appraisals, which overwhelm the viewer to create stress. I have analyzed a broad range of filmic elements, ranging from framing, pacing and color, to looking at the soundtracks and auditory styles of both films. As this is a comparative study, the observed elements of mise-en-scene have also been compared and evaluated against one another to come to a conclusion on which cinematic techniques convey feelings of unease and stress to the audience. Another key part of creating immersion and conveying emotions is through the characters and their surroundings, which has also led to an analysis of the psychological states and surroundings of the films' main characters.

From this analysis, I have concluded that the two films have distinct elements of both sound and imagery which are separate from each other, while still being able to reach similar levels of immersion and stress. Despite the stylistic differences in color, soundtrack and editing to name a few – the two films manage to create senses of stress and unease through their claustrophobic camerawork, fast pacing and a surrounding, ever-present sound profile which is combined with the naturalistic, atmospheric surroundings and its realistic characters which are portrayed in an equally

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[55]Swanson, Carl. Seducing Robert Pattinson. *Vulture*. August 7, 2017.
https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/robert-pattinson-sadfie-brothers-good-time.html

lived-in manner. I have also deemed the lifelike, personal atmosphere of the films as essential to achieving the immersion required for a long-lasting and affecting emotional experience, especially when it comes to creating stress.

The film's endings also manage to produce lingering feelings of stress and anxiety for the viewer that stay even after the film ends. The "emotional-rollercoaster plots" unravel into melodramatic, character focused endings which center on the effects of the emotional conflicts of the characters. In "Feeling Cinema", Tarja Laine quotes Thomas Elsaesser's essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", in which he writes of how a melodramatic ending is able to generate a strong emotional response in the viewer due to the emotional impact of wanting to "make up for the emotional deficiency" of the characters.[56] Therefore, the endings of both films conclude the respective plotlines, and manage to contain the viewer's feelings of stress and anxiety even after the film has ended.

The aim of this paper was mainly to compare the thematic and stylistic differences between both films and research how they achieve their similar, stressful viewing experiences, and how that creates an emotional impact which affects and stays with the viewer after watching the films. As the analysis has progressed however, the relation between the film's cinematography and characters has started to show how similar the foundations of both films are, and how the personalized, naturalistic style captures the stressful, fast-paced stories while still managing to feel so grounded and naturalistic. As mentioned during the analysis, the power of suspense is continuously used at a quick pace during both films to immerse and stress the viewer through the understanding of the story and characters. The main conclusion that can be drawn from the examination of these films and their characters however, is that to create the ultimate feeling of stress and immersion, is to personalize and characterize the suspense to maximize the amount of immersion. Instead of the conflicts in *Good Time* and *Boiling Point* centering around a bomb under the table about to explode, it is rather the people around the table that contain the conflict within them. The empathy and projection onto the characters combined with the elements of mise-en-scene create unique stories, whose feelings of stress and anxiety stay with the viewer long after the credits have rolled.

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[56]Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of sound and fury: Observations on the family melodrama", in *Home is where the heart is: Studies in melodrama and the woman's film. Gledhill, Christine. London, British Film Institute, 1987. 66*, in Laine, Tarja. *Feeling Cinema. Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies.* 53

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