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How Audiovisual Composition Reveals Gendered Limitations and Possibilities
in *Lady Bird* in the Wake of #MeToo

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts
with a concentration in Film Studies
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ABSTRACT:

This thesis focuses on the film *Lady Bird* and the historical coincidence of its release one month after the online movement #MeToo began. By giving frame and sound equal importance in my analysis of the film, rather than opposing these elements, I emphasize audiovisual composition and reveal the mutual dependence within what are considered traditional divisions of theory in cinema. These oppositions relate to control and escape, as they are portrayed through the mother and daughter characters, Marion and Lady Bird, as well as through image and sonic elements. My work demonstrates how the audiovisual composition of the film mediates an environment which places economic and gendered limits upon the mother and daughter specifically but can be applied to women in American society as well.

Through the incorporation of #MeToo, I highlight the gendered limitations and possibilities both women face within the film and how that relates to the current social movement which seeks to stop gendered violence and disenfranchisement. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to recognize the shared demands and desires of women who are faced with similar limitations in their environments, and through this are able to restructure environments and create new social arrangements to better serve those disadvantaged due to gender identity and economic class.

INTRODUCTION:

My thesis examines the mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) for its exemplary status in the #MeToo era. My approach to *Lady Bird* emphasizes composition in both senses of the term, through the film's score as well as its arrangement of the cinematic frame. Utilizing both definitions of this term showcases audiovisual composition as a singular element which helps form an environment consisting of shared economic and sexual limitations for the mother and daughter within *Lady Bird*. When score and frame are considered separately, as they typically are, we do not see their mutually dependent relationship. I argue that this mutual dependence, which stems from the audiovisual environment, discloses shared desires and demands for change that come from shared limitations. When we consider this mutual dependence between sound and image, we can understand the shared gendered limitations and possibilities for the mother and daughter relationship in *Lady Bird*, which refract and redress American society in the wake of #MeToo. Much like the #MeToo movement, which seeks to shed light on the gendered limits and possibilities of everyday environments, *Lady Bird* mediates relationships between restraint and excess through compositions that reveal alternative social arrangements for women in general and mothers and daughters in particular.

The original "Me Too" movement began in 2006 with social activist Tarana Burke as a way to create dialogue amongst young girls and women of color in low wealth

communities about their shared experience with sexual violence. Burke's work continues to focus on facilitating discussions of sexual violence, and how that impacts communities of women all over, and aims to bring resources to survivors, while simultaneously placing women who have been disenfranchised by gendered violence to the front of the movement (Me Too). The #MeToo movement is in reference to the social media movement which built upon Burke's work in October 2017 when Alyssa Milano encouraged women to post the hashtag "#MeToo" on Twitter if they had experienced sexual harassment or violence. The response was overwhelming with upwards of one million people using the hashtag within 48 hours of its creation (Pflum).

This starts a shift from the initial movement's focus on resource gathering and community building through dialogues on violence, to social media's #MeToo, which centers more on harassment and violence, and the seeking out of online communities. The participants in the #MeToo movement, fueled by their shared excess of experienced violence, called for a restructuring of the current environments that disenfranchised women. The online movement hoped to create a new environment with spaces safe for women to speak out in order to reframe the social restraints currently placed upon them. Such vocalization was successful in large part due to the role of social media; women were able to create spaces—indeed, environments—online to discuss similar issues they all faced. #MeToo going online simultaneously grew the community by reaching larger audiences, but within this growth created division as women sought out the best way to engage in discussions of their mutual limitations through an environment of gendered disenfranchisement.

This transition from in-person community building seen through ‘Me Too’ to the online forums of #MeToo introduces complex results. The use of social media offers both an escape from everyday life through online spaces, as well as instilling the risk of further control by implementing boundaries between class, race, and age as affluent white celebrities began to lead the movement, departing from the movement’s original audience. Though both movements have similar intentions of encouraging vocalization and solidarity, differences emerged, intensifying demands for control and escape through the introduction of #MeToo. While there are many divisions made present through this new movement, I focus on the generational gap between mothers and daughters when it comes to the creation of societal change through the use of social media. Younger women embraced the chance to share private experiences on a public forum in order to bring attention to the violence and gendered disenfranchisement they faced on a large scale. Older women, while in support of the movement, approached the topic with more restraint when publicly expressing similar experiences.

Lady Bird, a film written and directed by a woman and featuring a mother-daughter relationship as its narrative focus, received wide release just one month after #MeToo began. The historical coincidence of the film’s release and the start of #MeToo led me to think about how gendered limits and excess are being explored by both the film and the online movement. Similar to how #MeToo found solace in an online atmosphere, writer and director Greta Gerwig uses the medium of film to tell a coming-of-age story that is personal and yet has broader consequences. The audiovisual composition of this film mediates the environment of the narrative, serving as a link between the frame and sonic elements to create the world of the film. This environment,

which exists through divisions coming together, mirrors the mutuality between control and escape shown through the mother-daughter relationship within the film, along with the goals present in #MeToo's rhetoric. Both women have shared limitations, economically and by gender, which creates shared demands for change on their common containment. Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) wants to escape her home in Sacramento and live on the East Coast, far from her current life. Her mom, Marion (Laurie Metcalf), wants to control her daughter's impulses by pushing her to apply to schools nearby, an option that is already barely affordable for their family. #MeToo identifies flaws within the current system in its lack and inability to provide proper resources for survivors, enabling further violence upon women. In *Lady Bird*, similar infrastructures exist that limit both Marion and Lady Bird, including the economy, wherein their husband / father loses his job, forcing Marion to pick up more shifts in her gendered field of nursing in order to support her family. Indeed, because Marion recognizes her life's hardships, she places similar restraints on Lady Bird in her attempts at guidance. Lady Bird views this as control, recognizing her mother's life as one she could potentially have but does not want, thus fueling her desires to escape.

My argument places audiovisual composition as a mediation of these environments of restraint and excess that structure and restructure social limits and possibilities. In this, my argument departs from most theories, which tend to oppose the mutuality of restraint and excess, conceiving visual composition as boundary-making as seen in Mary Ann Doane's work, and music composition as a form of excess as detailed by Claudia Gorbman and Heather Laing. Despite this opposition, there are moments when such theories gesture to the ability of frames to reveal what exceeds them, and

sound to structure as well as surpass visual boundaries. I aim to expand upon these gestures by drawing them together in order to rethink the relationships of control and escape, and by extension offering up new limits and possibilities, in *Lady Bird* and its released during the #MeToo movement.

My emphasis on *Lady Bird*'s mother-daughter relationship and how that can represent complex mediations of restraint and excess is influenced by Linda Williams's work with maternal melodramas. Williams emphasizes that excess is the point of the genre, which also holds mother-daughter relationships as a focus. She suggests positioning excess as constitutive, coming first before restraint, and restraint working to tame this excess. For Williams, this means excess holds restraint "open," while restraint gives us old and, important for my argument, new structures. Williams's theory helps move excess to the center of my argument, thereby holding open extant structures. Theorist Caetlin Benson-Allott argues that affect, because it has not cohered into emotion, potentially disturbs structure, and yet we can only locate such affect through the structures of existing social and economic environments which contribute to the audiovisual composition. This helps me demonstrate that alternatives to currently established environments must come through the same old and new structures they wish to change. I use these theorists to support and develop my argument about *Lady Bird*, going to melodrama to rethink excess as an affective environment that complicates divisions and reveal mutual dependence. By combining the relationship between restraint and excess Williams traces in the melodrama and Benson-Allott's work on structures of affect to transform the oppositions between restraint and excess (as composition) and control and escape (as narrative) in *Lady Bird*, I am able to bring

forth the intersections with #MeToo as social context. This shows control and escape not only in opposition, but mutually dependent, conceiving the mother-daughter relationship anew. By thinking of the structures of sound and frame together, the former considered feminine in its excess and the latter associated with rationality and control, I seek out alternative structures that provide new possibilities for the mother-daughter relationship.

We see how audiovisual composition highlights the similarities of gendered limits and possibilities placed upon both *Lady Bird* and Marion, and how what initially appears as divisive tensions, is later revealed as a mutually dependent relationship in and through the audiovisual and social environment. The compositional environment links restraint and excess through use of sound and image, both aspects of film that when brought together through audiovisual design, set up division and mutual dependence. This complex relationship highlights shared demands and desires in the characters *Lady Bird* and Marion, allowing a restructuring of gendered relations, which can be read as relating to #MeToo's own goals of reducing gender disenfranchisement and creating safer environments.

This restructuring will be explored through three scenes from *Lady Bird*. The first is the opening scene where *Lady Bird* and Marion leave a motel after touring colleges and drive home. This first scene introduces the appearance of divisions between control and escape, emphasized through Marion and *Lady Bird*'s argument. The second scene follows *Lady Bird* and Marion when they go house hunting, a favorite Sunday activity they share together. Here, sound and image move past divisive and begin to reveal themselves as mutually dependent, opening up to more complex interpretations

to audiovisual composition. The third is the closing scene, when Lady Bird is in New York City and leaves a voicemail on her parent's home phone. This final scene not only reemphasizes sound and image as mutually dependent, but shows a recognition for shared demands and desires, allowing for social arrangements between mother and daughter to be restructured. These scenes are indicative of the film's general move from division to mutual dependence at the level of plot and composition. The placement of these three scenes within the storyline reveals through sound and frame a simultaneous corroboration and challenge to Marion and Lady Bird's characters, exposing their mutually dependent relationship. The move to environment thus recognizes the mutual dependence that affects both Marion and Lady Bird, showing limits yet also permitting opportunities for alternative possibilities, allowing for a restructuring of an old environment into a new arrangement for both characters.

SECTION I: THE AUDIOVISUAL REPRESENTATION OF DIVISION

In the beginning of the film, audiovisual composition links us to the ideas of restraint and excess creating the appearance of division. The first scene takes place in a motel room and is indicative of divisions between control (Marion) and escape (Lady Bird), as supported by a composition that underscores restraint and excess. The motel room is small, and the opening shot shows both mother and daughter sharing a bed, demonstrating how their shared socioeconomic status results in a shared environment. In this section, I focus on how this initial environment is portrayed as divisive but opens up to contradictions through the audiovisual elements, revealing a complex relationship of shared limitations and demands for both women.

While Marion is tediously tending to the motel bed, Lady Bird sits upon it, her back toward the camera while she faces the window, which is obscured by the motel curtains. When Marion sits down next to Lady Bird, she looks towards Lady Bird and adjusts her daughter's hair, showing further evidence of the desire for control from Marion. This is matched by the frame, which seems to be limiting Lady Bird and the audience, as we cannot see further than a few feet from the motel bed. With so many factors contributing to the restraint being placed in this scene, the tightly tucked corners of the bed, the closed curtains, Marion's positioning of Lady Bird's hair, the only sound in this scene is the conversation between mother and daughter. The majority of this dialogue comes from Marion, who controls the sonic sphere, asking Lady Bird if she is

ready to leave, although it appears less a question than an assumption. Within this scene, we see Marion control the visual aspect by deciding when they exit the frame, as well as the sound, by leading the conversation with her daughter.

The demonstrated desire for control and escape is later supported through the work of frame and sound in the car scene, which comes after Lady Bird and Marion leave the motel. The camera briefly cuts to a shot of a dry stretch of road, dotted sparsely with trees, showing the supposed lack of culture and civilization that Lady Bird wants to escape and signifying the emptiness she feels for the path home and her future. The sonic track accompanying this shot is an audiobook of *The Grapes of Wrath*, also about hardship and unrealized fantasies of escape. The camera cuts away from the contemporary version of the landscape being traversed by the audiobook, and we are placed in the car with Marion and Lady Bird as they drive down the road, heading home to Sacramento. After finishing the audiobook, the mother and daughter weep together in the car, a moment of mutuality in emotion. As Lady Bird wipes away tears, she remarks to Marion, “Our college trip took 21 hours and five minutes.” They laugh through tears, but the emotional moment is cut short when Lady Bird reaches for the radio dial to play music. Initially, sound is controlled in this moment by Lady Bird as a means of escape from the emotional excess she experiences from finishing the college trip and audiobook with her mother. The diegetic sound of the radio is, albeit briefly, forced into the boundaries of the film, showing how Lady Bird attempts to escape uncomfortable situations she cannot change. Marion tells Lady Bird to turn off the radio, controlling her daughter’s attempt at escape, and the musical soundtrack is silenced. Later, when Lady Bird cannot take the incessant scolding from her mother, she leaps from the car,

excess of emotion turning to escape, and Marion's screams are cut short by the next scene.

Here, sound is controlled by the audiovisual composition, which is constitutive of the environment. The mutually dependent oppositions of control and escape contribute to the audiovisual composition, which mediates the environment Marion and Lady Bird occupy within the film. Marion's desire for control stems from a life of hard work in her field of nursing, where she experiences gendered disenfranchisement, and this desire is expressed by the visual and sonic aspects working together. Marion views control as a solution to her problems, which range from economic to familial, and mainly revolve around providing a good life for Lady Bird. This is shown through Marion controlling Lady Bird's attempted escape through the sound of a radio, suggesting they should "Just sit with what we've heard." Her constant restraint upon Lady Bird trickles into the narrative through the sonic aspect, even breaking through the frame when Lady Bird jumps out of the car as an attempt to escape Marion's yelling, another sonic expression of control. Marion is aware of gendered social structures that have inhibited her and seeks to prepare Lady Bird for this same disenfranchisement through control. This causes divisions between Lady Bird and Marion, revealing oppositions vital to my discussion on their mother-daughter relationship and how that parallels mother-daughter relationships in the wake of #MeToo.

Whereas Marion has an impossible desire for control due to her own responsibilities as the primary breadwinner for her family, Lady Bird has an equally impossible desire for escape. Both of these desires are demonstrated through the environment created by sound and image. Lady Bird's dismissal of her mother cleaning

the motel room is an attempt to distance herself from Marion, who represents a life of being working class faced with gender constraints, something Lady Bird actively seeks to escape. Lady Bird wants to leave Sacramento and the life it holds behind, a sentiment which is brought up in the first car scene. Lady Bird bemoans her existence to Marion, calling her current Catholic private school education “Immaculate Fart,” and an argument ensues, delving into where Lady Bird should go to college, making her declare her desire to attend an East Coast school, “Where culture is!” This statement is of course filled with contradictions, as Lady Bird and Marion have just finished an audiobook written by a Californian author about California history while driving down the roads of California, revealing Lady Bird’s home state to be filled with the culture that she claims to seek. The argument evolves into Marion yelling about how their socioeconomic status prevents the family from sending Lady Bird to an East Coast school, mentioning how Lady Bird’s lackluster performance in school would not get her in regardless. The heated conversation ends with Lady Bird leaping from the car, dramatically shifting Marion’s screams from Lady Bird’s future to her current safety. The frame, originally established as a form of control, has now become a mechanism for escape, as Lady Bird leaps from the car, which was initially perceived as an impassable boundary.

This breaking of the image’s boundary causes disruption in what is expected of the frame in film. The visual frame is typically theorized as a way to contain the images and the characters of a film, providing restraint to the excess. Mary Ann Doane argues in “Scale and the Negotiation of ‘Real’ and ‘Unreal’ Space in the Cinema” that frame controls excess through boundary making, labeling the frame as a physical limit of cinematic narrative. She states, “Space in cinema is delimited by the frame, which acts

both as an edge or border (against the abyss outside it) and as an apparent container (of the plenitude of objects and people within it)” (70). Doane states that space, or for the context of my argument, the environment, has fixed boundaries put upon it by the frame, which she establishes as contradictory, identifying it as something that keeps out (a border) and keeps in (a container). Doane argues this frame is a border against the abyss, which in this scene from *Lady Bird* we can assume the abyss is the dry roads of California she wants to escape, and yet plunged towards in order to leave her mother. The abyss is also the unknown and can be considered the future Lady Bird desires where she is able to escape her current social environment. The frame here, according to Doane, is also a container for the women in the car (the car itself operating as its own containment), also acting as a defense against disruption and excess. The car is a space which allows for emotional expression, while also pushing away the limits of the outside world. The people within this containment are Marion and Lady Bird, their plenitude consisting of emotional excess in their argument. Excess as sound, heard through the two women’s screams, has long been coded as feminine (Laing, Gorbman), leaving rationality to the masculine, especially through theorists work in melodrama (Williams). But due to the lack of any male characters that control Marion and Lady Bird, the mother provides limits and rationality. All of these disruptions complicate not only the initial interpretation of frame and sound, but their roles as restraint and excess. In Doane’s work she gestures towards the frame as something more than a rigid structure, and I push that further with this reading.

The frame does not linger on what happens in the car, or what happens to Lady Bird and Marion immediately thereafter; instead, the frame suggests a temporary

escape is possible, and the film cuts to a few days later in Lady Bird's life, where she has a car, assumedly from her leap, and viewers are no longer bound to the initial framing. Sound is so rigid in this car scene that even Marion's scream is cut short by the credits, unable to fluidly transition to the next frame. Acting as an escape from Marion's control, the sound quickly shifts into a bouncy non-diegetic score, accompanying the opening credits. This instant cut leaves the audience no time to even respond to Lady Bird's jump. Both frame and sound are acting against their typical roles, and instead become a unified composition that represents the complex and opposing desires of Marion's control and Lady Bird's escape.

Ultimately, with the motel and car scene, the composition proves that total escape or control is not an option. Lady Bird cannot merely jump from a car and be rid of the argument she has with her mother. She cannot just leave the frame and also leave the narrative. Similarly, Marion cannot yell at a decibel high enough to stop Lady Bird from jumping out of the car or make her stay in Sacramento. Viewing the role of frame and sound in this scene as one, shows Lady Bird and Marion's mutual dependence within an environment that mediates their experience in ways that are at once limiting and opening. The mother and daughter's problems and, therefore, the solution are dependent on one another. This concept intersects with #MeToo, as women in the movement recognize there is no total escape from the world they are in, nor is there a way to have complete control over it, but there are ways of restructuring the environments that create the situations in the first place, which is an understanding Lady Bird and Marion begin to realize towards the end of the film.

This opening scene, which at first viewing seems to present very clear and distinct oppositions, can still reveal nuance. When Lady Bird jumps out of the car, a physical and visual boundary is broken, disrupting the narrative as well as the frame and sound. Lady Bird's action has shifted the direction of the plot, where the viewer is no longer in a car with the arguing mother and daughter. Because of this boundary-breaking narrative shift, there accompanies the previously explained change in frame and sound. When Lady Bird attempts an escape from her own emotional excess by jumping out of a moving vehicle and endangering herself, she also disrupts the traditional use of frame as boundary. The frame cannot control her excess, and therefore is no longer functioning in its typical role. Lady Bird is not being kept in by this cinematic and maternal frame nor is she being kept out, complicating the oppositions of frame and sound, as both are used to show Lady Bird's exit from the car, but also her departure from the audiovisual composition as a whole. In order to make sense of this complication, frame and sound have to be viewed as mutually dependent. This mutual dependence mediates the environment of *Lady Bird*, showing how the divisions between mother and daughter can be navigated through a new arrangement of previously existing structures.

To conceive composition as score and frame attunes us to an environment in *Lady Bird* which creates mutually dependent relationships, rather than oppositions, between restraint and excess as well as control and escape. This relates to the use of social media in #MeToo, which brought private experiences to public discourse and focused attention on gender disenfranchisement through power dynamics, creating the possibility of change through the recognition of currently experienced limits. Recognizing that these ideals of control and escape are impossible, we see the

aforementioned roles of sound and image creating the environment of *Lady Bird*, and the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship is revealed. Looking at these complexities through the lens of the #MeToo movement makes clear the gendered limits and possibilities presented to both Marion and Lady Bird, women who try, with opposing tactics, to restructure the disenfranchising environments they are placed within.

SECTION II: REVELATION OF MUTUAL DEPENDENCE THROUGH ENVIRONMENT

While Marion and Lady Bird present conflicting ideals and bicker throughout the film because of their differences, they still engage in activities that bond them together. These shared activities show the mutuality that exists between Marion and Lady Bird, regardless of their initially perceived divisions. I argue these pairings are negotiations, not total oppositions, and the relationship between sound and image that parallels restraint and excess shows through in the narrative of the film. Looking at the audiovisual environment, we are able to reveal the mutual dependence between Marion and Lady Bird. This mutual dependence means having mutual desires and demands due to a shared violence, which is shown through the composition depicting one of their favorite pastimes, house hunting.

This activity comes up at a point in the film where Marion picks up Lady Bird from her boyfriend Kyle's house. Lady Bird and Kyle just had an argument, and Marion, sensing her daughter is upset, asks, "You okay?" Lady Bird shakes her head and Marion follows with, "Aw, honey, ... he..." Here, Marion seems to tentatively inquire about the boy Lady Bird is seeing as her fears of her daughter being hurt, which fuels her need to control, come to the forefront of her mind. Lady Bird responds by crying in her mother's car, and the two women embrace. The car once again serves as containment, as Lady Bird reserves her emotions until she is safe in this space the two women can control.

This emotional moment leads Marion to suggest they go and participate in their “favorite Sunday activity; I don’t have a second shift,” as a way to help her daughter feel better. This line simultaneously reveals the economic control over Marion, where she typically would be working doubles to provide for the family. Lady Bird nods in agreement to the newly formed plan, still stifling her sobs. Marion’s car drives off from Kyle’s house with Lady Bird inside, and the next shot has them pulling up to a large house with a “For Sale” sign, leading to a montage of them touring nice houses clearly outside of their price range. This further supports their economic and gendered inequality, as well as shows house hunting as a form of escape and control. They indulge in the brief escapism that comes with touring domestic spaces they wish to permanently occupy but cannot afford, ultimately reminding them of the financial restraint that has control over their lives. These houses are limited structures that represent maternal and financial success as well as security which are both out of reach, and through these structures, mutual dependence arises.

Here, where Marion and Lady Bird seem to get along the most, is when sound and image have converged the most fluidly. Frame and sonic aspects work together to show the unity between mother and daughter. While they tour the houses, the frame shows them speaking and moving through a montage of static shots, but the actual dialogue and ambient noise is muted and replaced with the musical score by Jon Brion, having the viewer focus more on the physicality of the relationship between Marion and Lady Bird. Heather Laing speaks on the use of music in melodrama to convey what dialogue cannot, stating that “the musical representation of [female characters] emotions suggests the transcendent nature of women’s interiority” (10). Here, Laing

discusses how the role of music in melodrama is to show a woman's emotions, that her feelings are able to pass from inside to the outside world. I apply this concept of internal transitioning to external as a way to discuss the dissolution of boundaries amongst mother and daughter. Both *Marion* and *Lady Bird* shared a tender moment together in the small space of the car, and that feeling transcends into the musical composition when they tour houses, their complicated emotions inside being placed in the exteriority of these homes. The external is their environment, which is mediated by the audiovisual composition, which is created through the mutual dependence of sound and frame depicting gendered and economic limits and possibilities for both women.

While Laing focuses predominantly on the 1940's genre films of melodrama, she ultimately argues that women's emotions in film are established as a dangerous excess to themselves and those around them, discussing how this is shown through the use of music. Laing largely highlights the relationship of women's voices to their accompanying music, claiming that music works "in conjunction with the female character's emotions" (31). Laing views music as an aid to dialogue, that words alone cannot express what music achieves, and with music's reputation of being gendered as feminine, as laid out extensively through her work, the accompaniment in the films Laing analyzes exists to create more excessive emotion for the female characters. Building on this approach to viewing the portrayal of women's emotional excess through music and voice, I apply Laing's sound-centric work to my argument on the gendered aspects of frame and sound, which reveal more complex interpretations of gendered limits and possibilities when they are brought together. Laing also discusses excess in its relation to the visual frame, positioning the frame within the traditional role of control.

Laing uses the term “double frame” in her writing, which she borrows from Susan McClary’s work in *Feminine Endings*. McClary uses “double frame” to describe how women’s extreme emotions and actions are only accepted in performance when the audience knows the excess is confined. I build upon this work in melodrama to rethink excess as an affective environment in order to reveal mutual dependence. Laing and McClary both discuss containment in terms of gender in the melodrama and opera, stating how containment is upheld by the male characters in the genre, and excess is mapped onto women. I apply this to the audiovisual environment in *Lady Bird* to complicate divisions associated with excess and restraint in music and frame. I also question the responsibility of containment placed within men, as in *Lady Bird*, there are no major male characters that provide control, and instead that role is placed upon Marion and the socioeconomic environment that provides containment for both her and Lady Bird.

While I agree with Laing’s statement on music being tied to emotion, her work largely focuses on films released in the 1940’s, whereas *Lady Bird* was released in 2017 and takes place in 2002. While films today still deal with women’s emotions, they are presented in highly different ways, shown through *Lady Bird*’s lack of a masculine frame, something Laing argues is explicit in women’s films through the male characters (16). While there is the presence of a social frame influenced by the patriarchal world *Lady Bird* and Marion coexist in, it is lacking or at the very least pushed aside. There are no male characters that exhibit control over the two women, so a masculine frame cannot be applied, and the responsibility of rationale and control is placed upon Marion as she attempts to structure Lady Bird’s life. Laing mentions the cinematic frame, but

does not actively think through it, instead focusing on the role of sound in film. However, image is proven to be just as important in establishing the emotions of and between women, as shown before the house-hunting montage, when Lady Bird and Marion have a heartfelt moment expressed through dialogue and physical touch in the car. There is no music to accompany them at this point, and it is not until they drive up to their first house for sale that a musical track begins playing. Now that the dialogue has established their current emotional state, they can start house hunting and the audience has more room to interpret what the mother and daughter are feeling. Their interaction in the containment of the car grounds the musical expression that follows, as the sonic element is reduced down to the composed soundtrack, a score that is simultaneously melancholy and uplifting as a way to show how the conflicts of escape and control are coming together to create a cohesive whole. The music orchestrates alongside the frame which shows Marion and Lady Bird in an array of emotions ranging from excitement to seeing a new house and imagining the life they could live there, to a resolute sadness when they know the house is an unattainable space, showing a parallel to the musical soundtrack. It is not that the frame is controlling the women by silencing them, as Laing implies, but instead frame works with the sonic field to create an audiovisual form that shows the limitations placed upon both women, demonstrating their desires for upward socioeconomic mobility in their shared environment.

This mutual limitation upon both women gives way to mutual desires and demands. This mutuality is demonstrated through an activity that simultaneously bonds them while reminding them of what they cannot obtain due to their financial state. House hunting for Marion and Lady Bird functions as an escape, suggesting a demand

for a better life, while also reminding them of the current restrictions placed on them through their socioeconomic status. Both women seek respite through taking up space in environments within which they cannot exist. The houses are inherently gendered through their domesticity, and even the rooms in which the frame shows the women are places such as the kitchen and the dining rooms, where provision and entertainment take place. While house hunting is escapism, it also provides control, as the women can imagine what their lives would be like in these environments. The houses provide a blank space in which they think of a life free from working double shifts, away from boys who treat them poorly, of spaces they can occupy safely. Indeed, when Lady Bird visits these large expensive houses, similar in status to Kyle's house, she is able to restructure her past experience within those spaces. She is not just a middle-class teenager who was hurt by a boy, but now she can walk confidently down the halls of her own space, restructuring her own environment. With this scene we see how the audiovisual composition is possible, something that can only be fully understood when approached as a singular entity, and not two separate aspects.

This unity occurs when sound takes a step away from its usual fluid state, and the frame opens itself to multiple interpretations. Sound creates structure, through the use of the motif in the instrumental soundtrack, having been previously developed earlier in the film when Lady Bird walks through an upper-class neighborhood with her friend, and looks upon large houses she can never occupy or own. The frame shows Marion and Lady Bird getting along, occupying the same space together and enjoying each other's company. This is one of the very few scenes in the movie where Lady Bird and Marion are alone together and are not arguing.

This scene highlights what #MeToo seeks to accomplish. Even with the conflicts between Marion and Lady Bird, they still have mutual limitations, which creates their shared demands, allowing them to get along and form bonds during their favorite shared pastime, which gives them common ground to build upon. This commonality creates their shared fantasy of one day owning a large house, and the shared reality of never having one. The houses they tour in this scene show the potential for a new environment that they can call their own, a structure that already exists that they can restructure to include and protect them. As they walk around the houses, Lady Bird gestures to the walls and furniture, in a manner that suggests she is speaking on how she would configure the space if they owned it, as opposed to only being visitors. Marion follows her along and nods in agreement, showing their mutual desires for escape and control. The camera ends the scene with Marion taking one last longing glance around the kitchen space, wishing her desire to provide a home of this size and status to her daughter being made known to the audience.

This desire from Marion shows a connection to #MeToo, as we see a woman from an older generation look around at an environment she wants to provide for her daughter, a younger generation, as an attempt to give her a better life than the one she has lived. Many women of older generations initially remained silent when faced with disenfranchisement and harassment in the workforce, but learned to speak about it when #MeToo gave them the language and tools to do so, and in turn have become more supportive of the movement in hopes that the world awaiting younger women will be better (Barroso, Hartocollis.) Even though Marion shows her desires for her daughter to succeed through controlling Lady Bird, and Lady Bird reacts through a desperate need

to escape, which creates a seemingly endless cycle of conflict between mother and daughter, their goals are ultimately the same. They crave a space that is safe, from economic struggles, from gendered disenfranchisement, from a society that constantly attempts to displace them. #MeToo, and the women behind the movement, want to exist together, regardless of their differing approaches, in a space that accepts them and is safe. Marion and Lady Bird are able to exist together harmoniously, where audiovisual composition places them in an environment of their own creation. This mutual dependence is also possible for women who actively seek a better environment to develop and grow in, without fear of violence due to gender identity.

SECTION III: A SHARED DEMAND FOR RESTRUCTURING SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The opening of the film suggests divisions through control and escape within Marion and Lady Bird, and the house hunting scene reveals mutual dependence within the composition as well as between the characters through their shared environment. This revelation allows the closing scene to recognize the shared demands that come from Marion and Lady Bird's mutual desires and offer up a restructuring of current social arrangements, revealing possibilities within the previously established limits of the gendered environment. This is shown in the final scene through the composition utilizing sound and frame to portray Lady Bird and Marion as unified in their differences as well as their experiences, both aspects of the film working together to showcase the possibilities of growth within the shared limits of their mother-daughter relationship.

At the end of the film, Lady Bird attends college in New York City and is shown having just left a Catholic church service visibly moved, a large step from comparing her Catholic high school to flatulence in the beginning of the film. She calls her parents, leaving a voicemail that begins with, "Hi, Mom and Dad. It's me. Christine." As she states the Christian name given to her by her parents, one she had denied throughout the film, the camera cuts away from Lady Bird on the phone and begins showing tracking shots of Sacramento. The frame continues to show scenes of her hometown, the

environment she spent so long trying to escape, while she continues with “It’s the name you gave me. It’s a good one.” The camera cuts back to Lady Bird standing in New York City as she quickly addresses her dad, explaining, “This is more for Mom,” further suggesting Lady Bird’s mutual dependence with her mother, and how their gendered disenfranchisement brings them together. Lady Bird asks Marion if she felt emotional when she first drove around Sacramento, and the frame returns to showing flashbacks from Lady Bird’s perspective of her time driving in her hometown. While the sound of the voicemail is in present time as Lady Bird stands on the East Coast, the visual memories are secured in the past with the West Coast, revealing escape as not only impossible but intertwined with home and environment. Her environment, made of the audiovisual composition, includes the restraints and excesses she experienced, and now grows nostalgic towards, as she seems to yearn for a return to the very space she spent the entirety of the film attempting to escape.

As the frame shows close-up images of Lady Bird driving in Sacramento, it cuts quickly to identically framed close-ups of Marion driving through the same areas, not only showing memories Lady Bird has of her mom but blurring the divisions that separated her from her mother, proving that even boundaries have to touch. This cinematic technique creates a visual space of Lady Bird’s thoughts, of her perceptions of her mother through memory. Marion and Lady Bird are both framed in close-ups while driving, glancing in the same directions, occupying the same space. Instrumental music plays, aiding Lady Bird’s dialogue but not overpowering the volume of her voice, and as she continues to speak the street sounds from New York City fade away and are replaced by the music composition, her voice, and quiet dreamlike murmurings from Marion.

The sonic element blends *Lady Bird*, Marion, and memories of Sacramento together. The images of mother and daughter driving become almost fluid, seamlessly bringing the images of the two women together. Frame and sound actively work together to create an environment that mediates their experience, good and bad, which shows the mutually dependent relationship Lady Bird and Marion share with one another. The use of voicemail links to the broader environment, by acting as a sonic connection to Lady Bird and her mother, and simultaneously a visual one, as Lady Bird speaking into her phone resurrects memories from Sacramento that begin to appear within the frame, cutting to scenes which depict Lady Bird driving through her hometown.

These interchanging close-up shots of both Marion and Lady Bird communicate the mutuality between mother and daughter along with Lady Bird's newfound recognition of their shared experiences. Within the close-up, we have a breaking of what separated Marion and Lady Bird, and in response the two women converge, visually through the close-up and sonically through Lady Bird's narration, which connects the memories with her current location. The fluidity of frame and sound together creates an environment that mediates the experiences of both women. Mary Ann Doane writes on how the close-up can be both intimate and destabilizing with its use of frame in *The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema*, stating "The face, usually the mark of individuality, becomes tantamount to a theorem in its generalizability. In the close-up, it is truly bigger than life" (94). Through Doane's work, and this final scene in *Lady Bird*, we see the dissolution of oppositions, as the close-ups of Marion and Lady Bird reveal their similarities. The close-up effectively diminishes the parts of Marion and Lady Bird that divide them, reducing their "individuality" as Doane puts it, and showing their

commonalities. Doane points out that the concept of the close-up is interpreted differently based on language, and that the English definition references proximity, pointing out how the close-up “invokes ... binary oppositions - proximity vs. distance” (92). In this scene, the close-up shows Marion and Lady Bird in the same environment, the car, creating proximity. But it is already established for the viewer these are memories, and the nearness from the proximity is generated from Lady Bird’s inner thoughts. Instead, the distance of Marion, and the memories of driving through Sacramento, are far away. The opposition between Marion and Lady Bird is melted through the frame’s use of close-up as well as the sound of Lady Bird recalling these memories to her mother over voicemail. The women are physically distanced in reality but are in proximity through memory. The frame and sonic elements dissolve these binary oppositions, as they did for control and escape, creating an audiovisual composition capable of restructuring a new environment for Lady Bird and Marion that presents to them their mutual dependence and commonalities.

Throughout the film Lady Bird wants to escape her hometown and the life it brings, but ultimately, she discovers the very notion of escape, as opposed to control, needs to be reconfigured in order to acknowledge the environment that made her, so she could begin to rebuild one better suited for a healthy relationship between her and her mother. This mother-daughter relationship is tied to the economic and gendered structures they share that provide limitations for the two women. For Lady Bird to be seeking amends with her mother is for her to also recognize the controlling structures which disenfranchise them both and in turn make Marion seek control over her daughter as a form of protection. This opposition of desired control and escape that

Marion and Lady Bird have is complicated and redefined, revealed as impossible ideals through the composition which creates the environment of the film.

The opposition between mother and daughter parallels #MeToo, a movement that wants to escape gendered violence by gaining control over situations, where control was taken away and replaced by an excess of violence, in order to rebuild boundaries that were previously broken. These parallels matter when conceiving of the mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Bird*. The audiovisual composition shows that control is produced in Marion, who makes daily sacrifices for her daughter, which Lady Bird witnesses, creating her desire for escape from the same structures that confine her mother. This leaves us with two women in a mutually dependent relationship which undermines the opposition of their different perspectives set up at the beginning of the film. The control Marion wants and the escape Lady Bird desires are both impossible ideals; it is not possible for Marion to control where Lady Bird moves when she is old enough to do so, and it is not possible for Lady Bird to completely escape the confinements of her financial status and gender, or her mother's impact on her life, regardless of where she lives.

These impossible ideals can only change when we realize that what is needed are new social arrangements for both characters. By recognizing the opposition they held against each other, Marion and Lady Bird seek out a restructuring of their gendered environment, creating change in the limitations that extend from the current structure, thus allowing for new possibilities. Although divisions may be unnecessary, or even imagined, their effects are real. Therefore, in order for the #MeToo movement to continually grow and succeed, there needs to be a recognition of the mutual desires and

demands between women in order to create change in shared gendered environments. Composition demonstrates that by bringing together frame and sound, a direct parallel of restraint and excess, there is a restructuring of the environment of mutually dependent relationships that intersect with #MeToo's goals.

CONCLUSION:

The audiovisual composition of *Lady Bird* discloses an aesthetic and narrative environment that reshapes control and escape as mutual dependence in ways that are meaningful in light of the economic and sexual limits and possibilities that characterize the #MeToo era into which the film was released. By focusing on the mother-daughter relationship present within *Lady Bird*, and how it is presented through sound and image, mutual dependence is revealed. This restructuring of mutual dependence suggests both mutual limitation and desire, and a demand for change that we see through #MeToo which calls attention towards gender inequity.

There is an exchange of words halfway through the film between Lady Bird and her ex-boyfriend, Danny, about Lady Bird's mother. Danny states,

"Your mom is crazy. I'm scared of her."

Lady Bird defends her mother, saying "She's not crazy. She's just, you know, she has a big heart. She's very warm."

"I don't find your mother warm."

"You don't?"

"No. No, she's warm. Yeah. But she's also, kind of, scary."

"Well, you can't be scary and warm."

"I think you can. Your mom is."

This exchange between Danny and Lady Bird encapsulates a lot of what Lady Bird has to process before she leaves a voicemail that ends the movie. For so long, Lady Bird considers her mother one or the other, either Marion is controlling, or she is warm -- if Lady Bird is defending her to a boy at least. Only when Lady Bird views her mother as more complex can she achieve recognition of the mutual dependence her and her mother have and begin restructuring their shared environment to mend the relationship.

Ultimately, the idea of complete control or total escape are impossible ideals, as demonstrated through the characters Marion and Lady Bird, and related back to #MeToo as well as the roles of frame and sound. Due to this lack of totality, it is clear that these elements that comprise the environment, traditionally viewed as oppositional, deserve a more complex approach which treats them as singular entities that challenge current structures. In order to restructure current environments, they must first be understood in terms of the mutual dependence and the shared limitations and possibilities that creates.

With #MeToo, the control of gendered social structures encourages an escape to online social media forums and yet this forum establishes new boundaries in response to an excess of sexual discrimination and violence, creating a more complicated approach to limits and possibilities. By identifying the structures formed through the use of visual frame and sound, I am able to reveal their mutual dependence and thereby their shared demands for restructuring current environments.

The traditional oppositions of sound as excess and frame as restraint, when brought together, reconceive the limits and possibilities that arise when we approach the

composition of the film as an environment. Going forward from this project, I am interested in exploring what the idea of mutual dependence and audiovisual cinema means for films in this current era of #MeToo, such as *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2019), *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019), and *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) and what communities expect from depictions of gender through sound and image.

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