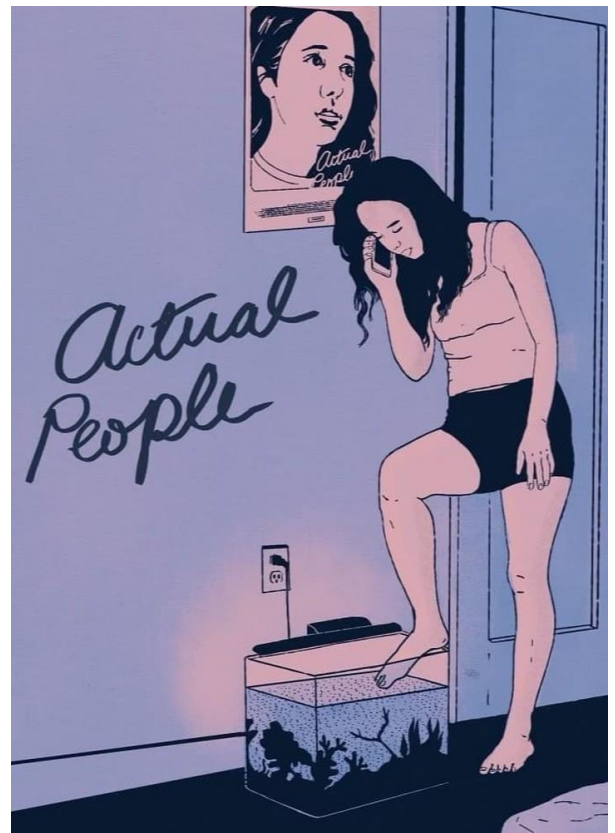
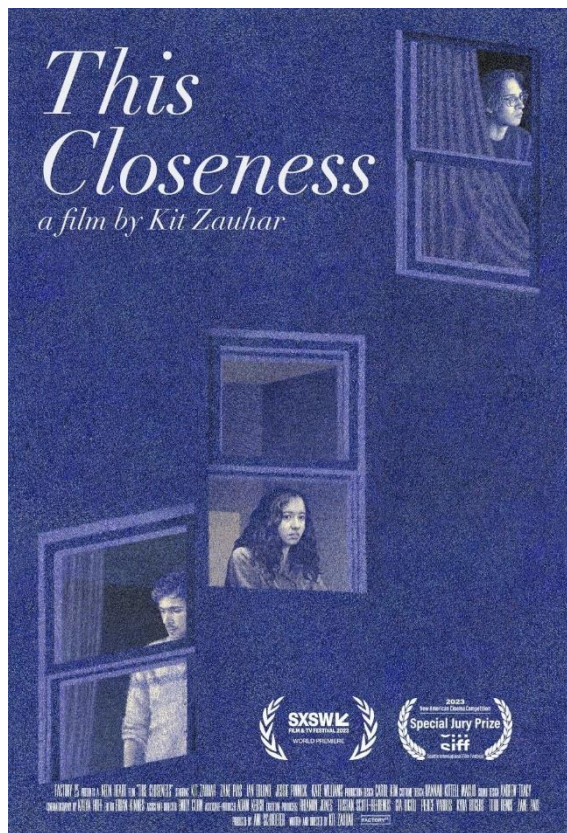


Kit Zauhar, *Actual People* (2021) and *This Closeness* (2023)



# Kit Zauhar : the disintegration of intimacy

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Nicolas Floury

*« Like, I walked at graduation. So now this is the last step. Then I'm a real person. Then I'm an adult. »* Rilay, *Actual People* (2021).

*« Loving someone like Ben feels really lonely because as much as I complain about him and know things aren't working or they could be and I just don't know how to get us there. »* Tessa, *This Closeness* (2023).

The generation of millennials has been criticized for being the most narcissistic, constantly putting every detail of their lives into images. Selfies mirror the selfishness of this lost generation. For them, life only exists once it has been put into images for others. A life solely alienated from the gaze of the Other.

Kit Zauhar's two brilliant, landmark films - and it's no coincidence that she was born in 1995, just as Generation Y was giving way to the next generation - totally explode this prejudice. Indeed, to bring the sequence to a close and finally tell the truth about this generation, as she does, we had to turn things completely on their head. It's only at the start of twilight that Minerva's owl manages to take flight.

Indeed, these two films are revolutionary in the sense that they open up a new paradigm in cinema, using the most intimate portrayal of life - the much-criticized autofiction - to turn it against itself. We had to think of it: using intimacy to dissolve the ego under its repeated glare. To use intimacy to the full, in order to use it to shatter narcissism. In this way, we can touch the universal in ourselves with the help of the most singular.

We're reminded of the folisophy advocated by Jacques Lacan: succeeding in turning one's singular madness into wisdom. Except that Kit Zauhar goes one step further: she doesn't care about wisdom, what she's aiming for is the pure and simple destruction of the ego, this so-called identity, this temple of illusion. She shows us a truth that should have been obvious to us long ago, like Edgar Allan Poe's stolen letter, once exposed, but only made obvious to all by the grace of her work: if this generation of millennials was so preoccupied with its image, with putting the intimate

into images, it wasn't out of narcissism, out of immoderate self-love. On the contrary, it was a response to a proven hatred of the ego. Through a subtle dialectic - and this is what Kit Zauhar's films marvelously demonstrate - the extreme point of intimacy becomes, by universalizing and turning itself inside out, a veritable weapon of war against ego and selfishness.

What is at stake in Kit Zauhar's cinema is this fundamental reminder: there can be no harmonious relationship between men and women, due to the very fact that the ego acts as a screen, and fantasies do not fit together. There is no sexual relationship for those who are sick of speaking - this is the great lesson of psychoanalysis, so rarely put on screen, and which our director manages to film as closely as possible.

Our hypothesis is as follows: contrary to what a cursory glance at these two films might lead one to believe, their aim is not to deal with the difficult question of acquiring an identity, the passage from adolescence to adulthood, let alone the quest for the stability supposedly found in a harmonious couple at last, but rather to denounce identity as such throughout. Denouncing identity, the ego, as an illusion, and pointing out that there is definitely no sexual relationship that holds between men and women.

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Everything, it seems, when it comes to identity, begins with the image. Are we not the only animal species to recognize ourselves in the mirror? Yet it's not He who is reflected in front of his eyes, since it's his image. And yet, it seems, we can't help but identify ourselves with it, taking this image to be who we are. We are therefore, first and foremost, a mere image, frozen as such in the mirror. This birth of the ego through the imaginary is due to the fact that the image presented in the mirror, unified, total, closed in on itself, anticipates our proprioceptive capacities. We appear to the image in the form of the One before this is possible through our bodily sensations. The body is originally experienced as fragmented, divided and splintered, and it is the birth of the ego, thanks to the mirror stage, that allows us to put an end to the anguishing and painful sensations that inexorably follow birth. It's a question of fixing in an image what was then no more than a troubled jouissance, that of the very vibration of flesh, of the body before it was taken over by language. Fixation is the only way of minimally localizing this experience and making it more bearable.

If I am originally nothing more than my image in the mirror, then it's because "I is another". Kit Zauhar cleverly turns the mirror stage on its head. She makes it clear that if "I is another", then that other is not me, since it becomes virtually and potentially strictly everyone else. And isn't this what can determine a filmmaker's destiny: to demonstrate through images that the world of the ego has nothing to do

with the strictly linguistic world of the subject? Isn't this one of Kit Zauhar's stated aims?

When it comes to my identity, to who I am, it can only be Me in the world of the imaginary. This means that who I am will always ultimately depend on the gaze as gaze. Whether it's me who sees myself in the mirror, or others who observe me, my identity is never other than that which the gaze fixes.

This is clearly highlighted in *This Closeness* by the atmosphere of the apartment. The restricted world of the apartment is reduced to the world of the gaze. Everyone spies on everyone else, and there's no way of escaping each other's gaze. That's why Tessa sometimes doesn't dare leave her room, and why there's often talk of doors opening when you least expect them, and of the repeated intrusion of others. You never feel alone in Kit Zauhar's films; the other is always there, lurking in the shadows, always on the verge of appearing. The gaze as object never ceases to prowl.

This feeling is reinforced by the very presence of the cameras, absent for the viewer but all the more present for its absence. It is this device, which could be described as panoptic, that seems to induce the slight anxiety that hovers throughout *This Closeness*. This atmosphere, typical of huis clos, where others, since they are reduced to being only those in a position to judge me in my intimacy, become hell - and Tessa, at the end of the film, will demand to leave as quickly as possible, will insist, having lost patience, in anguish, that the car be brought so that she can finally leave this oppressive place where an omnipresent and burdensome Regard reigns.

What *This Closeness* reveals is the original metaphysical truth: the gaze is in the world. It is not on the side of the subject, but on the side of objects. The world never stops looking at me - and the apex of this truth bursts forth in paranoia, when everyone comes to know my every move, my every thought.

Kit Zauhar's cinematic lesson is this: in the inward-looking world of mirrors - the world of the ego, of identity - it's all about images, but never about who I really am. If I want to know who I am, in the world of the imaginary, of narcissism, I can only be someone else. So, to answer the question "Who am I?", we have to move to another plane, the plane of the symbolic.

It's probably for this reason that Kit Zauhar can sometimes say, because of her exceptional attention to what is said around her, that she has mastered the art of dialogue above all else. It's between the lines, in the enunciation more than in what is said, that the truth of beings lies for her. In our opinion, this is why the figure of the shrink is present in both films. It's about saying what you feel, out of sight. It's a more direct way of finding out who you really are - the ultimate goal in psychoanalysis being to understand that the question has no meaning. Perhaps that's what becoming an adult is all about: not finally knowing who you are, but understanding that you can be absolutely who you want to be, precisely because our identity is condemned to be illusory, a prisoner of the gaze alone, and is therefore in flux as such.

If the image is the starting point, our young filmmaker takes it one step further. As usual, she takes what is originally considered classical and subverts it with the help of cinema. As soon as the image is set in motion, there's the presence of the voice. The opening of *This Closeness* is a monstration of the voice as voice.

Make no mistake about it, the sounds used to reduce stress, known as ASMR, may never be voices per se, but they have all the trappings of them. They are clearly sounds that evoke the life of the foetus when it was still in its mother's womb. The voice here is nothing other than the sound itself, beyond all meaning. If the particular sounds of ASMR manage to act on our feelings in this way, soothing us, it's because they are nonetheless something of the order of the object that causes desire, the object of the drive. It's precisely for this reason that we're talking here of voice in relation to the sounds of ASMR.

Thus, in *This Closeness*, in the form of the sounds specific to ASMR, we have from the outset the presence of the voice as an object causing desire.

If the gaze is central to Kit Zauhar's films - we are often shown what usually remains hidden, lurking in intimacy - it is not without the co-presence of the voice.

If cinema seems to her to be above all a game with the gaze - which is on the side of the world and not on the side of the subject - it is also at the service of the voice. In fact, in *This Closeness*, it is probably the voice as voice that becomes the subject of the film at certain points. For example, it's very important that Tessa's profession is closely linked to the recording of very specific sounds, which she puts on video - Tessa makes videos for a living, and these must be able to convey relaxing, anxiolytic sounds, which for some even become addictive in their own right.

On another level, which also has everything to do with the objects of fantasy - the gaze and the voice - Kit Zauhar's films display a certain obsession. It's all about showing reality in film, no more and no less than reality - the actual *Actual People*. In short, it's about returning to the classical definition of truth as the adequacy of representation and thing. It seems that Kit Zauhar doesn't like cinema to show things that can never happen in real life. This is his leitmotiv, and it's what marks his entry into the world of cinema for us.

Let's make no mistake: for her, the challenge is not to show a truth that would be truer through realistic cinema, in the sense of an obsessive concern for detail, but rather to succeed in disaggregating the very intimacy of the intimate. This disaggregation of intimacy is achieved through an archi-monstration of intimacy. Rather than using means to veil the truth, the better to make it reappear when it is revealed - which would be an atheistic game of incessant veiling/unveiling, a cinema driven by the metaphysical question of being - Kit Zauhar's aim is to do everything possible to dissolve the ego in the very image.

In this way, she manages to explode any possibility of eroticism linked to the monstration of the veiling/unveiling of intimacy. Masquerade femininity is thus denounced by the brutal exposure of its opposite: the naked crudity of the female

body. In *This Closeness*, for example, there are the dirty panties showing Tessa's dried white discharge - something never shown in cinema - as well as the scene in which Riley is seized by a violent stomachache in the toilet, or even the scene in which she talks at length about her violent vaginal mycosis.

There's an undeniable rejection of femininity as a mere masquerade in Kit Zauhar's films. Femininity is situated more on the side of the body as dancing and moving, and of the voice as the object of desire, than in a game of minutia, semblances and masks classically attributed to femininity. Here again, Kit Zauhar subverts the feminine, showing it elsewhere than where it is classically expected.

Fantasy as a specifically feminine sometimes is not absent - the classic "being possessed" as proof of love when Tessa tells her shrink in *This Closeness* that she wants to be possessed because then she'll have won. Femininity is thus thought of as the Other of the masculine - there are two sexes in this sense for Kit Zauhar, who doesn't get bogged down in gender theory like so many directors of her generation - but the feminine is presented more on the side of voice and movement than on the side of the gaze. To be possessed requires enunciation, the return of one's own message in an inverted form: "If I am yours, it's because you are mine".

Female eroticism is thus - and this is the lesson of *This Closeness* - deported to the side of sonority, of the voice as voice. Here, the voice object is the cause of desire, while the image, which is on the side of the gaze - in the sense that it looks at us, not the other way round - is there to prevent the gaze object alone from constituting the fantasy. The use of ASMR sounds in *This Closeness* is remarkable in this respect. The aim is to make us hear something beyond noise, as well as something below all meaning. The sounds used in ASMR reveal silence in the midst of the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In a silence that is no longer a meaningful silence, one that is linked to communication and has meaning. This particular silence, induced by ASMR, allows Kit Zauhar to reveal the voice as a voice.

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Kit Zauhar's work is thus about identity as impossible, about the difference between subject and subjectivity. Our identity - and this is what We believe *This Closeness* shows - by virtue of being alienated from an image, necessarily passes through the gaze and language of the other. That's why, in this film as in *Actual People*, we are constantly witness to the passing of judgments on one another - the immature gossip that Tessa denounces when reporting on the comments of Ben's former high school classmates as they dined together, in *This Closeness*, but also the opinion of Riley's mixed-race lover about his sexual relationship with her, in *Actual People*.

Not only can't we reduce a subject to his or her image, even if it's the one perceived through the eyes of others, but putting it into words, in the form of judgments about us, misses the point just as much as it misses what we really are. To tell the truth about a being, we'd have to use a singular language of our own, which would be the only one able to say what it's like for our body to be our own identity. For the secret of the matter lies in the fact that the answer to the question "Who am I?" can only be "a singular body". Reality is always more complex than we can make it out to be, and the psychological or sociological vocabulary we use to judge others, to try and say who they are, is too general, and so always misses the point. Psychology is condemned to using the poorest possible subsuming language, and so we are condemned to not being Nous, whether reflected in a mirror or as a reflection of someone else's judgment, when it comes to the Ego. In the world of the imagination, "I is another". Such is the egotic lesson of Kit Zauhar's cinema.

By judging the other with the language of the city, we miss the point - and that's what Tessa will try to tell Benjamin and his girlfriend when they talk about their persifluous discussions about high school elders.

In our view, Kit Zauhar's films are an attempt to use cinema to capture the poverty of psychological language alone - "Who are you?" - and sociological language - "what do you do for a living?" It's a question of filming, not immanence as flow, the body as body, always too complex to be captured by a camera, but the simple sketch that is a body once judged with psychological language. What Kit Zauhar puts into images is this empirical observation: a person's reality, once sifted through by the judgment of others, necessarily turns out to be a caricature.

Indeed, it is around a shared judgment of others that Tessa and Benjamin meet and reconcile after an argument - their host is said to be an imaginary friend. The other interferes in the very heart of their desire, as they make love by parodying the other's desire. Desire becomes, by *mimêsis*, the desire of the other when Tessa pretends to have desired the host. This takes place around the voice object: "I swear to God. And then I saw him in his little sweatpants and it just made me so wet...". This desire, as a false desire for the other, immediately gives rise to Benjamin's real desire for Tessa - their noisy lovemaking probably being, whatever they say, "we didn't know the walls were so thin", addressed to the host himself. The hysterical structure of their desire is thus redoubled - the host, in his solitude, must come to desire their desire in turn.

Kit Zauhar's cinema captures the flatness of psychology when it remains at the imaginary level of the ego. If it's an attempt to disaggregate the intimate, it's also a critique of psychology, the one not going without the other.

It is the question of the boundary between the self and my image, and not between the self and the world, that is scrutinized in *Actual People*. Paradoxically, the disintegration of the "I" as such is shown through images of the very intimacy of intimacy. This is a far cry from the criticism of millennials and their supposed

permanent exposure of intimacy. *Actual People* and *This closeness* are a much deeper denunciation of the ego as a temple of illusion. Kit Zauhar's deceptively intimate cinema is the art of the disintegration of the ego.

It wasn't a question of depicting a quest for a stable identity, of showing how to become an accomplished adult, of exposing the social fixation of the ego, but rather of criticizing identity as such. It wasn't a question of grasping how one could finally become an adult, but of understanding the illusory side of this becoming. The ego is no more than an imaginary alienation, the sum of our identifications, and its essence fluctuates. Stabilization in an identity is therefore quite simply impossible.

*Actual People*, when reflecting on what it means to be an adult, offers a kind of analogy to Sartre's famous analysis of the café boy in *Being and Nothingness*. The latter is not a waiter per se, but merely plays the part socially expected of a waiter. If Riley, but also Tessa, seem to suffer from the absence of a fixed and definitive identification in the adult world, it's not because they intuitively understand that this is a dead end. There's no such thing as a stable identity, they seem to be telling us in the end.

To the question "What is identity? Kit Zauhar's films answer with another question: "How can we dissolve identity through the very intimacy of intimacy?"

The challenge was to film the very intimacy of intimacy. The disintegration of the ego, by imploding intimacy as intimacy. By turning the most intimate into something extimate, by tipping the most intimate into universal banality. After all, what woman hasn't experienced leucorrhoea, vaginal mycosis, or a stomach ache that literally twisted in two and emptied itself in the toilet? Aren't these most intimate moments, which Kit Zauhar was the first to film beyond any sense of shame, so common to us all that they say nothing about us? Indeed, isn't one of the functions of shame to make us believe that our intimacy is linked to our interiority? So we need to move beyond this feeling, demystify it as such, and separate intimacy from who we are as subjects. The ego and the subject make two," says Kit Zauhar throughout *Actual People*.

The daunting question then becomes: if I is another, who am I once this other has been disaggregated by autofiction itself?

It would have been nice if Kit Zauhar had gone one step further, if this pulverization of the ego through the capture of the intimate could have been brought to a conclusion, if identity could have appeared, through the medium of cinema, as finally disjoined from the time of the clock, from the time of society, which in the final analysis is only the time of Technology. Once the ego has been dissolved, isn't the real alienation our alienation from technology, in the sense that the latter completely separates us from our bodies?

Couldn't Kit Zauhar's deceptively intimate films in the future manage to show the time specific to each body, beyond any socially assigned identity, beyond the time of



the clock and the calendar? It would be a matter of using cinema's own processes to make the cut appear as a cut, to show, with technical means, what is at stake in the very logic of the unconscious. After all, the unconscious is totally unaware of the mechanical and falsely rhythmic time induced by society. The work would probably be more focused on dreamlike intimacy, on showing bodies in their hypnotic movements. It would be to focus the camera more on the moments when the subject takes over from the ego, and which are already apparent when Tessa or Riley lose their nerves, when they literally appear on the verge of a nervous breakdown - Kit Zauhar, who is an astonishing actress, marvelously plays these moments when we are on the verge of going outside ourselves, tipping over onto the Other stage, out of our depths, when the body takes over from language and the Time of Technique finally lets go.

We'd like Kit Zauhar's future films to be even more revolutionary: to challenge our relationship to the artificial time of the watch.

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So *Actual People*, like *This Closeness*, was not about a quest for identity. Rather, it was about the extent to which stabilization in a single identity was an impossibility. It was about how an entire generation refused to fall prey to this false search for identity. The adult world doesn't exist, it's a semblance, and it's based on a belief. Believing in one's identity, taking oneself for one's "I", such was the illusion.

Kit Zauhar's deceptively intimate cinema is the art of the disintegration of the ego. It's not a question of exploring the boundary between the self and the world, but of shattering identity as such. Revealing the boundary between the "I" and who I really am.