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PAGE VIEWS

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Imagining Hollywood from the Outside In: A Conversation with Celestino Deleyto

Imagining Hollywood from the Outside In: A Conversation with Celestino Deleyto on *From Tinseltown to Bordertown: Los Angeles on Film*

Regina Longo

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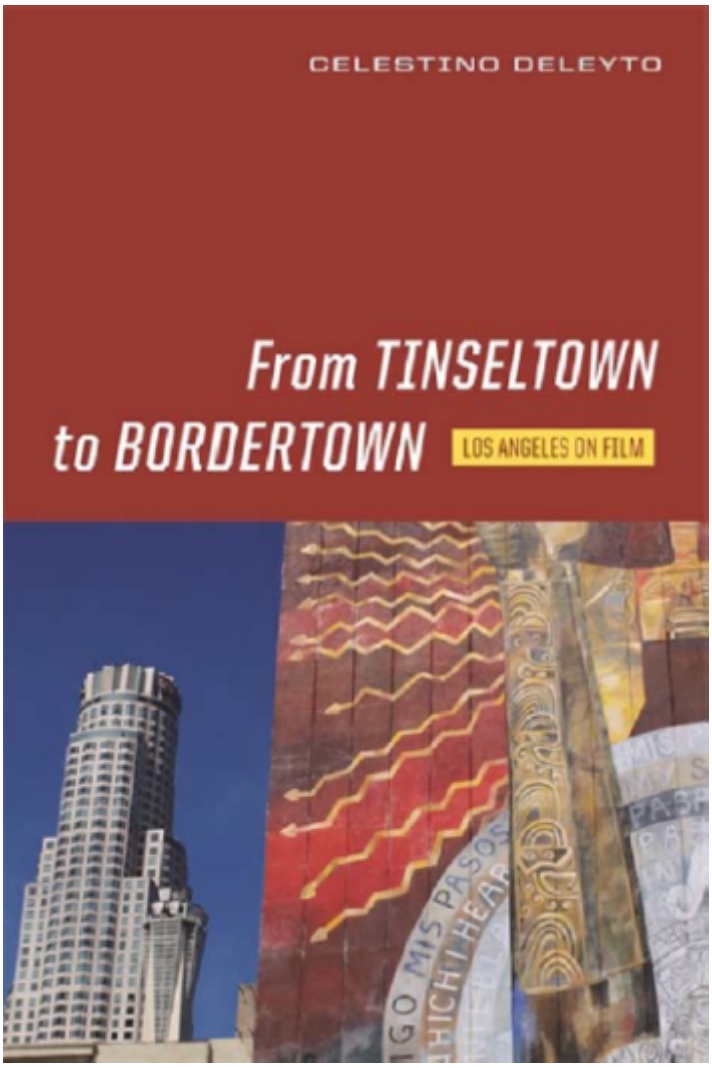
It is not uncommon for me to pick up a book—any kind of book—and as I begin to read it, to make mental notes of elements of the story or facts that intersect with my own experiences. I am certain that I am not alone in this practice of suturing myself into these written realms. Film scholars have been developing multiple theories regarding notions of subject formation ever since Jacques Lacan first developed the concept in the 1950s–60s. From Daniel Dayan and Pierre Oudart to Jacques Alain-Miller to Christian Metz to Stephen Heath to Laura Mulvey to Kaja Silverman, despite this post-post–ad infinitum structural moment, debates on the logic of the signifier persist in film and media studies. Celestino Deleyto's monograph *From Tinseltown to Bordertown: Los Angeles on Film* refreshingly performs a double articulation that brings these seemingly outdated notions of semiotic theory to bear on late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Los Angeles from multiple subject positions.

For Deleyto, Los Angeles is indeed a city steeped in cinema, but it is also a cinematic city that is more than just a company town or a Tinseltown. Using dominant Hollywood films produced from 1992 through 2009, he shows how the mainstream films set in L.A. reflect the changing faces of the city. He foregrounds the settings, locations, and backdrops of the films rather than their characters and narrative arcs to show how Hollywood has reshaped its representation of Los Angeles in the wake of political and cultural upheavals. This allows the reader to reflect on how the larger imaginaries of the city have also been transformed. Deleyto demonstrates that the urban and social spaces of Los Angeles are unquestionably part of its urban and social discourses, equally "enmeshed in the struggles for the control of discourse" (8).

The enmeshing of my own subject position in the argument of From Tinseltown to Bordertown feels immediate and concrete for two reasons: because I'd seen nearly every film that Deleyto discusses during their first runs in movie theaters and because I'd first experienced the urban space of Los Angeles as both tourist and student of film studies in the early 1990s. California was where I had dreamed of living since the age of eight, and at nineteen I finally made it there. My vision of Los Angeles and desire for the California dream had undoubtedly been shaped by the images that I had seen on the big and small screens, but despite reading Mike Davis's then-new *City of Quartz* (1990), my fantasy lasted until I hit I-5 on my way to visit college friends in Los Angeles: nothing looked or felt anything like it did in the movies.

In fact, it felt much like the city Deleyto (a native of Spain) describes first encountering in 2008 as a tourist. Cruising down Sepulveda and Pico Boulevards to catch a quick bite to eat with his wife, Deleyto marveled at the "exorbitant city"—a phrase he credits to Ackbar Abbas. And he was surprised that "there was little we could see that we could relate to the cinematic city we were familiar with . . . Maybe Venice, Santa Monica, and Malibu were slightly more

recognizable, but even in these traditional beach communities, people's skin seemed a notch or two browner than in the movies, and not just because of the sun" (2).



These discrepancies between city and screen are what Deleyto foregrounds so well in *Tinseltown–Bordertown*. To do so, he moves the backgrounds—the Los Angeles locations where the stories are set—to the forefront of his analysis. Instead of looking at how mainstream Hollywood narrative cinema thrusts characters into the spotlight and encourages viewers to trace emotional threads and character development to their often clichéd ends, Deleyto shows how protagonists and narratives are both functions of cinematic space.

Post–1992 Los Angeles (post–Rodney King Los Angeles) is, as seen through the movies of this era, both a real place and a cinematic space. While Hollywood films set in Los Angeles hardly ever accurately document or represent Los Angeles's demographic, cultural, and historical realities, Deleyto acknowledges that global audiences have nonetheless come to know the city through these films. Drawing out the multitude of urban discourses that undergird a fantasy of homogeneity, Deleyto maps a Los Angeles that reflects the layered, multi-ethnic, cinematic, industrial city that he and I (in the 1990s and 2008) and so many others before and since have encountered.

Yes, the movies indeed give us these glimpses and more if we know how and where to look for them, and Deleyto certainly does. *Tinseltown–Bordertown* is an erudite travel guide as conceived by a cinephile outsider. A non-Angeleno and non-American fluent in the two primary languages of the city, English and Spanish, Deleyto understands the city's more distant and recent colonial histories well beyond its Spain-Mexico-California-U.S. mappings. He is an outsider who loves and appreciates, watches and absorbs, inhabits and critiques, and even desires a Los Angeles that he also terms "the superlative city" and "the brown city."

Tinseltown–Bordertown is divided into three parts— "Historical Continuities," "The Legacy of the Riots," and "The Brown City"— with a structure that is intentionally political yet also theoretical. Deleyto knows his film and cultural theory backward and forward. Even those film theorists (David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, and Deborah Thomas) with whom he takes issue, for placing too much emphasis on narrative continuity in cinema and not enough on the confluence of narrative and cinematic space, serve to bolster the foundational work of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Stephen Heath upon which Deleyto constructs his alternate readings of Los Angeles playing itself. Deleyto complements the work of cultural theorist Michel deCerteau with the analyses of globalization theorists Saskia Sassen, Doreen Massey, and Edward Soja along with the formal film analyses of Heath and Nowell-Smith. As a result, a cogent social, political, and ideological critique of geographic and cinematic space consistently informs this book. Well before Deleyto gets to his close analyses of particular post-1992 films, he contextualizes their genealogy. In the section on historical continuities, Deleyto addresses mainstream Hollywood films produced from the 1960s–1980s that were beginning to allow audiences a glimpse of a more diverse cosmopolis. He wants his readers to be open to multiple fields of vision.

Wherever Deleyto wanders in *Tinseltown–Bordertown*, he never strays from the path he lays out in his first chapter: reminding the reader that film analysis requires a nuanced understanding of onscreen as well as offscreen space.

Ironically, Deleyto reframes Los Angeles's cinematic and social space with a discussion of the small screen broadcast of a video recording of four Los Angeles police officers brutally beating taxi driver Rodney King after a high-speed car chase in March of 1991. The assault was witnessed by George Holliday, who had watched and recorded the beating from his home balcony and delivered the videotape to local TV news station KTLA. Fourteen months later in April 1992 a predominately white jury acquitted the officers, and the city of Los Angeles went up in flames. The entire nation watched as the neighborhoods of South Central, Koreatown, and Pico-Union were burned and looted. Something in Los Angeles had decidedly changed that April.

Relying on the analysis of Mike Davis in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), Deleyto reasserts:

> Although the focus was initially on Anglos as victims of African American rage, evidence of the involvement of Latinos and Asian Americans in the ensuing confrontations made this a riot in Technicolor…at the same time, awareness of the multiracial nature of the outburst of violence also led, first, to the social and

> cultural necessity of acknowledging the presence of what had remained hidden and, later, haltingly, to the incorporation of demographic realities into dominant discourses. (30)

And so it was that Hollywood found itself in a new moment in the months following the Rodney King uprisings. Los Angeles's diversity and its tensions had now been seen in living rooms across the nation and the world, and L.A. was being closely watched as an urban space with the potential to become a successful "heteropolis," a new term for "the new form of urban agglomeration that thrives on difference" (31). As the real people of Los Angeles got down to the business of trying to rebuild and restructure the city, mainstream Hollywood went to work smoothing out some of the rough edges of this social and physical rebuilding and tried to produce narratives with a little more nuance than those made in the months leading up to the King beating. *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990) and *L.A. Story* (Mick Jackson, 1991) suddenly seemed terribly naïve fairy-tale renderings of the city. And yet, Deleyto reminds the reader that Boyz in the Hood (John Singleton, 1991) and *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991) came out in the same moment. Deleyto suggests that viewing these films together is one way to get a more accurate picture of what was actually occurring in Los Angeles. They reveal "an industry that appears to be both attuned to and implicated in the immediate social background of events that would change the history of the city" (36).

Deleyto's key intervention is his ability to combine close textual and spatial analysis of popular Hollywood fare, such as *White Men Can't Jump* (Ron Shelton, 1992), *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), *Mi Familia* (Gregory Nava, 1995), *American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992), El Mariachi (Robert Rodriguez, 1992), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995), *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009), and *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009), to demonstrate that there is indeed something worth seeing beneath their stylized veneers. Something that the Hollywood insiders may not have even recognized themselves while making these films. In some ways, I think that this book could only be written by an outsider, and I want to shout out to everyone seeking a better understanding of Los Angeles on film: Read this book!

Regina Longo: Your book begins as a meditation on your personal perceptions of Los Angeles as an outsider who loves cinema and the city, yet you quickly manage to shift gears to more critical discussions of the metonym that is Hollywood. How did you get from point A to point B?

Celestino Deleyto: Thanks for your kind words. What you say describes my intention quite nicely. I think it's always important to be aware of one's perspective—where one is writing

from. From Tinseltown to Bordertown is indeed intended to offer the perspective of an outsider both to L.A. and to the U.S., but also of somebody who admires the country (well, I may have mixed feelings at the moment!) and has devoted many years to the study of its culture and, of course, its cinema. And somebody who, from his first visit, became fascinated with Los Angeles, so much so that he kept going back in the following years. This book is, in part, the result of that fascination and desire to understand what at first sight seemed indecipherable. More specifically, there is a "political" intention in the book's structure, and that is not to highlight and celebrate the Mexicanness or "Latinidad" of the city and its imprint in the cinema (I think that is best done by Latino writers), but, rather, to contribute to its normalization by integrating it as an important part of a narrative of the city that includes many other layers and many other discourses. For me the best way to argue for the visibility of what so far has been largely invisible is to make it normative rather than exceptional.

Longo: In chapter 2, you introduce the idea of the multi-protagonist film and query how such work complicates the depiction of L.A. in mainstream films of the early 1990s. How did this concept of the metanarrative come together with these selected texts?

Deleyto: The multi-protagonist genre, as theorized by my colleague María del Mar Azcona, is an important presence throughout the book, because of its potential to represent not just our contemporary experience in a global world beyond our comprehension but, more specifically, because it seems to be well equipped to convey the complexity and inscrutability of Los Angeles.

To me *Grand Canyon*, a particularly symptomatic narrative of the times and its multi-protagonist structure, seems, in this case, to be a conscious attempt on the part of Hollywood to cope with the racial tensions of the time and offer a "balanced" picture of a multiracial society. Whether the attempt is fully successful or not may be less relevant than the way in which it symptomatizes those tensions. My intention at this point was not to dig deep into these films but to offer a panorama of how L.A. was being visualized at the time, as a framework/preamble to my analyses of *Falling Down* and *White Men Can't Jump*, one that went a little beyond the list of titles and that highlighted their proximity to one another. The metanarrative was not explicitly intended, although I do like the idea of a group of films working together towards conveying the intricacies of a particularly place and time. From a methodological perspective, this may be a consequence of "letting the movies speak." When the film scholar does this (in my case, through close readings), links and intersections start to proliferate, even if in an apparently unstructured way. I'm sure this is how it works in many spectators' minds, too. As a whole, the book does attempt to offer an idea of the complexity of the cinematic representations of a particular place, in this case L.A., and also of the

emplacement of cinema, but not of a neat historical evolution, which is, in my view, not borne out by the texts themselves.

Longo: When did you start making the connections between these films?

Deleyto: As I say, I think the connections make themselves without much intervention on the part of the author. I just selected those films from around the 1992 Los Angeles riots that, in my view, had something significant to say about the city. Often, thinking of a group of films together that hadn't been put together before is enough for connections and a metanarrative to materialize. Films and film narratives, when put together, develop complex interlinked meanings because they are part of a shared social and cultural history.

Longo: If we take the Oxford dictionary definition of the term metanarrative as "an overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern for people's beliefs and gives meaning to their experiences," do you think that Hollywood was attempting to influence to a greater degree how people should live their lives in this metropolis, or elsewhere?

Deleyto: My feeling is that, at least in this case, Hollywood was not explicitly seeking to influence how to be an Angeleno at the time. Rather, it was struggling to offer a renewed image of itself that was more appropriate for the times, while inevitably and contradictorily resisting change. In more abstract terms, however, what we see in the cinema influences our grasp of a place, and therefore films, like other cultural texts, do have a strong impact on what I would call the spatialization of experience and of discourse: not only in the ways in which L.A. citizens may construct their own identities but also in the ways outsiders perceive them. I'm more skeptical about textual intention, without ignoring it altogether, as in my analysis of *Luminarias* [José Luis Valenzuela, 2000] and my conversations with the director.

Longo: You spend a lot of time talking about the film *Falling Down*, and rightly so for your argument. You use Richard Dyer and Susan Faludi really effectively for your argument, but in the case of this film, I cannot help but extrapolate to the U.S.'s current Trumpian nightmare of white male anxiety taken to an extreme that even Falling Down could not imagine. Do you see it as part of a continuum still in evidence today?

Deleyto: *Falling Down* is extraordinary in the way it records certain anxieties about white masculinity. I see it very much as a film of its own time, but I had never imagined that our own times would be what they are. Maybe the film will gain a new lease on life after 2017. This is another example of history not progressing in a linear way. I am very aware of the specific

ways in which D-Fens [the name of Michael Douglas's character in the film] presents a particular moment of U.S. (and I would say, to a great extent, Western) masculinity, but I was more interested in how the film constructed a certain discourse about the city at a particular intense point in its recent history. I read the film . . . as an L.A. movie, while the "Trumpian nightmare" is in no way an Angeleno phenomenon—fortunately, I think, [because] if it had been, my book would have become obsolete even before being published.

Longo: Your covering so much ground made me wonder why O.J. Simpson's 1994 Bronco ride and the subsequent trial get very little mention in your book?

Deleyto: The reason why I don't use the O.J. Simpson case is because it didn't trigger the generalized civil disturbances that the Rodney King case did. In the latter case, I'm more interested in the riots than in the individual actors that triggered the events. This does not mean that O.J. Simpson's ride didn't have cultural resonances that, in many important ways, overlapped with those of the earlier case.

Longo: After *Falling Down*, you shift gears to discuss *White Men Can't Jump*, which coincidentally is going to be remade by *Blackish* [ABC, 2014–] creator Kenya Barris.

Deleyto: I wasn't aware of a remake of *White Men Can't Jump* being made. Thanks for pointing it out. I very much look forward to seeing what the filmmakers make of the story 25 years later. I do believe that the 1992 version was unusual in its simultaneous comic critique of masculinity and of the simplification of racial issues. In this respect, Gloria, and to a lesser extent, Rhonda are very powerful characters, even if the male protagonists and actors did attract most of the attention at the time. I'd like to believe that a character like Gloria would not be so exceptional in 2017 as she is in the film, both in gender and ethnic terms, but I'm not so sure. We must wait and see what the new film makes of the character. I expect that, in purely Angeleno terms, the types that both female characters represent will need to be updated. The main challenge of the new film will be to retain the freshness and the resonance of its four central characters without reproducing cultural discourses that would probably seem outdated nowadays.

Longo: You lay out a detailed genealogy of L.A. film noir that also allows you to discuss the work of Robert Altman (among others) and not restrict yourself to the realm of neo-noir terrain, including films that critique the earlier noir films and engage in dialogue with them, such as *L.A. Confidential* in chapter 6. But you go into depth on the film adaptation of Walter Mosley's book *Devil in a Blue Dress*, a neo-noir with an African American director and a Japanese American cinematographer. It is significant that you do this.

Deleyto: Film noir is indeed a central thread in my book because of the ways it changed perceptions of the Land of Sunshine . . . and because it almost single-handedly inaugurated the cultural concept of Angeleno alienation that later acquired a cultural life of its own beyond noir, both in and outside the cinema. The chapter on *Devil in a Blue Dress* attempts to focus on the history of African American Angelenos and their place in the cultural imaginary of the city. First B. Ruby Rich and then others have brilliantly elicited the film's cultural work of reminding us of the black in noir and I, therefore, don't need to insist on this very important dimension of the film. My job here is to unravel the consequences of making the noir protagonist a historically believable African American in 1950s Los Angeles. But the film becomes also very centrally a narrative of passing, through the story of Daphne (Jennifer Beals), and about the type of blind spots that this story of passing shares with the city's discourses about itself, specifically its immense difficulties in coming to terms with its own hybridity. In other words, the chapter was intended to place the African American presence at the center of the conversation about the recent history of L.A., but, because of its [*Devil's*] plot and its casting peculiarities, it ends up also being about the city's seemingly irresolvable problems with its own urban identity (and inevitably, in being about the past, the film is very much a text of its own time).

Longo: Your genealogy of "city symphony" films about L.A. goes all the way back to Harold Lloyd and *Safety Last!* [Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1923] and up through *(500) Days of Summer*. To bring things to this current moment, where might you put *La La Land* [Damien Chazelle, 2016] in this genealogy? Is it retrograde in the way that *L.A. Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia* [Brian De Palma, 2006] are, or is it something else entirely?

Deleyto: I can't see my book not engaging with this film if it had been released two or three years earlier—it seems such an important L.A. movie for all sorts of obvious reasons. I suspect that it would have become part of chapter 5, "Tinseltown," rather than chapter 4, where the movies you mention are discussed. *La La Land* is very much a film about Hollywood and its legendary fascination with itself, with its own history and myths. It would have worked as an excellent counterpoint to *Mulholland Drive* and, when compared to the Lynch film, as one more illustration that progress in cinema history is never linear. The film is a fantasy of a dazzlingly white Los Angeles and of Hollywood's history of erasure of difference. The brazen whitening of African American culture is very obvious, as is, for me, the almost comical erasure of Mexican L.A. I would be reluctant to argue that the movie is fully representative of Hollywood's contemporary view of the city, which in my opinion is more complex and contradictory, but it does represent a very resilient strand of Anglo homogeneity which will no doubt receive a boost from the movie in these troubled times. There is the very forceful and joyful opening number, which does allow for the type of diversity one would find while in gridlock on the freeways, but, after that, the whiteness of the fantasy is, well, as I say,

blinding. Only Hollywood in its self-involvement could have come up with this narrative in 2016.

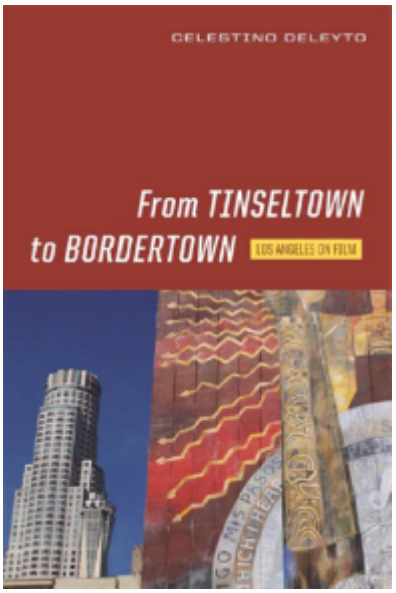
Longo: On page 213 you state that you started this book with a striking invisibility of Latinos and Latinas, particularly Mexicans, in the history of cinematic representations of Los Angeles. You rightly state that the importance of this "minority-majority" in L.A. and other U.S. cities remains understudied as a whole, and not simply underrepresented in cinema. And yet, you point out that David Lynch is one of very few contemporary white American auteur filmmaker who features Latino or Mexican characters as more than extras. While these characters are still marginal in many ways, they are at least present and onscreen. How were you able to bring *Luminarias* and *Mulholland Drive* into dialogue?

Deleyto: The metanarrative allows such strange bedfellows as *Luminarias* and *Mulholland Drive* to come together! As you know, my argument in the chapter on Mulholland Drive is that Lynch is almost interpellating the spectators directly and commenting on our own blindness to ethnic difference even when it hits us in the face. For such an inward-oriented and cryptic story, the film's accuracy in the representation of the city and of the underside of the Hollywood Dream is astonishing. In a sense, it is not really representative of the genre of films about Hollywood, which, as in the case of *La La Land,* are generally much more self-absorbed. One could argue that what *Luminarias* does in a more explicit way in terms of bringing visibility to Mexican American women, *Mulholland Drive* also does, just as openly, while at the same time commenting on our culturally induced inability to see what is in front of our eyes. I am very happy that the book has allowed me to bring these and other apparently very different films together and put them in conversation among themselves, thus conveying the multiplicity of perspectives from which the city has been imagined in post–Rodney King times.

Longo: I could ask a million more questions, as your book is so rich, but I hope *FQ*'s readers will pick it up and read it cover to cover as I did. What can your readers look forward to next?

Deleyto: I'm currently working with my research group at the universities of Zaragoza and Barcelona on developing a cosmopolitan methodology for the study of contemporary cinema. Theories of cosmopolitanism developed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Gerard Delanty, Chris Rumford, and others allow us to frame our analysis within the social and cultural realities of globalization. The link with my book on Los Angeles is the continued interest in the exploration of cinematic and cultural space and the relationships between films and real places. I have described my initial approach in the article "Looking

from the Border: A Cosmopolitan Approach to Contemporary Cinema," which will be out in print later this year in the journal Transnational Cinemas, but is already accessible online.



Celestino Deleyto, From Tinseltown to Bordertown: Los Angeles on Film. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017. $36.99 paper. 312 pages.
Read an Excerpt from chapter 2

Header Image: *White Men Can't Jump* (Ron Shelton, 1992)

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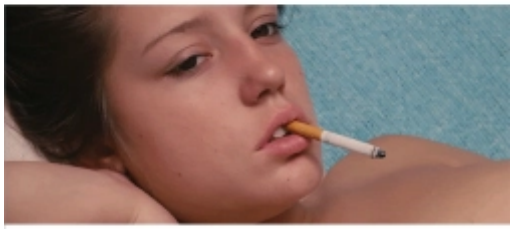

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