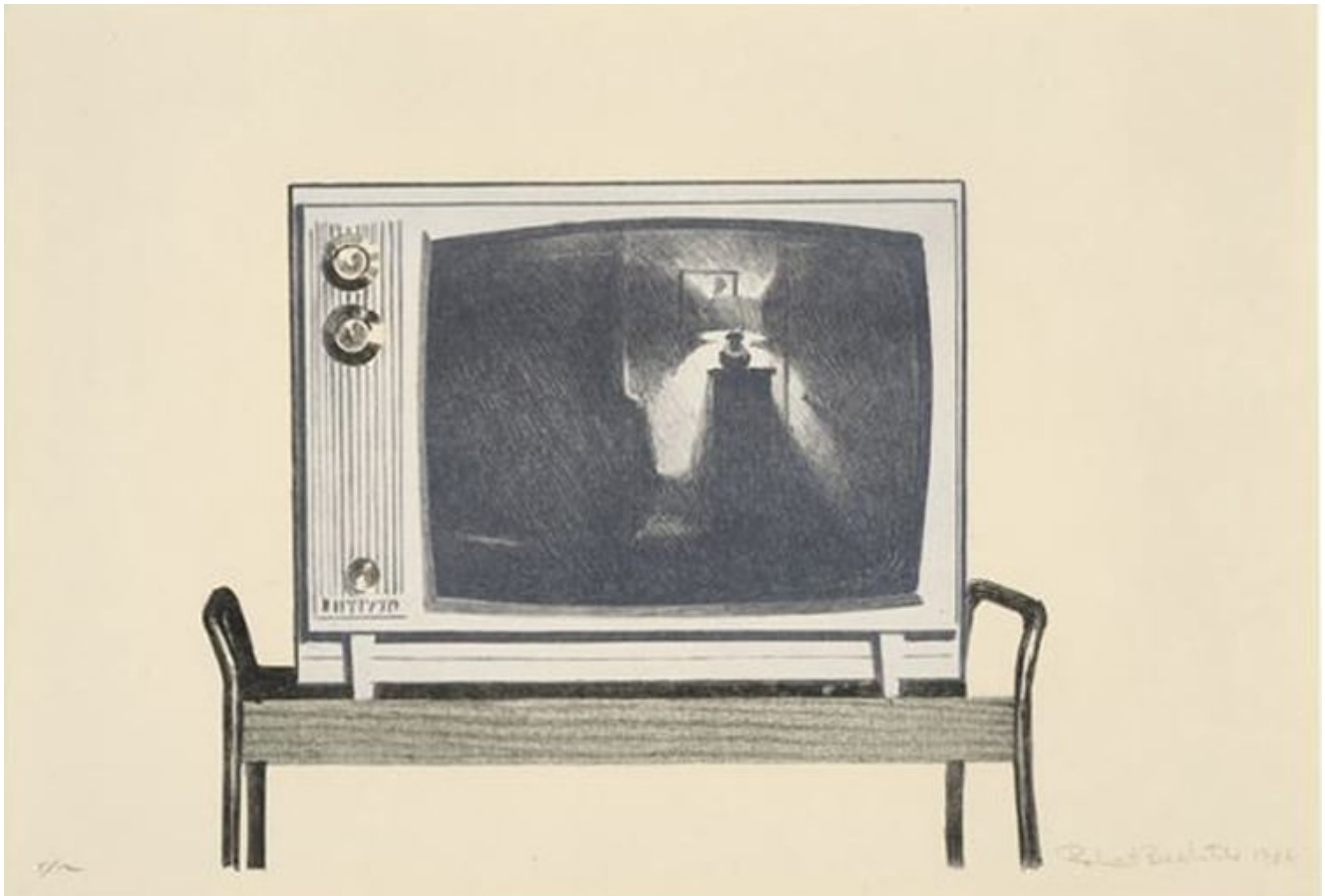


Nihilism's Contradiction

Passionate

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (April 2025)



Zenith (Robert Bechtle, 1966)

We are enriched by scarcity. Watching a movie was not a common occurrence growing up with a gaggle of siblings gathered in front the singular family TV, replete with one, later two channels. Limited access made for memorable moments. But it was more than that. Narrative arc, character development, intricate plot, comedic relief, pending crisis, romantic interlude, inevitable loss and sweet redemption used to culminate in answering why questions in life. Films tended to

have meaning, reminding us that our small lives do too. *It's a Wonderful Life* is an exemplar of our un-modern cinematic past.

We moderns have leveled meaning in the name of relativism. The moral code for which there was general consensus—as represented by the trifecta of allegiance to God, country and family—has been displaced by the trifecta of me, myself and I. Sure, it is more complicated than that. And yet in many contemporary films nihilism rules, and to infuse meaning into the story is presumptuous. The hero was displaced by the anti-hero; the anti-hero was displaced by the anti-social. There are no longer black and white hats; unambiguous good and evil must now be viewed through the lens of structural inequity, oppression and privilege.

The films of my youth are etched upon my brain these decades later for instant recall; last night's Netflix whatever flows through my numb mind and is immediately forgotten. Even though the multiplicity of television series are better than most films, they seduce us into entertainment passivity as we meander through 23 episodes from season 15. Without knowing a show's duration when it is piloted, narrative arc often has to run amuck to fill the requisite number of episodes for each season's renewal before eventual cancellation.

Still, when I watch that condensed version of the pre-television series known as film, I can't help searching for substance, often in vain. Why did they make this film, what does this film say about life? I don't watch many new films, until my wife says its time. So, with apologies for this very limited sample size, we watched two films this week which puzzled me for their deliberate quest to titillate much and answer nothing.

Well, not quite nothing because *Anora* and *Babygirl* both characterize the realization of wants and desires as virtue. In a world where there are no objective moral truths—the foundation of nihilism—wants and desires is all we have.

Makes perfect sense and is depressing as hell. The word depressing is my editorial two cents and not the message of either film.

Anora won this year's Academy Award for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actress, which is truly puzzling and can only be explained within the context of progressive cinematic entropy. In truth, lead actress Mikey Madison is talented (and I'm not just saying that because she is naked for half of the film). Interestingly, the film trailer describes *Anora* as a stripper who gets a chance for a Cinderella story. But such a descriptive is disingenuous. Her stripper gig includes a happy ending component—where the real money is—where she thrives. I know it is a terrible life and we are suppose to root for her to escape from it, if only she showed some inclination to do so before meeting her Prince meal ticket Charming.

The Prince turns out to be a frog, and that fact is never hidden, is on full and irritating display for the duration of the film. Mark Eydelshateyn plays the rich spoiled Russian kid to the hilt. My greatest urge throughout the film (which is remarkable in consideration of the prevalence of nudity) was to kick this entitled, arrogant and narcissistic brat in the teeth. On a spontaneous and drunken Las Vegas trip, *Anora* and the frog Prince decide to get married as an F*%k you to his rich parents. There is no pretence of love or friendship—just opulence, sex, repeat. Their relationship, for all its histrionics and excess, is not even interesting.

Predictably, the rich kid capitulates to the rich parents once they appear and immediately demand the sham marriage be annulled. Incredulously, *Anora* is surprised by her teenage husband's lack of resolve to combat his parents. This film is not *Anna Karenina* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. There is no great love found or lost. There is only chaos, unending self-indulgence and colossal irritation. I know this can sound like age not understanding the excitement of youth in an edgy film. Whatever this film's ambition, the *it* of its ambitions ain't

there.

The final scene is intended to be poignant. Rejected by her Russian (could be Armenian, is not clear) prince and his parents, Anora is sent packing. A Russian thug, employed by the Russian family is tasked with returning Anora to her old apartment and former life. He is the only one within the Russian circle who treats Anora decently, and she in turn treats him like a Russian thug. When he pulls up to her house, our thug reveals that he has the expensive diamond wedding ring that was ripped from her finger with the cessation of the marriage. This causes Anora to burst into tears, the ring supposedly reminding her of the loss of love. But no, after brief tears she has dollar signs in her eyes, and rewards the thug's ring heist with immediate intercourse on his lap in the car. Love is transactional, and we are happiest when the transactional compensation is highest, I guess.

My second selection is worse. *Babygirl* intends to dazzle with a rich and powerful woman—founder and CEO of a cutting edge company—who has a lurid sexual affair with an intern. Nicole Kidman, age 57, is seduced by a cocky (pun intended) guy 30 years younger. And of course in the contemporary game of achieving wants and desires, why shouldn't an older powerful woman get exactly what rich older powerful men have always lusted for?

You can hear members of the metaphoric audience saying, yeah, you go girl, whereas my lowly simple thought is maybe powerful women don't do what their male counterparts do because they aren't as stupid as men. But that would be reinforcing a gender stereotype so I'll un-claim the claim just made. Anyway, boy-toy intuits what women want, what Nicole's character in particular wants, that she didn't know she wants, just in case intrigue intensity is lacking. At one sordid point—in an expensive hotel they steal away to—she is given the *nom de plume* 'babygirl' by the baby boy. And—I preface with a spoiler alert—babygirl crawls to the bed and laps up a

saucer of milk waiting for her on the floor. Boy toy sits on the bed, knowing all his instincts, techniques and experience with women have led to this revelatory moment. Who needs sex when you've got such advanced kink? This scene makes a strong case for the most ridiculous moment in film history. Another lowly thought/weird question—do people who take this stuff seriously, who need advanced kink to muster interest—of which I am embarrassingly ill formed—ever have any real sex?

Parenthetically, I recently came across an article that claimed married religious couples have the most frequent and satisfying sex of all demographics. An ironic inconvenient kink to the world of kinky wants and desires. Especially ironic because babygirl is long married to a caring and good looking man, Antonio Banderas, with whom she has two children. We, the peeping-Tom audience, just happen to witness their satisfying sexual relationship. There is no attempt to answer why she commits adultery with a young guy with whom she has no chemistry. Perhaps again we are to channel equity sensitivity by inwardly acknowledging men have always done as much. Though true, in terms of character development—involving understanding of personal history, attachments and motivations—we are left to ponder the imponderable. Laps of milk from a dish on the hotel floor doesn't quite get there.

The imponderable is reinforced by babygirl's faux-attempt to dissuade boy-toy from pursuing her, as if he controls all (where is the powerful woman in that dynamic?). She declares, "nothing is more important to me than family," as she sacrifices family for a saucer of milk, making her epiphany claim a wee bit hollow. Then bizarrely, perhaps to address the powerful woman in control scenario, babygirl confesses the affair to her husband who is justifiably outraged, until he graciously accepts the situation because his wife is a powerful woman—once again, I guess.

I was going to add a sentence about the end of *Babygirl*. But not being Tony Curtis in "The Vikings," or Vivian Leigh in

"Gone with the Wind," or the Marx Brothers in "Duck Soup" or Jimmy Stewart in "Shenandoah," or Ingrid Bergman in "The Bells of St. Mary's," I can't remember anything worth mentioning. While it is true that meaningless films have always been made, answering big questions is becoming alien to contemporary film. And as we consume ten, twenty fold what we used to, how does this nihilistic mush shape our quest for an examined life? The great irony of wants and desires is that their realization diminishes drive and desire.

There is emerging evidence that young men are having trouble relating to young women. That is, young men, exposed and possibly addicted to porn at obscenely early ages, have difficulty becoming aroused by the prospect of an attractive and willing young woman in the flesh. Also, research is indicating that young people are having less sex today than their square old parents, and possibly even antiquated grandparents. Yikes.

I remember with the clarity of a 1950's adventure film, a moment in early spring when I was ten or twelve years old. Offered up and in full view in a melting snow-bank was the unobscured centrefold of a Playboy magazine. It was the first time I had ever seen full frontal nudity. That pathetic brief example of scarcity transcended, ended up gifting me a life-long, call it appreciation, for the reality of women and the passionate bounty that is possible in a committed, intimate relationship.

Hollywood will not be offering to make a film about my life. Scarcity is not interesting, is un-Hollywoodish, is the antithesis of wants and desires, even if it is the actual source of attraction and sexual passion. That ironic truism alone is worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster.

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife. His website is larrymccloskeywriter.com.

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