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Culture in Don't Worry Darling

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1. Introduction

“Horror begins by establishing normality, a house, a school, where daily life is uneventful. Very quickly that safe place becomes a place of terror, where the most homely space can no longer be trusted.” (Holland 2)

In *Don’t Worry Darling*¹, the home not only becomes a place of terror, but its origin for the main protagonist, Alice Warren (Florence Pugh). Alice’s home is situated in the utopian company town of Victory. Victory is a seemingly idyllic 1950s-inspired community which heavily draws on mid-century modern architecture and the aesthetics of Californian suburbs. Beautiful apron-wearing housewives, palm trees, white picket-fences and colourful convertibles complete this suburban 1950s aesthetic. However, as the story unfolds, this picture-perfect utopia turns into a dystopia for Alice. It is revealed that Victory is a virtual reality (VR) simulation created by Frank (Chris Pine) and upheld by men, like Jack, who seek to exert control over women. These men are cinematic stand-ins for incels. Incels are a growing group of men who share misogynistic beliefs and a deep dissatisfaction with their standing in contemporary society (Cottee 2022; O’Malley et al 2022; Fowler 2021). The men’s beliefs, their misuse of VR and its repercussions for women trapped in the simulation are shown in the film. In this way, *DWD* merges science fiction with social commentary, making it a fascinating work to explore critically. This especially rings true in the wake of growing right-wing and conservative sentiments in many countries across the world and on social media (Aleksic 2025; Carter 2025). In particular, the rise of incel and conservative content on social media, which positions the simulation’s outcome as desirable, is worrisome. A critical analysis of the film’s invocation of that idealised patriarchal past, and its negotiation of gender, race and power is, therefore, very relevant and current.

One goal of this thesis is to show that *Don’t Worry Darling* is a commentary on current anxieties and cultural shifts. Particularly, I want to argue that the film accurately reflects incel ideologies and their fantasies. At the same time, it also critiques incel ideology explicitly. The film’s critique is mainly expressed through highlighting the negative effects of these fantasies on the Victory women, and especially Alice. Alice’s growing discomfort and eventual rebellion from Victory are what drive the narrative. It is her story of escaping

¹ For readability, I will use the abbreviation *DWD* throughout the thesis to refer to *Don’t Worry Darling*.

Victory that the audience empathises with, not the men's disillusionment. Questions, such as "What are the similarities and differences in the Victory men and incels' ideology?" and "In how far does the recruitment process between incels and the Victory men align?", guide this part of the analysis.

Another central goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how *Don't Worry Darling* uses filmic language as a tool for cultural critique. The use, or more so, subversion of the male gaze is central to the analysis of Alice's story. I want to show that the male gaze's conventional use is subverted and then discarded in favour of the feminist gaze. The analysis shows that the feminist gaze is used to follow Alice's emancipation from her prescribed role closely. "What are the effects of the male gaze on Alice?" and "How is the feminist gaze used and conceptualised in DWD?" are questions that are integral to my analysis.

Additionally, the film's ambiguous treatment of Margaret (KiKi Layne), its only Black female character, is investigated. The goal of this section is to show that her early death in the overwhelmingly white dystopia is meant to serve as a commentary on the difficulties that women of colour face when striving for ideals rooted in whiteness. Nevertheless, the film's potential to reproduce exclusionary or hegemonic norms through its invocation of a 1950s utopia is also discussed critically. The film's portrayal of the idealised nuclear family and the Final Girl trope are also questioned.

Close viewings of key scenes, alongside narrative and mise-en-scène analysis, will be used to achieve my goals. This approach allows for a detailed examination of how the film creates and negotiates meanings. The theoretical foundation for my analysis draws from various approaches and frameworks. Seminal feminist works on gender performativity (Butler 2004, 1990/2007) and the male gaze (Mulvey 1975/1989) are used to critically analyse the representation and daily lives of the female residents of Victory. Additionally, the Final Girl trope (Clover 1992/2015; Paszkiewicz & Rusnak 2017) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) are used to examine Alice and Margaret's roles in the film. I also use the female/feminist gaze by Soloway (2016) in my analysis of Alice's character. Research on incel culture (Cottee 2021; Ging 2019; O'Malley et al. 2022) informs the analysis of the Victory men's belief systems and indoctrination processes. The very structure of Victory and the patriarchal ideals it indulges are also investigated accordingly.

The thesis consists of the following chapters: Chapter 2. Theoretical Approaches presents the theoretical frameworks in detail. Chapter 3. Synopsis of *Don't Worry Darling* thoroughly explains the plot of the film. The subsequent chapters focus on the film analysis. Chapters 4.1 The World of Victory and 4.2 The Victory Men deal with the patriarchal ideals that inspired the simulation, as well as the men's belief system and how they are indoctrinated into the group. Incels have a well-developed belief system with its own terminology and principles. These terms and beliefs are compared with the Victory men's. Chapter 4.3 Victory Women explores Alice's daily routines and their connection with her gender performance and norms. The women's roles in the simulation are also addressed and questioned. Additionally, Alice's role as the film's Final Girl is explored. The Final Girl is a common trope in the horror genre. Its negotiation in Alice's character is at the heart of this chapter. Additionally, Margaret's inability to take on the Final Girl role because of her race is investigated, too. Her social standing in Victory and treatment by her friends and husband are also viewed from a critical and intersectional lens. In chapter 4.4. From spectacle to subject, the male and feminist gaze are used to explore Alice's emotional journey in Victory. The visual language of the film is dissected to reveal how it first aids in Alice's subjugation and then her liberation. Finally, chapter 5. Conclusion presents a summary of my findings and discusses the thesis's success in achieving its goals.

2. Theoretical Approaches

Gender Performativity

In *Gender Trouble* (1990/2007) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler challenges the essentialist notion of gender as a natural, inherent "truth" or identity and instead conceptualises it as a performative act. They convincingly argue that gender identity is a performance that draws on regulatory frameworks, rather than a natural truth of gender. Their argument then centres on the idea that gender is not something one *is* but something one *does* (Butler, *Trouble* 34). In particular, the doing of gender is constituted through repeated acts which produce the illusion of a stable, inherent, or natural gender identity over time (Butler, *Trouble* 45). These performative acts are produced through the body (Butler, *Trouble* XV). That is also why the body is often considered to be an external

screen for the presumed internal 'truth' of gender. However, these repeated acts that constitute gender are drawn from a rigid framework of gender norms, not an internal truth (Butler, *Trouble* 45). The very repetition of the acts solidifies the myth that gender represents an internal fact about a person (Butler, *Trouble* 185-186). This myth is reinforced by the status quo, which polices and punishes those who deviate from it (Butler, *Trouble* 190). This regulatory aspect of gender performativity alludes to the idea that being a gender is an *effect* (Butler, *Trouble* 43). On the one hand, gender is an effect because society demands a coherent expression of gender (Butler, *Trouble* 45). On the other hand, gender is an effect because it is produced by repeated acts and gestures (Butler, *Trouble* 185). This interplay between the production of gender through repetition and the demand for coherence creates rigid gender norms that are difficult to escape. Especially because gendered behaviours are not simply individual choices but shaped by institutions, social expectations, and regulatory frameworks that dictate what is considered normal or deviant (Butler, *Undoing* 52). Any deviations from the acceptable gender expression are made out to be unnatural and disruptive (Butler, *Undoing* 41). In *DWD*, this idea is exemplified by the daily routines of the female characters. I will use Butler's theory to examine the effects of these daily routines on the maintenance of the Victory women's gender identity. It is hypothesised that the routines are integral to the women's adherence to the rigid patriarchal gender norms they are forced to live under.

In their work, Butler also highlights how gendered routines can be disrupted. Interestingly, they state that, while routine is a mechanism used for reinforcing norms, it also contains the potential for transformation (Butler, *Trouble* 192). The very fact that gender must be continuously performed means that there is always the possibility of variation, failure, or resistance (Butler, *Trouble* 192). These variations of gender performance point to its artificiality, which is important in subverting and overcoming the confines of gender norms. In *Don't Worry Darling*, Alice's growing awareness of the artificiality of her world can be seen as an example of the performative nature of gender being exposed. When Alice begins to question her reality, she is no longer able to conform to the prescribed gender performance easily. Her resistance challenges the performative script that has previously structured her life. In this way, the film aligns with Butler's assertion that gender norms can be undone when their artificiality is exposed and disrupted (Butler, *Undoing* 57). Nevertheless, Butler acknowledges the risks associated

with breaking the norms (Butler, *Trouble* 190). Individuals who challenge gender norms are often punished (Butler, *Trouble* 190). *Don't Worry Darling* also touches on these repercussions or punishments. In Victory, attempts to break free from gendered expectations are met with increasing control and social isolation.

Lastly, it is important to mention that Butler also explains that gender is not an exhaustive term to define a person by (*Trouble* 4). Gender performativity provides a powerful framework for understanding gender construction; however, it does not fully account for a person's lived experience. That is because gender does not solely shape a person's identity. Instead, identity is also shaped by race, class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation, among others (Butler, *Undoing* 4). Intersectional perspectives highlight how these aspects define identity and lived experience.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical theory first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Her theory describes how individuals experience discrimination and privilege based on multiple aspects of their identity, such as race, gender, age, class, religion, or (dis)ability (Crenshaw, *Intersection* 140). The term was introduced to highlight that traditional approaches to discrimination failed to capture the unique oppression faced by those who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. That is “[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, *Intersection* 140). She goes on to say that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which [B]lack women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, *Intersection* 140). This concept is important to the analysis at hand because Margaret, the only Black female character, is a failed Victory wife. She is not able to easily assimilate into the simulation, unlike most of her white peers. I want to argue that this symbolises the more complex form of marginalisation that women of colour face in society.

Crenshaw distinguishes three different categories of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational (Crenshaw, *Margins* 1245). Structural intersectionality refers to how social structures and institutions disadvantage individuals at the

crossroads of multiple identities. Political intersectionality describes how different social justice movements tend to exclude those with intersecting identities. For instance, feminist movements have historically prioritised white, middle-class women's concerns, while anti-racist movements have often centred Black men's experiences. Representational intersectionality examines how media and cultural narratives shape and reinforce stereotypes about people with intersecting identities (Crenshaw, *Margins* 1296). These aspects are particularly relevant when analysing *Don't Worry Darling* because of its lack of racially diverse representation. The film's choice to depict a world devoid of racial and ethnic plurality invites multiple interpretations. One interpretation could be that the explicit exclusion of people of colour (POC) highlights the underlying racial politics of Victory and its creator. Victory idealises the myth of the white, middle-class 1950s suburb. This nostalgic aesthetic reinforces a vision of gender and power that is inseparable from race. The film's homogeneous cast could then be deliberate commentary on the difficulties Black women face in achieving ideals that are rooted in whiteness. The absence of racial diversity in the film consequently serves as an implicit critique of the ideals that Victory embodies. However, a different interpretation might view the film as reinforcing rather than deconstructing the white-centred nostalgia it shows. From this lens, *Don't Worry Darling* visually and narratively evokes an era that thrived on racial exclusion without interrogating its implications explicitly. In line with that argument is the film's sidelining of non-white characters. Margaret is portrayed as unstable and quickly eliminated from the narrative. bell hooks critiques such patterns in media, arguing that movies, television and mass media have repeatedly reproduced and maintained white supremacy (*black looks* 115). Additionally, Margaret's struggle is dismissed and made into a cautionary tale, rather than a legitimate, complex character arc. Her death serves to push Alice toward her awakening, rather than allowing Margaret's own experiences to be explored deeply. This aligns with the fact that people of colour are often confined to buddy or side characters' roles in media (Coleman 313). Moreover, the film fails to engage with issues of ability or sexuality critically, flattening the movie's message to one that is exclusively about white women's oppression. This lack of diverse perspectives might ultimately be perceived as weakening the film's feminist messages. The varying perspectives on the film and its characters will be explored

throughout the analysis, illustrating the potential and pitfalls of *Don't Worry Darling* as cultural critique.

The Male Gaze

Another aspect of the film that invites contrasting interpretations is Wilde's use and subversion of the male gaze. The male gaze was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975. In her essay, she sought to demonstrate how patriarchal structures in society have influenced the structure of filmmaking, particularly in classical Hollywood movies (Mulvey 14). Over the past 40 years, the concept has been widely used, challenged, and extended by other scholars. Nevertheless, Mulvey's text remains a canonical work in feminist film analysis, and its concept of the male gaze is important for my analysis of Alice and the Victory women.

Mulvey's male gaze is based on a psychoanalytical framework that attests to a sexual imbalance, which places the male in an active and the female in a passive role (Mulvey 19). In Hollywood films, this was reflected in men being portrayed as active agents who become the onlookers of the passive female (Mulvey 19). This dichotomy is often shown through the male protagonist looking at women with desire. Any moments portraying the desirous male gaze do not add to the narrative of the movie (Mulvey 19). Instead, the male gaze slows down or even halts the progression of the narrative because it is used to create "moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 19). Mulvey argues that these moments of gazing at the female body fashion a spectacle out of the woman (Mulvey 21). As a spectacle, the woman is unable to match her onlooker's gaze and is left suspended in it, performing for the spectator (Mulvey 19). The pleasure felt by the male character is based on her suspension, her inability to look back. He enjoys the power of his voyeuristic gaze. Mulvey claims that this voyeuristic look also captivates the audience (Mulvey 19). This is because the audience experiences the movie through the eyes of the active male protagonist, as he is the driving force of the movie (Mulvey 20). The result of this structure is that the gaze of the spectator, ergo the male character, seamlessly overlaps with the gaze of the audience (Mulvey 19). Hence, the audience identifies with the male protagonist (Mulvey 19). The pleasure derived from the film is based on this very identification (Mulvey 18). Mulvey's male gaze, then, is twofold. On the one hand, it invites

the audience to identify with the male protagonist. On the other hand, it creates erotic objects of women by gazing at them with desire.

Interestingly, there are many ways in which the male gaze can be visualised in film. The desirous gaze can, for example, be visualised through a close-up of the woman's body (Mulvey 22). This close-up often begins by focusing on a specific part of a woman's body and then slowly pans up or down it. This camera movement symbolises the protagonist's gaze scanning the female body. The male gaze is also often portrayed through a shot showing the male character looking somewhere desirously. This shot is then followed by an eye-line match that shows the object of his desire, the woman's body. This iteration of the male gaze is exemplified in Figure 1, which

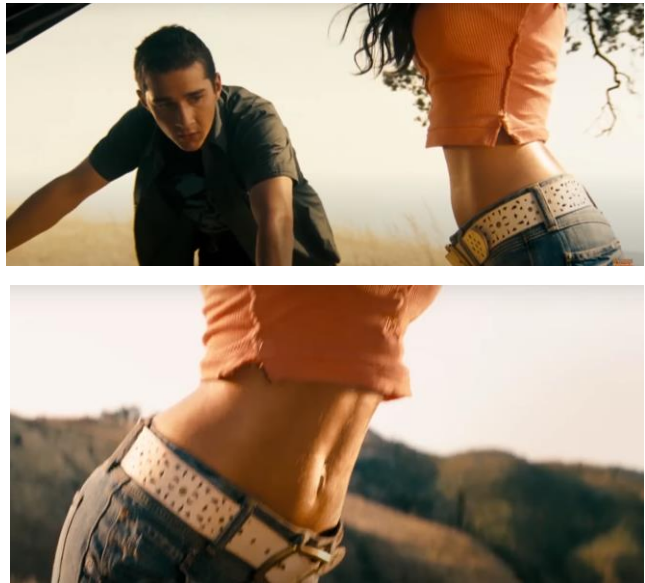


Figure 1: Eye-line match of Sam looking at Mikaela (00:25:25-00:25:30)

was taken from *Transformers* (2007). Sam Witwicky (Shia LaBeouf) is shown looking desirously at Mikaela Banes' (Megan Fox) exposed stomach. In the first frame, the audience sees his desire for her body, which is then followed by an eye-line match, showing Mikaela's body from Sam's perspective. In this scene, Mikaela is made a spectacle because there is no narrative purpose to the deliberate showcase of her body. Similarly, a point-of-view (POV) shot can be used to portray the male gaze. These examples make evident that movies can create a spectacle of women through different camera shots, angles and editing.

However, the male gaze is not solely confined to these aspects of filmmaking. Instead, it extends to the styling and appearance of female characters since it projects its fantasies onto their bodies (Mulvey 19). This leads to female characters being dressed and styled in ways that appeal to the male gaze. In Figure 1, Mikaela Banes is deliberately dressed in revealing and tight clothing to enhance her "erotic impact" (Mulvey 19) as the object of Sam Witwicky's desire. In the context of *Don't Worry Darling*, the styling of the female characters looks different because the film indulges in the 1950s aesthetic. Hence, the

main character, Alice Warren, and all other Victory wives are dressed more “conservatively” than Mikaela Banes. The Victory women’s dresses and skirts usually reach the knee, and cover their stomachs. Nevertheless, this style still caters to the male gaze, as I will show in chapter 4.3.

Lastly, I believe it is important to mention that Mulvey’s theory, although essential to feminist film analysis, offers room for criticism and elaboration. Some of the criticisms focus on Mulvey’s reliance on heteronormative structures, the gender binary and deterministic language (Kaplan 33). Furthermore, the lack of an explanation for female spectatorship, or the impact of a female protagonist, has been criticised by scholars too (Glenn 497). Mulvey addressed some of these issues in a follow-up essay. For this analysis, only one aspect of Mulvey’s follow-up text is relevant, namely the impact of a female protagonist on a movie. Mulvey claims that a movie with a female lead produces a different kind of narrative, namely a melodrama (Mulvey 35). In the melodrama, the focus lies on the female protagonist’s internal struggle towards accepting or denying femininity (Mulvey 36). In particular, the struggle highlights the female protagonist’s need to choose either the hegemonic passive/feminine role, which is expected of her, or to embrace the active/male role that she might face repercussions for (Mulvey 35-36). This dilemma fails to be liberating for the female protagonist as it either leads to her accepting passivity or being punished (Mulvey 36). Neither outcome of Mulvey’s theory is particularly liberating for the female protagonist or spectator. A more promising and optimistic theory for female viewers and protagonists has been proposed by various filmmakers and scholars in the form of the female or feminist gaze.

The Female or Feminist Gaze

Interestingly, the female gaze has not been defined by one canonical work, as is the case with the male gaze. It has hence been more challenging to define *the* female gaze because there are various approaches and concepts. I will only focus on the ones that are most important for this thesis, which are Soloway’s “female gaze” and Deffenbacher’s “mutual gaze”.

Deffenbacher defines the female gaze as a frame of reference that creates a subject outside of the restrictive male gaze (Deffenbacher 451). This means that the female gaze is not simply a reversal of the male gaze (Deffenbacher 451; Benson-Allot 66). A reversal

of the male gaze would entail the objectification and sexualisation of male characters in film and television instead of female characters. The woman is made the onlooker instead of the man. Many scholars, including Deffenbacher and Kaplan, are not pleased with this definition for two reasons. Firstly, this female gaze reiterates the object-subject dichotomy present in the male gaze, with the only difference being the gender of the object (Kaplan 33). Theorising the female gaze in such a way cannot be successful because the patriarchal structure at the base of the male gaze is still upheld (Kaplan 33). With the underlying object/subject dichotomy intact, it is questionable if this type of female gaze even wields any subversive power. This leads to the question of how the gaze and power are interconnected. The power men assert through their gaze comes from their agency, which is inherent to the role men are granted in movies and patriarchal society (Kaplan 34). A woman's gaze or look does not hold this same power because she lacks the agency to act upon her desires (Kaplan 34). Consequently, the female gaze lacks the power that is necessary to overcome the male gaze when it is defined as its reversal. For this reason, Deffenbacher proposes a female gaze that breaks entirely with the "hierarchical opposition between men and women" (Deffenbacher 460). This break is signified by the rise of a "mutual gaze" (Deffenbacher 460). The mutual gaze represents a way of looking in which pleasure and desire are shared between two equally empowered individuals (Deffenbacher 460). This gaze does not only hold space for two individuals, but it also includes a connection to the community (Deffenbacher 460). The gaze cannot be assigned to a single character or person anymore. It is de-centred and interconnected (Deffenbacher 462). It is powerful to imagine the female gaze in such a way since it does not demand or imply a kind of universal "female" experience that is at the centre of the narrative. Instead, it is about inviting and embracing plurality.

Deffenbacher's theory of the mutual gaze was inspired by queer filmmaker Joey Soloway's television show, *I Love Dick*. This is an interesting show to analyse because Soloway used their version of the female gaze in it. They gave insights into their rendition of the female gaze in a Keynote Speech in 2016. In this speech, they state that the female gaze is a tool in filmmaking that involves a "conscious effort to create empathy" (28:28-28:31). This is done in three parts: (1) the feeling-seeing, (2) the gazed gaze, and (3) returning the gaze (Soloway 17:36-23:40). The first part of the female gaze, the feeling-seeing, describes that the camera tries to get "inside the protagonist" (Soloway 17:44). It

does not just show the protagonist's feelings but demands the audience to feel what the protagonist is feeling (Soloway 17:51-18:04). In this first part, the feeling body and its emotions takes precedence over action (Soloway 19:30). The gazed gaze constitutes the second part of the female gaze and reflects what it feels like to be the object of the (male) gaze (Soloway 21:26). This part highlights the protagonists stepping into their power or becoming aware of their growing power (Soloway 22:00-22:15). Lastly, the third part is returning the gaze (Soloway 22:56). Characters who return the gaze are rebelling against being seen as the object (Soloway 23:32). This part is about becoming the subject and overcoming the objectification of being seen through the male gaze (Soloway 23:00-23:31). This rebellion does not reverse, or gender swap the male gaze (Soloway 23:43). Instead, it is seen as a framework to criticise the lack of subjectivity female characters have received in movies and television so far (Soloway 23:32-24:02). This can be done through a character's look dominating the scene, or narrative changes where the female character turns observation into confrontation. This last part of the female gaze is presumably the most important one, as Soloway reiterates the idea that the female gaze is a way to criticise and create empathy (Soloway 31:41-31:51). Overall, it is used to reframe common power dynamics, which is why, for Soloway, the female gaze is a "justice demanding way of artmaking" (24:03). Considering the female gaze as a tool of critique it is important to note that Soloway claims that the female gaze is not dependent on gender or sex (Soloway 44:24-45:26). Anyone can create a female gaze. Not all media produced by women will result in the female gaze, just as not all media produced by men will result in the use of the male gaze (Benson-Allot 66). The term "female" gaze is, therefore, problematic, as it invites the assumption that only women can create this kind of gaze. Soloway reveals that they are aware of this problem and propose that the term "female" can be swapped for many others, such as "other", "queer" or "feminist" (Soloway 44:30-45:30). Nevertheless, Soloway chooses to use the term female gaze because it is easily recognisable as the antithesis to the male gaze (Soloway 44:30-44:50). For this thesis, Soloway's concept of the female gaze is used, but under the term feminist gaze. I think using the term feminist gaze evokes more accurate ideas about its goals. It also invites conversations about filmmaking that go beyond the body because anyone can be a feminist. Changing the terminology might then not only invite more accurate representations of an alternative gaze, but also a variety of voices.

Genre Conventions and Tropes

The horror genre has long been intertwined with gender politics, shaping how women are represented and perceived. Historically, women as creators and viewers of horror have been marginalised and erased based on gender norms that assume horror to be a “male” domain. Horror was thought to misrepresent women on and off-screen (Peirse 3). Off-screen, female horror fans were excluded from popular discourses, and their existence was denied or erased (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 42). Horror’s focus on a male perspective and the use of the male gaze was deemed irreconcilable with female viewing pleasure (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 42). On screen, women were misrepresented because they were routinely chased, raped, tortured or murdered. Their suffering took centre stage, as it was often filmed in close-ups and in a more detailed manner than that of male victims (Clover 35). Women were portrayed as mere victims; their bodies fragmented through the male gaze without any personality or agency (Bec 25). Feminist scholars considered these portrayals of female characters to perpetuate stereotypes, reproduce patriarchal structures and indulge in violence against women (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 49). In short, feminist scholars criticised the genre’s indulgence in women’s pain, suffering and subjugation (Bec 25). These criticisms aided in cementing horror movies as a male and misogynistic genre. It was also thought to be “inherently formulaic and patriarchal” (Paszkievicz, *Gender & Genre* 109). All these reasons are why horror movies have long been thought to be a genre that is “made by men for men” (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 42). This perception of horror has, however, become outdated. Instead, over time, horror has been reframed as a promising site of resistance and contestation. In particular, two developments are relevant to this analysis – the exploration of women in horror as creators, and horror movies as a site of contestation for gender norms.

Women, as viewers and creators of horror, have not received much academic attention historically. This is due to the previously mentioned assumption that horror is a male genre, which in part led to the erasure of female horror fans. The female horror fandom, which has always existed, was long considered to be an oxymoron (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 42). Williams, for example, argued that horror is unattractive to women for two reasons (17). Firstly, horror movies show women their powerlessness in the face of killers

and monsters (Williams 17). Secondly, horror movies do not offer women pleasurable roles to identify with (Williams 17). The identification referred to here is a reference to Mulvey's male gaze, which positions the pleasure derived from films in the identifying process with a male character. Both of Williams' arguments are based on the active/male and passive/female dichotomy established by Mulvey's concept. The ubiquitousness of the male gaze in horror meant that scholars and popular discourses assumed the audience is mainly comprised of male viewers because they can derive pleasure from identifying with the male protagonist or monster. For female viewers, this exact identification, although possible according to Mulvey, was considered unenjoyable and even alienating (Williams 17). Consequently, women who enjoyed the genre were seen as misguided anomalies (Peirse 7). Interestingly, the same can be said for female directors of horror. Female horror directors are often framed in a negative or misogynistic light in popular discourses. For one, the women's unusually "morbid" taste always seems to be highlighted (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 43). The implicit message of this discourse is that the directors can direct brutal and violent films *despite* their gender. The gender of female directors is also often highlighted and discussed explicitly, as they are expected to bring a 'female perspective' into the horror movie (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 43). This female perspective supposedly leads women to create horror that transgresses or subverts the genre (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 49). However, Paszkievicz (*Woman Directs* 49-50) argues that female creators only draw on the generative potential of the genre. She does not view the genre as formulaic or rigid. Consequently, it is suggested that female horror directors use the genre's inherent versatility, its ability to repeat tropes and conventions with adjustments (Paszkievicz, *Woman Directs* 50). This ability of horror to generate new perspectives and tropes makes it a productive site of negotiation. This means that horror films, especially more recent ones, do not necessarily adhere to gender norms or common tropes, such as the damsel in distress. Women are depicted with agency and in central roles instead. One trope that exemplifies this active, central female character is the *Final Girl* (Clover 1992; 2015).

The Final Girl is a trope first coined by Carol J. Clover in 1992. Her concept is relevant to my thesis because I will analyse how Alice's character aligns with the Final Girl trope (Chapter 4.3.2). First, however, it is important to outline the characteristics and traits of the Final Girl. Clover determined that the Final Girl is the only survivor of the killer's

attacks in a slasher movie (Clover 35). The Final Girl is only able to survive because she either lives long enough to outrun or face and kill the perpetrator herself (Clover 35). Typically, the female character is portrayed as the main protagonist of the film (Clover 35). She distinguishes herself from her friends by being sexually inactive and interested in typically “boyish” things, such as mechanics or science (Clover 39). Even though the Final Girl survives the killer’s attacks, she does not leave the situation unharmed. Final Girls commonly endure a lot of physical and psychological trauma due to encounters with the killer and their friends’ dead bodies (Clover 35). They are also usually chased and/or wounded by the killer (Clover 35). This is why Clover calls the Final Girl a “victim-hero” (Clover X). With this term, she draws attention to the aspect of victimhood in the Final Girl trope. The Final Girl is shown as a victim or prey for the killer for most of the movie, despite having agency. Clover highlights this aspect of victimhood in the most recent edition of her book because of the appropriation of the Final Girl as a “female avenger” or “triumphant feminist hero” since its initial conception in 1992 (Clover X). This reimagining of the Final Girl, although not unfounded, erases the peril and suffering the character endures for most of the movie (Clover X). It seems that Clover wants to argue that the Final Girl is not necessarily a feminist hero just because she has agency. Similarly, she might argue that a Final Girl does not make a horror film a feminist horror film. Clover’s criticisms of the re-imagined Final Girl are understandable because her initial theory was a very narrow and detailed definition. Whilst such a straightforward definition is helpful because of its simplicity, its versatility and universality are questionable for the very same reason. Some scholars (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 2017; Maron 2015) have consequently revisited and criticised the Final Girl trope.

One aspect that has been criticised is Clover’s use of source material. The slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s do not pose a significant problem as such. It is Clover’s small number of source materials that has been deemed “too small to generalise across the subgenre” (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 3). Moreover, the source material has likely influenced the lack of racial diversity in the trope. In their article, Paszkievicz and Rusnak (5-6) established that whiteness is deeply embedded in the Final Girl trope. This is an apparent downfall of the original concept. Furthermore, another aspect that has been criticised is Clover’s reliance on the gender binary (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 1). In her descriptions of the Final Girl, Clover uses the words “boyish” (Clover 40) or “not fully feminine” (Clover

40). These descriptions emphasise that the Final Girl is masculinised. Highlighting the female characters' male characteristics implies that the Final Girl can only succeed because of her masculinisation (Maron 2). This implication draws on gender norms and, similarly to the issues with the terminology of the male and female gaze, frames specific characteristics as essential to one gender. Maron (1) suggests that it might be useful to reconsider the Final Girl as the Final Subject instead, to avoid existentialism based on the gender binary. Maron's update to the Final Girl trope offers two advantages. On the one hand, the term Final Subject avoids the use of problematic terminology. On the other hand, the concept allows for re-imaginings of survivors in horror films that transcend their gender and the consequent societal norms. Consequently, the Final Girl/Subject can be viewed as a "living trope" (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 5) - a victim-hero that undergoes changes and shifts that are reflective of its time. This kind of fluidity is not exclusive to horror tropes. Instead, the whole genre is seen as ever-changing and thriving because it is always "current" (Holland 1). The timelessness and relevance of horror movies are due to the reflection of contemporary anxieties and fears (Holland 1). Horror as a genre taps into common societal anxieties created by advancements in science, technology and/or societal changes or movements.

Interestingly, feminism is one societal change that has been ubiquitously negotiated in the horror genre (Holland 2015; Helford 2006). Films often portray women's anxieties in a patriarchal society or men's anxieties in response to the rise of feminism. *The Stepford Wives* (1975), for example, very explicitly deals with both themes and ideas in its narrative (Helford 147). *The Stepford Wives* follows Joanna, the main protagonist, as she attempts to resist the patriarchal ideals prevalent in Stepford, the town she and her family have recently moved to. She criticises the unfair division of domestic labour, the unbridled indulgence in patriarchal norms of femininity and the power of the men in Stepford. Unfortunately, Joanna loses her battle and is turned into a robot by the Stepford men. She shares this fate with all her female neighbours. Evidently, the movie reflects common sentiments voiced by second-wave feminists (Neill 263-264). Moreover, it comments on men's anxiety about feminism empowering women. *The Stepford Wives* narrative suggests that men would rather kill and replace their wives with robots that were explicitly created to please them, rather than be in a relationship with a woman who has agency and/or is a feminist. *Don't Worry Darling* and *The Stepford Wives* deal with similar themes,

ideas and aesthetics. I would argue that *Don't Worry Darling* is an updated version of *The Stepford Wives*. The horror of a patriarchal utopian town that is made to subordinate and exert control over women is very similar in both films. However, the technology that is used to subordinate women has been updated to reflect anxieties surrounding advancements in VR technology. The type of man who uses this technology also reflects contemporary anxieties about radicalised groups online, such as incels.

The Incel Community

The incel community is part of a larger online community, namely the manosphere (O'Malley et al. 4987). The term 'manosphere' was first introduced in a blog post and is an umbrella term that encompasses many sub-groups (Ging 640). Some of these groups include Pick Up Artists (PUAs), Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Incels (Cottee 94). Incels are a special subgroup that "define themselves in reference to a deficit, and that deficit is a sexual relationship with a woman" (Cottee 94). Members of the incel community all share one "problem" – they consider themselves to be unable to have sexual relations with women. This is not the only similarity incels share, but the one by which they define themselves. The term incel is a portmanteau of the words "involuntary" and "celibate" (Fowler 2022; O'Malley et al. 2022; Cottee 2021; Ging 2019). Thus, the men seem to define themselves fully through their perceived inability to have sexual relations with women. Interestingly, the term incel was taken from a message board initially created by a woman with the goal of creating a space where frustrations about dating could be shared (Fowler 1406). This timid origin of the term was, however, quickly left behind. Now, men dominate the hashtag and online forums donning the incel name (Cottee 94). I can confidently state that men dominate this term, as research has found that incels are exclusively male and heterosexual (Cottee 94). There are no gay, queer or female incels in terms of how the community is defined today (Cottee 94). The monopoly of heterosexual men in the community is likely due to the prominent concepts and ideologies, as it was shown that these are "by definition anti-women" (Cottee 94). Incel ideologies are based on the false belief that (white) men are the oppressed group in society (O'Malley et al. 4996). The supposed reasons for the men's oppression are women, especially feminist women, and social justice movements (Cottee 95). Feminists and activists are established as the main oppressors or enemies

because the social change demanded by these groups has supposedly resulted in the loss of men's rights or power (Ging 652). This loss of power is mainly exemplified through the celibacy incels experience, because they believe that political power is conveyed through sexual relations (Fowler 1417). Consequently, incels claim that their inability to have sex is a direct result of their oppression and shows their lack of political power (Fowler 1416-1417). This line of argumentation is supported by prominent concepts in the community, such as red-pilling, anti-feminism, misuse of science and the "sexual market" (Ging 2019; O'Malley et al. 2022).

Red-pilling is a term that incels have taken from the movie *The Matrix* (1999) (O'Malley et al. 4987). In the movie, the main character, Nero, is asked to choose between taking a red pill or a blue pill (*Matrix* 00:29:06-00:29:20). The blue pill ensures that Nero stays in his familiar fake reality, whereas the red pill will reveal actual reality to him (*Matrix* 00:29:06-00:29:20). Incels and other members of the manosphere believe that they have taken the metaphorical red pill (Ging 645). As a result, these individuals claim that they can see beyond the illusion created by the Left, women and feminists (O'Malley et al. 4987). This illusion is that men hold the most power in society (O'Malley et al. 4987). Incels believe that women and feminists have purposefully crafted the illusion of male supremacy to hide that, in reality, women hold all the power and control in society (Fowler 1415). Incels also claim that women only created feminism as a tool to oppress men (Fowler 1415). The red-pilling philosophy subscribed to by incels and the manosphere reveals the inherent anti-women and anti-feminist sentiments that are an integral part of the communities. The justification of these anti-women and anti-feminist sentiments is not only based on the red-pilling philosophy but also on the (mis)use of scientific terminology.

The misuse of scientific terminology, primarily from the fields of evolutionary psychology and biology (O'Malley et al. 4993), is commonplace in the community. The concept of natural selection in biology is, for example, used to explain why incels are struggling to find sexual partners. Incels contend that women will only engage in sexual relations with "mates with superior genetics" (O'Malley et al. 4991). For incels, these superior genetics are evidenced by physical attractiveness" (O'Malley et al. 4991). Incels consider themselves to be physically unattractive, which means that, following their argument, they will never be able to have a sexual relationship with a woman. This is only one of

many examples of how incels misuse scientific concepts to justify their claims and arguments. Usually, their misguided beliefs are further supported by anecdotal evidence. Moreover, incels also misuse the aforementioned scientific frameworks to name and highlight supposedly inherent gender differences between men and women (O'Malley et al. 4993). One example of such an inherent difference is the male sexualisation of women versus women's desire to be sexualised (O'Malley et al. 4994). Incels claim that men are "programmed to sexualize" (O'Malley et al. 4994), whereas women are programmed to enjoy being sexualised (O'Malley et al. 4994). These and other gender differences are framed as natural and used to justify the oppression of women in the past, future and present (O'Malley et al. 4993). Incel's preference for arguing that there are natural gender differences and advocating for the oppression of women establishes feminism – a movement that questions essentialist notions of gender and gender norms - as an enemy of incels (O'Malley et al. 4993).

Feminism, according to incels, is a "man-hating movement" that has led to men being denied their "rightful" place in society, which is as the dominant group (Fowler 1415). Incels are, therefore, anti-feminist because they view the movement as oppressive to them (Fowler 1415). Incels yearn to establish patriarchal structures of power that were widespread before the emergence of feminist movements (Cottee 96). Unsurprisingly, this means that incels find the myth of the 1950s appealing, because the decade supposedly centred around traditional values, the nuclear family and patriarchal supremacy (Cottee 96). Additionally, incel's hatred of feminism is also tied to the movement's empowerment of women (Cottee 96). The sexual revolution of the 1960s and other feminist movements of that era granted women more rights and freedom regarding their sexuality, motherhood and other life choices, such as marriage (McDonough). Incels condemn these consequences of feminism because they long for a world in which women are subordinate to men and every man has the "right" to have a partner (Cottee 96). In the incel community, men usually feel entitled to sex, which is why women's refusal to have sexual relations with them is perceived as a "morally wrong" choice (Cottee 94). Since the basis of incel culture is informed by sex, or the lack thereof, it is unsurprising that discourses in chat rooms also centre around sexual content. These discussions of sexual content are often deeply problematic because they include rape fantasies or posts defending rape culture (Ging 645). Incels have also been found to send

rape or death threats, and to use revenge porn (Ging 646). These actions are all done to harm and intimidate women. This shows how deeply rooted sexism and misogyny are in the incel community. A concept that is used to justify further or legitimise women-hating sentiments is the “sexual market” (O’Malley et al. 2022).

The sexual market is a popular concept that is used to explain why members of the incel community are unable to engage in sexual relations. Incels believe that women hold all the power in the sexual market and society at large (O’Malley et al. 4990). Women have this power because they get to choose their sexual partner (O’Malley et al. 4990). According to incels, women will choose their partner based on the “sexual market value”, which is comprised of physical attractiveness and wealth (O’Malley et al. 4991). Incels see themselves as neither physically attractive nor wealthy; therefore, as wholly powerless in the sexual market. The people whom women are sleeping with are referred to as “Chads” (O’Malley et al. 4990). In the incel community, the term Chad(s) is used to refer to physically attractive or wealthy men (O’Malley et al. 4990-4992). These men are intensely disliked in the community (Fowler 1412). This line of argument is used to support the view that women are “sexual gatekeepers” who only choose to sleep with Chads (O’Malley et al. 10-12). Incels, consequently, place the blame for their lack of sexual relations on women, as well as attractive or wealthy men. The “logic” of the sexual market is therefore twofold. Firstly, it is used to shift all responsibility and accountability away from incels when it comes to finding a partner by presenting themselves as powerless. Secondly, the sexual market is used to legitimise the perceived oppression by and hatred for primarily women, and some men under the derogatory name Chad (O’Malley et al. 4982).

The intense hatred of women (and some men) and the spread of radical beliefs in the incel community are also aided by its setting, the internet (Ging 644). The manosphere and its subgroups primarily exist online in social networking forums or websites, such as Reddit, 4chan or 8chan (Ging 639). These online spaces are thought to increase the spread of and participation in radical theories and beliefs (O’Malley et al. 2022; Ging 2019; Massanari 2017). Some scholars argue that elements of social networking sites, such as anonymity, echo chambers and a lack of moderation practices, play an integral part in the formation and spread of radical belief systems (O’Malley et al. 2022; Cinelli et al. 2020; Massanari 2017). It is, therefore, unsurprising that popular social networking sites amongst incels

offer all three aspects. For this analysis, the echo chamber is the most important aspect of social networking sites. The term echo chamber is used to describe an environment in which an opinion, ideology or belief is reinforced by repetition (Cinelli et al. 1). In online spaces, the creation of echo chambers is aided by the algorithm since the algorithm is programmed to show users content that they will enjoy or agree with (Cinelli et al. 5). This is particularly concerning when considering that echo chambers were found to radicalise groups, e.g., move groups toward more extreme positions (Cinelli et al. 1). For the incel community, echo chambers, therefore, aid in reinforcing and cementing anti-feminist and anti-women sentiments, alongside red-pill rhetoric. It has been proposed that echo chambers play an important part in the indoctrination process into the community (Regehr 2022). Regehr (144) found that men who experience severe loneliness sought belonging in incel communities because the members understood the struggle of finding sexual or romantic fulfilment. Similarly, O'Malley et al. (4984) argue that men who are frustrated with their lack of sexual encounters can find solace in their shared predicament when communicating online. These shared circumstances are reiterated, reinforced and built on in echo chambers. Podcasts have been found to serve a similar function (Herro 2025). Popular manosphere podcasts, like the Tate brothers' "The Emergency Meeting", are used to reflect and reiterate the audience's opinions (Herro 44). The medium is then also used to, for example, echo anti-feminist or misogynistic stances (Herro 44). This reiteration of incel rhetoric in echo chambers and podcasts will make outlandish theories, such as misandry – hatred of men ("Misandry") - seem reasonable to men who relate to incels, because they repeatedly encounter these theories. Personal anecdotes and emotionally charged posts, which can easily be found in online forums, also help in drawing new members in (Ging 643). The affective nature of these posts often positions women or feminists as scapegoats, offering an easy target for the men's experienced misery. These posts then turn men's loneliness and pain into anger with a "misogynistic focus" (Regehr 152), indoctrinating them into the incel community. The indoctrination process into the incel community can, consequently, be described as gradual (Regehr 150). Nevertheless, I do believe it is important to mention that the gradual indoctrination, aided by echo chambers and algorithms, should not absolve the men. Their willingness to participate in the community and the ease with which they seem to

slip into misogynistic sentiments cannot be blamed on the structure of social media platforms alone.

Lastly, it is important to note that incels live out their violent fantasies beyond the online realm, too. The exploration of the incel community has so far mainly focused on the online context. The reason is that this is where most of the discourse and hostile attacks, such as leaking revenge porn, deep fakes or doxing, have taken place. However, there have been multiple attacks and shootings committed by self-proclaimed incels that ended fatally for many women and men (Regehr 138-139). Two of the attackers, Elliot Rodgers and Alek Minassian, are well-known for their attacks, as well as their ties to the incel community (Regehr 2022; Massanari 2017). The perpetrators of these violent attacks have since achieved celebrity or martyr status within the community (Regehr 147). Their attacks are even widely celebrated by other incels (Regehr 147). The attackers' actions are celebrated because incels believe that violence is a suitable medium for expressing dissatisfaction and seeking revenge for their predicament (Baele 1683-1684). Although violent attacks in the offline world are rare, the celebration of violence is not, as incels generally advocate for violent attacks against women and society at large (Regehr 149). Consequently, it is likely that fears surrounding the incel community's indulgence in violence against women and other individuals on- and offline have arisen. I propose that this fear of extreme online groups, combined with advancements in the realm of VR, is negotiated in the film *Don't Worry Darling*. The exploration of how these fears are visualised and explored in the movie, as well as the representation of incels and their ideology, is at the heart of this analysis.

3. Synopsis of *Don't Worry Darling*

Don't Worry Darling is a psychological thriller set in the seemingly idyllic 1950s-style company town of Victory. In Victory, traditional gender roles and suburban perfection define daily life. The story follows Alice Warren, a devoted housewife living with her husband, Jack, in this picturesque yet unsettling community. Victory is a utopia for its residents. The male residents go to work on a mysterious "Victory Project" led by the town's charismatic founder, Frank, while the women spend their days cooking, cleaning, shopping, and socialising. The town's aesthetic and social structure are inspired by an idealised version of a 1950s affluent nuclear family. The term nuclear family describes a

family unit consisting of two heterosexual parents and their children (“Nuclear family”). This type of family unit is idealised and strived for in Victory, hence being the central family dynamic shown within the film. Victory’s plethora of pristine homes, tailored dresses, lavish cocktail parties, happy couples, and overt affluence further evoke this image of an affluent family and community-oriented town.

At the beginning of the film, Alice embraces all the comforts Victory has to offer. She enjoys her marriage with Jack and the sisterhood she has found in the other wives. However, cracks in the town’s perfect façade begin to appear when her friend Margaret starts behaving erratically, voicing suspicions that something is wrong in Victory. Margaret’s claims that Victory is a lie are swiftly dismissed by the community, but a seed of doubt is planted in Alice’s mind. Despite reassurances from Jack and the other residents, Alice begins experiencing disturbing hallucinations and inexplicable events. In one incident, she finds herself asleep in her bed with no memories of getting there after visiting Victory’s headquarters, the only restricted area in the town. After this incident, Alice’s paranoia comes to a head. She sees strange, glitch-like occurrences in the world around her — walls closing in, eerie reflections, and a feeling that she is being watched. As her paranoia grows, Alice questions what the men do at the Victory Project and why no one seems to know. Her neighbour and friend Margaret confronts her about her visit to headquarters, but Alice dismisses her despite having suspicions of her own. Shortly after, Margaret kills herself. Alice witnesses Margaret’s suicide, which is later covered up as an accident. By then, Alice is disturbed and confused. The town’s indifferent behaviour regarding Margaret’s death only raises more questions for her. Her growing unease reaches a breaking point when she has an odd confrontation with Frank at a dinner party, where rather than dismissing Alice’s suspicions, Frank acknowledges her doubts. He even encourages her to pursue the truth. This moment fuels Alice’s doubts and curiosity, and she begins investigating Victory in earnest, despite increasing pressure from Jack and her friends to conform and stay subservient. Slowly, she discovers that the town is riddled with inconsistencies and that the women’s lives are disturbingly similar and controlled. As she continues searching for the truth, Alice is gaslighted and labelled hysterical by her friends, husband, doctor, and Frank.

However, the film’s final act shows that Alice’s doubts were not hysterical or unfounded. Alice receives electroshock treatment, which should block her real memories and

personality, to make her the perfect docile wife again. Alice, however, starts to remember her real life as a surgeon. After her treatment, she confronts Jack, and the truth about Victory starts to unfurl. Victory is not a real town but a simulated world in which the women are trapped against their will. Jack, like the other men, has forcibly placed his “wife” in this artificial reality. A reality where they can live out a fantasy in which men work, and women are docile housewives. Alice was once an independent, career woman in the real world, but Jack, resentful of their modern relationship dynamic, opted to imprison her in Victory, where he could be the ideal husband and provider - something that he was not able to be in the real world. The men’s job is merely maintaining the simulation, while the women remain unaware that their lives are an elaborate fabrication based on advanced VR technology.

As Alice pieces together the full horror of her reality, she fights to escape. Realising that she is beyond his control, Jack begs her to stay, claiming that Victory is better than the real world. Alice refuses, and in a desperate act of self-preservation, she kills him. Alice makes a final, desperate run for the simulation’s exit while Frank and his crew are closing in on her. The film ends ambiguously. Alice reaches Victory’s headquarters, which serves as the entry and exit point of the simulation. She puts her hands up against the glass building, starting her exit. Shots of Alice dancing in her kitchen, interspersed with recurring visuals from the entry/exit of the simulation, are shown as she exits the simulation. Finally, the screen fades to black, and only Alice’s sharp exhalation can be heard, suggesting that she has successfully broken free. Unfortunately, it remains unclear what happens to the other women and men in Victory, aside from Frank, whom his wife, Shelley (Gemma Chan), also kills.

4. Analysis of *Don’t Worry Darling*

In the following analysis, close readings of several scenes will be conducted. These scenes were chosen because they are integral to the film’s narrative and offer insights into the representations of incels, the impact of routine on gender performativity, the negotiation of horror tropes and the film’s visual politics. Chapter 4.1 and 4.2 discuss the Victory men, their beliefs, and their real-life inspiration, incels. In Chapter 4.3, I focus on Victory’s female residents, in particular Alice’s daily routine and her appearance. I also examine how her character represents or diverges from the Final Girl trope. Margaret’s

struggle to assimilate into the simulation and her suicide are also explored in detail. Notably, the implications of the 1950s aesthetics and the (white) nuclear family for a woman of colour are explored too. Lastly, chapter 4.4 discusses how the male gaze is used and subverted within the film to serve the narrative purposefully. The impact of the feminist gaze on the portrayal of the main character's agency and emotions is also discussed.

4.1. The World of Victory

Don't Worry Darling's primary setting, Victory, is characterised by a striking dichotomy: the affluent town centre and its desolate surroundings. The Californian suburbs of the 1950s heavily inspire the overall aesthetic of Victory. The residents' homes are all charming bungalows with well-manicured front gardens and sparkling clean vintage cars. The town is pristine and boasts a plethora of amenities. In fact, Victory seemingly provides everything its residents could ever need, from shopping malls to ballet studios, concert halls, and public swimming pools. It is, however, significant to note that the recreational facilities appear to be primarily designed with the interests of the female residents in mind. This is mainly because women are the only ones who regularly visit these venues. They have sufficient leisure time to enjoy Victory's amenities, whereas the men must spend most of their time working outside the town. In addition to the numerous facilities Victory offers, the town has an underlying sense of opulence. This opulence is evident in party scenes, where the residents indulge in lavish celebrations in stunning locations and extravagant outfits. The men are generally seen wearing well-tailored, expensive suits, whereas the women wear 1950s sundresses, evening gowns, or vintage nightgowns. The residents' styling generally implies wealth and comfort. The opulence of Victory is also reflected in the residents' homes, costly cars, and even in the way they shop without credit cards or cash. As a resident of Victory, the world seemingly lies at your feet. However, the surroundings of the small town are less opulent and inviting. A vast desert and mountains surround the small town. Interestingly, the desert is also the only area that the female residents are prohibited from entering. The area is only meant to be accessed by the men who pass through it on their way to work every day. The only knowledge the women have about it is that the Victory headquarters are situated there. The secrecy around the desert and the headquarters does not seem to affect the daily

lives of the Victory women much. Mainly because there is no seemingly plausible reason for them to venture into this desolate and dangerous area. The dichotomy between the inviting and accommodating town inhabited mainly by women versus the harsh and empty surroundings only accessible to men serves as a metaphor for Frank and the Victory men's ideologies on gender and heteronormative relationships.

The town represents the female sphere. It is warm, inviting and homely. The town's design and facilities speak to Frank's idea of femininity. Where the men are harsh and chaotic, the women are soft and controlled. The town is perfect, clean, and beautiful, and so are the Victory women. This is due to Frank's limited idea of femininity that the women are forced to live out. His concept of femininity is rooted in an idealised version of the American nuclear family from the 1950s, where women were supposedly first and foremost homemakers, mothers and wives. This translates to the look and feel of Victory. The town feels homely and welcoming due to its utopian lush greenery and quaint houses. The towns' recreational facilities contribute to creating a welcoming atmosphere, while also keeping the women engaged in acceptable behaviour, as per Frank's standards. He decides which activities are suitable for the women of Victory, covertly controlling the women's gender performance by restricting them to perform a specific type of femininity that he deems acceptable. The recreational facilities are then not recreational at all, but disciplinary. The town, as a metaphor for the female sphere, consequently, shows what the world would look like if women lived the way "nature intended", as Frank might say. This natural way of being for women, in Frank's eyes, is, of course, as homemakers and caregivers serving their husbands and children, continuously controlled and constantly performing.

The surrounding empty desert, the male sphere, stands in stark contrast with the town. The desert is a metaphor for how Frank views masculinity and men's standing in contemporary society. According to Frank, contemporary society is a challenging place to inhabit for men because there is a lack of compassion and support. The desert is vast, chaotic and empty; no one would stop there to linger. He even describes the desert as "barren, so hard, so dusty, so worthless" (*DWD* 00:18:19-00:18:30). His description offers a clear picture of how the men who participate in the simulation see their lives. They feel worthless, empty and left behind. From their point of view, contemporary society has failed them because they are alone and unable to find companionship.

However, it is their rigid ideas on masculinity and relationships that have isolated and kept them from finding community. Their rigid ideas on masculinity are so pervasive that they even lack community within Victory, which is visually represented in their modes of transportation. In Victory, the women use public transport to get around. They engage in conversation on their way to ballet or the mall, building community. The men, however, all drive through the desert in their cars. They are physically isolated from each other. The way they drive through the desert, recklessly, fast and without clear direction, adds another layer of symbolism. Figure 2 shows the men rushing through the desert chaotically. There is no road and no apparent reason for how they are driving, which directly contrasts with the women's calm and communal use of Victory's public transport system. For the men, driving in this way embodies a fantasy of masculine autonomy and unregulated power that they are only able to live out in the simulation. The rigid confines of masculinity are the same in and outside of Victory, but the men's tools to navigate it are different because of Frank's simulation. He has given them a way of living out their



Figure 2: Men driving through the desert (DWD 00:05:49)

fantasies without having to genuinely deal with their misogynistic ideals, loneliness and lack of self-esteem, which are based on their confining concept of masculinity. In particular, Frank has used the men's loneliness, lack of purpose, and dissatisfaction with society to fulfil his fantasy of a misogynistic utopia. He keeps reiterating that they "mine that pure, unbridled potential" (DWD 00:18:51-00:18:58) in Victory. The subtext of this message is clear: Frank sees potential not only in the desert but in the male participants—their potential to fulfil the fantasy of creating a world in which men dominate over women. Just like Victory, he builds on the men's disillusionment,

manipulating their self-consciousness by affirming and championing them. In the end, this makes the men dependent on Frank's approval and irrevocably loyal to his cause because they cannot fathom living in any other world. The desert then also serves as a constant reminder to the men of whom, or more so what, they could lose. They are forced to pass through the desert daily because it is the bridge between the fantasy of Victory and the harsh reality of their real lives. For the women, the desert serves a similar purpose. It is a quiet but omnipresent reminder of their luck at living in Victory, and an ever-present cautionary tale of what might be "out there". The desert is their reminder to stay close to home and not step out of line because that is not what a good wife does. A good wife stays home, cleans, shops, cooks, and most importantly, stays subservient. The physical manifestation of the female and male spheres in Victory is informed by outdated gender norms, which are an integral part of the simulation and its appeal to the male participants.

Unfortunately, the simulation's facilitation is a facet of the film's narrative that is not thoroughly explored. Hardly any information is shared on the workings of the technology, unlike other fake-reality films, such as *The Matrix* (1999) or *The Truman Show* (1998). There are, however, two interesting pieces of information that are shared. Firstly, it is revealed that the male participants must leave the simulation every day to sustain it (DWD 01:40:42-01:40:47). The simulation requires them to earn money to pay for Frank's VR programme, technology and any other means to uphold it, such as an apartment, food, electricity, and an internet connection. The world outside of Victory is shown to be dark, dilapidated, and unwelcoming. It is a stark contrast to the warm, picturesque world of Victory. Secondly, the audience sees the entry into and exit from Victory. For the entry, the participants must lie under a white hemisphere. This hemisphere projects images around the users. A voice recording of Frank, reminiscent of meditation tapes, plays whilst the users' eyes are pried open with a special device. This special device seems to scan the retina of the users' eyes, presumably projecting images onto it. The Victory project calls this set the "home device system" (DWD 01:36:24). Most of this information is revealed towards the end of the movie when Jack's entry into Victory is shown (DWD 01:37:30-01:38:20). While the technological advancements proposed by Victory are underexplored but impressive, it is the similarities between incels and the men of Victory that is particularly striking.

4.2. The Victory Men

Throughout *Don't Worry Darling*, it becomes evident that a feature all male residents share is their worship of Frank and his creation. This is because Frank provides them with what they most desperately want: to dominate over women under the guise of a romantic relationship. As cinematic stand-ins for incels, it can be assumed that the participants of Victory are mostly single men who struggle to find and maintain romantic relationships with women. This lack of a female partner in their life has resulted in resentment and hate towards women. Incels express these emotions by asserting dominance over women to restore an idealised patriarchal order of society (Regher 142). In *DWD*, this fantasy of domination is also indulged and even made attainable due to Frank's creation, Victory. The relationships in Victory are extremely fulfilling to the men because the Victory wives are entirely devoid of agency and shaped by the male gaze. In reality, the women are silenced, drugged, physically restrained, and assaulted just so the men can indulge their fantasies. Based on the Victory men's alignment with incel ideology, it is hardly surprising that they do not seem to be concerned about the ethics of holding a woman hostage and forcing her to live out a life completely tainted by a male fantasy. Whilst the ideology provides the men with a framework to justify their actions, it is Frank's persona and rhetoric as the enigmatic and "genius" creator of Victory that assures the men of their right to the simulation and its outcomes. Throughout the film, he is repeatedly shown reassuring the men and reinforcing the ideology they subscribe to, thus creating avid followers and admirers. The men's admiration for Frank is undeniable in their conversations and the way Frank is portrayed in them.

One striking conversation about Frank, that conveys the men's admiration for him, takes place just before the audience is introduced to him. Jack and his friend Dean (Nick Kroll) are shown conversing with Bill (Douglas Smith), a new member. Bill shares that he and his wife are finding it difficult to adjust to their new surroundings, but Jack reassures Bill that the transition into Victory can take a little time. Bill says that he is very excited to be here, but surprised that he has not yet had a chance to speak with Frank. To this, Dean replies in a hostile manner: "Frank doesn't have to talk to you. You have no idea how extraordinary he is. Or what he can do. You're lucky to even know who he is, let alone be standing in his house" (*DWD* 00:16:23- 00:16:32). Naturally, Bill is taken aback by this

harsh reaction and apologises to Dean. This interaction reveals the extent of Dean's worship of Frank and his creation by devaluing and patronising the new arrivals' experiences and feelings. Dean's comment suggests that Bill is not worthy of Frank's time or energy because it is too valuable to be wasted on a man like him. Consequently, Bill's emotions are devalued, and his (non-) status in Victory is made clear to him. Additionally, Dean highlights Frank's grandiosity, whilst also establishing his own superiority, by implying that, unlike Bill, he does know the extent of Frank's genius. Dean, therefore, uses his power over new arrivals to enforce Victory's rules and ideology. His status enables him to establish the hierarchy present at Victory, with Frank at the very top, followed by the most outstanding followers, such as Dean. The new arrivals, or people who are unable to follow the status quo perfectly, are at the bottom of this hierarchy. This sentiment is driven home when Dean patronises Jack's position later on in the conversation by saying that Jack works in a "technically worse, less important department" than himself (*DWD 00:16:14-00:16:21*). This reveals two things, namely Dean's need to dominate over others and that there is a particular rivalry for Frank's approval among the male residents. Frank shows his approval of the residents in the form of a promotion to the "senior advisory board" and a big, flashy ring for all its members. Dean has earned this ring and position, whilst the other two men have not. This puts Dean in a privileged position, which he joyfully exploits by putting down Jack's job position and Bill's emotions. Generally, it seems that the senior position at the company is lusted after because of the in-status it grants with Frank and the additional power the men can wield over other members. This is all part of the men's worship of Frank, prompting some characters, such as Peter (Asif Ali), to behave ridiculously.

Peter's attempt to please Frank reaches ridiculous heights after Jack's promotion. To celebrate his promotion, Jack throws a dinner party. As the guests arrive, Bill is visibly impressed with Jack's house and vigorously compliments it. Peter, however, does not care for Jack's home. Instead, he is only concerned with Jack's promotional gift, the ring. Promptly, after arriving at the house, he dismisses Billy's admiration of Jack's house and says, "It's a house. Show me the ring. Let me see it" (*DWD 01:09:18*). He demands that Jack show him the ring with incredible urgency. His tone also suggests that he is jealous of Jack's promotion and Frank's consequent recognition and approval of Jack. In an attempt to gain Frank's approval, Peter even goes so far as to change his appearance. At

the party, Frank arrives in a suit without a tie, because of that Peter frantically undoes his tie too, muttering to himself: “I knew it. I told Peg [his wife]. It’s gonna be a no-tie event” (*DWD* 01:09:36). Peter even unbuttons the first button of his shirt to match Frank’s look perfectly. Only then does he approach Frank, trying to land a very clearly rehearsed joke referring to the events of last night’s party (*DWD* 01:10:02). Frank’s reaction is not visible to the audience. Still, Peter is visibly pleased, once again muttering to himself, “He liked that” (*DWD* 01:10:02). Later on, when Frank is wandering off to play some music, Peter and Bill can even be seen admiring Frank from across the room. This shot puts Frank at the centre of the men’s gaze and demonstrates just how infatuated they are with their leader. These two excerpts of conversations are prime examples of the worship and admiration the Victory men share for Frank. Similar rhetoric or behaviour can be found in the incel community regarding famous incels. Men in the community, who have reached “incelebrity,” such as mass killers Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian, are worshipped and celebrated vigorously in incel forums (Regher 150). They have achieved martyr status in the community and are celebrated for committing crimes in the name of the movement, showing their commitment to the ideology (Regher 147). Similarly, Frank is celebrated for his creation of Victory within the community.

There is, however, a significant difference between the real incel community and Frank’s followers in *Don’t Worry Darling*, namely the followers’ willingness to partake in physical violence. Frank’s followers have all crossed moral and ethical boundaries in the pursuit of their happiness and satisfaction. In particular, they kidnap, rape and hold women hostage for an indefinite amount of time to achieve their dreams and satisfaction. The physical harm caused by the men’s brutal actions is not explored in detail in the movie. However, the few glimpses the audience gets of Alice’s real life are gruesome. From a point-of-view shot, Alice’s body is being dragged away; only the lower half of her body, a tipped-over mug, and spilt coffee on the floor are visible to the viewer (*DWD* 1:35:36). This scene alludes to how Jack kidnaps and locks up Alice to begin their life in Victory. In this scene, the violence inflicted by Jack remains implicit, as the audience never gets to see how Alice is hurt and kidnapped. This is uncharacteristic for horror films, as the genre is known for its detailed portrayals of bodies in pain. The absence of body horror in the film is one aspect of Wilde’s feminist gaze. The effects of the feminist gaze on the narrative and mise-en-scene of *DWD* will be explored in detail in chapter 4.4. At this point, I want

to highlight that the physical violence Jack inflicts upon Alice is mostly implied. Similarly, to the kidnapping scene, the physical horror behind the seemingly consensual sex scenes between Alice and Jack is left up to the imagination of the viewers. However, from the context of the movie, it can be assumed that all sex scenes in Victory are non-consensual in the real world. Alice's real self is unconscious throughout the entire movie, thus unable to consent to any sexual activity. What I find especially interesting is that the violence is hidden from view, whilst its effects are explored explicitly. For example, the consequences of Jack's violence on Alice are shown in a scene towards the end in which the truth about Victory is revealed. In it, Alice can be seen chained to a bed, attached to a drip, and wearing compression stockings and a dirty nightgown (*DWD* 01:36:49). She looks dehydrated and unwashed. The room Alice is being kept in is the bedroom in the apartment she and Jack shared during their relationship. It is dark and secured with multiple locks. Their home has become the breeding ground for Jack's violence against Alice. The film further suggests that Alice's situation is not unique in Victory. It can be assumed that all the male residents have committed acts, like Jack's, to attain and keep their partners, since most wives are unaware that Victory is a simulation. This sets the Victory men apart from their real-life inspiration because in the incel community, acts of real-life violence are rare (Regehr 147). Incels glorify violence against women and Chads online, but they rarely commit physical harm offline (Regehr 139). This is not to say that these acts of online harassment are harmless or that rare mass-killings by incels, such as Elliot Rodger or Alek Minassian, are not to be taken seriously. Instead, I merely want to point out that *Don't Worry Darling* hyperbolises an incel's ability and willingness to commit physical violence against women. The Victory men are dystopian incels because they wholeheartedly welcome the most extreme manifestations of their ideology, which is based on fantasies of control, submission and punishment. To them, the violence is negligible because it is necessary to fulfil the fantasy. Moreover, their fantasies can only come to life thanks to Frank's technology. Without it, the men are unable to indulge in their fantasies in the same way without facing repercussions or real-life consequences. The Victory men's ruthless pursuit of their self-assigned right to have power, a female partner and a "fulfilled" life is then enabled by the technology Frank provides. This fact makes the Victory project and its male residents a cunning commentary on the current state of incelism because the Victory men's behaviour is a logical progression of incel's

behaviours if their delusions are entertained or encouraged. Consequently, I am arguing that Victory men's willingness to harm women physically is a striking dystopian element in *Don't Worry Darling* that adds to the horror of the movie. Additionally, the horror and insidiousness of the Victory men's physical violence is heightened when the belief system that supports this behaviour is considered. The violence inflicted upon the women appears to be the physical symptom of the Victory men's beliefs and ideologies. These beliefs and ideologies are very similar to the ones incels subscribe to. The most important overlaps are their dissatisfaction with society, the sexual market, anti-feminist or anti-women sentiments and their recruitment through technology.

4.2.1. Dissatisfaction with society

Similarly to incels, the Victory men harbour negative feelings towards their current place in society. This is due to incel's belief that men have been stripped of their natural place in society, which is superior to women (Fowler 1415; O'Malley et al. 15; Cottee 96). This dissatisfaction directly translates to the setting and structure of Victory. Victory is strongly aligned with an idealised version of life in the 1950s; thus, the decade's aesthetics and supposed societal norms are adopted and embraced. This manifests in different ways, such as clothing, architecture, and home life. The Victory men's and women's clothing mainly includes formal attire, such as suits and sundresses. Their cars, homes, and the town's buildings further situate the simulation in this era. Moreover, the family structure in Victory is reminiscent of the idealised 1950s nuclear family and its proposed traditional values, falling into the nostalgia trap. The traditional family, as it is lived out in Victory, is based on mythologised portrayals of families from popular culture and political rhetoric from the 1950s. Victory indulges in the nostalgic fantasy of the single-income suburban family. In this fantasy, the men are the breadwinners of the family, and the women are housewives (Jenkins 3). The woman's job is within the home, unconditionally caring for her husband, child(ren) and household. In particular, this means that the female residents of Victory cook, clean, shop, and tend to their husbands' emotional and physical needs, while the husbands work long hours outside of the home. This division of duties by gender is reminiscent of gender norms that were established and encouraged in the 1950s. After the war, women were demoted or forced to leave the workforce on account of men returning home after the Second World War (Coontz 71). To

make this loss of independence and income more palatable for women, identification with the home and family was encouraged by politicians, sociologists and the media (Coontz 71). This push for women to find fulfilment in the home, the economic boom after the war and political action to create spaces for the growing middle-class, resulted in the creation of the mythologised nuclear family commonly associated with the 1950s (Coontz 68). Nevertheless, the lived reality of many families in the 1950s largely differed from the idealised version perpetuated in the media. The media's depictions of the nuclear family often neglected to represent families with diverse economic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, resulting in a distorted image of family life in the 1950s (Coontz 69). Similarly, to media depictions at the time, incels and Victory men do not concern themselves with the multifaceted and diverse ways of living of that era. Instead, they fall into the nostalgia trap and strive to attain the mythologised 1950s nuclear family with a patriarch as the head and sole breadwinner of the family. Such yearning for the patriarchal past is something that incels and the male residents of Victory share (Cottee 96). The reasons for this are manifold, though the primary one appears to be that these men believe it is their biological destiny or right to live as patriarchs. The Victory men seem to think the same way. In Victory, they can finally live the life they deserve, as Jack tells Alice (*DWD* 1:40:35-1:40:40). This life includes a wife who cares for them and attends to their every need, especially sexual ones. There is a significant overlap between the Victory men and incels in these regards, as incels also contend that it is their right to have a sexual partner (Cottee 96). They even go so far as to state that women refusing sexual advances are morally wrong (Cottee 94). The Victory men share this sentiment. Their wives' bodies are trapped and sedated in the real world, which means that the women are unable to decline sexual advances. Consequently, all sexual intercourse in the film is rape. This is a dystopian element of Victory. The ideology behind the normalisation and acceptance of rape as part of the simulation is, however, very real and can be traced back to incel's hate of women, and their belief in the "sexual market".

4.2.2. The sexual market

As previously explained, incels use the concept of the sexual market to justify their lack of sexual relations. Incels believe that women hold the most power in the sexual market, whilst incels hold the least power due to their unattractiveness and poor financial status

(O'Malley et al. 4990). Incels' self-proclaimed unattractiveness and low socio-economic status are supposedly keeping them from having sex with women, because women will always choose men who are attractive and/or wealthy (O'Malley et al. 4995). This belief is also mirrored in *Don't Worry Darling*. Jack is played by Harry Styles, who is conventionally attractive and was even named one of the 10 most handsome men in the world (De Silva). In Victory, Harry Styles's attractive looks are enhanced. His character is tanned, shaved, well-dressed, and his hair is styled. He also wears a well-fitted black suit and tie with a crisp white shirt. His good looks add to the charming personality he adopts in the simulation. In the real world, however, Jack is different. His polished Victory look is replaced by a scruffier version, with stubble and casual clothes. Aside from these apparent changes in appearance in- and outside the simulation, there is a more minor but noteworthy transformation in Jack's appearance after his real-life break-up with Alice. Before the break-up, Jack wears nice T-shirts and shirts, his hair is washed, and he looks pulled together. This is to say that even though the grandeur and glamour of Jack's persona in Victory are gone, he is still conventionally attractive (*DWD* 01:29:24). However, after their break-up and during his participation in Victory, his appearance has deteriorated immensely. His hair is long, unkempt and greasy. His clothing is oversized, stained and grimy (*DWD* 01:35:54). Jack also wears an unflattering pair of glasses and has noticeable scarring on his face (*DWD* 01:35:54). The "logic" of the sexual market can be used to explain this dramatic change in appearance.

In Victory, the men have a female partner. Based on the "logic" of the sexual market, they consequently must be attractive and/or wealthy. This is why Jack and all other Victory men seemingly have well-paying jobs and attractive appearances in Victory. I would argue that these changes in appearance make Victory incredibly appealing. In Victory, the men get to experience life through an idealised, Chad version of themselves. All their insecurities about their looks melt away in the simulation, whilst they are stuck with them in the real world. Additionally, incel's self-proclaimed lack of job opportunities or wealth is also eradicated in the simulation. In Victory, Jack has a job and is the household's sole breadwinner. In the real world, however, the roles are swapped. Jack relies on Alice's income because he has lost his job. This seems to be a great insecurity of his, because when Alice and Jack talk about him losing his job, he apologises and hides his face, looking disappointed and guilt ridden (*DWD* 01:28:25). His guilt might, on the one hand,

be due to the extra strain that is put on Alice to provide for them financially. On the other hand, Jack appears to subscribe to the outdated belief that women need to be financially supported in a relationship. He even asks Alice, “How am I gonna take care of you?” (DWD 01:28:05). Alice dismisses Jack’s concern by saying that she will work extra shifts to grant them financial security. Hence, Alice takes on the role of the breadwinner. This contradicts Jack’s ideas about male and female roles in relationships, which may further exacerbate his insecurities. Not only does he see himself as unattractive, but he is now also financially dependent on Alice. According to the logic of the sexual market, these two aspects of Jack’s life make being in a relationship with Alice, or any woman for that matter, impossible. When Alice and Jack’s relationship ends, the reasons for their break-up are not explored in detail. However, Alice is shown exhausted from her extra shifts and annoyed by Jack’s unwillingness to take care of himself and their shared apartment (DWD 01:29:20-01:30:44). Ultimately, the break-up seemingly “proves” the theories of the sexual market. Jack’s inability to maintain his romantic relationship with Alice suggests that only Chads —financially stable and/or attractive men —can have a partner. In Victory, Jack’s insecurities about his looks and financial status are eradicated. Thus, the simulation helps him overcome these “natural” differences with Chads, assimilating into their way of life.

Whilst this clear differentiation between Jack’s incel version and Jack’s Victory, ergo, Chad version works well in the context of the film, there are some incels, so-called black-pillers, who refuse to believe that this type of transformation is even possible (Baele 1675). Black-pillers believe that the social categories incels have created, e.g., incels and Chads, are impermeable, whereas red-pillers do believe in upward mobility within the categories (Baele 1675). The type of incels that are represented in *Don’t Worry Darling*, therefore, appear to be red-pillers. This can be said because they wholeheartedly welcome the changes in appearance and wealth that Victory brings. This suggests that they believe incels can transform into Chads with the “proper” physical and economic adjustments. What I find striking, though, is that the Victory men do not change in their real lives. Instead, they resort to violence and the use of exclusive and costly technology to live out their dreams. This choice can be interpreted as an easy way out of their misery, though I would argue it is not. Instead, it shows that the men are entirely pessimistic about the current and future state of their lives, which is common in the real incel

community and often used to justify violence (Baele 1683). The violence inflicted by the Victory men is seen as a means to an end, a way to get the life that they believe was taken from them by the Left and feminist movements. Generally, anti-feminist sentiments are spread far and wide in the incel community. Research has even found the community to be inherently anti-feminist (Cottee 94). The reason for the community's hate of feminism is that the movement challenges traditional gender norms and roles. Incel's deeply rooted anti-feminist and anti-women sentiments are also portrayed in Victory.

4.2.3. Anti-feminist and anti-women sentiments

Whilst incel's hate of feminism and women tends to show itself through misogynistic posts and other harmful content or behaviours towards women online, the Victory men's hate shows itself in the structure of the simulation and the men's treatment of women. As previously established, Victory embraces a patriarchal utopia that is based on an idealised version of 1950s familial structures and gender roles. The members of Victory want to return to this idealised patriarchal order because they believe this is the way the world is meant to be. So, while the men in Victory do not explicitly critique feminism throughout the movie, it becomes clear that they are profoundly dissatisfied with the social changes that feminist movements have brought about. This is particularly evident in the confinement of women to "traditional" roles, such as mother and wife. However, I want to argue that even the role of mother is secondary in the simulation. The men have joined the simulation to indulge their fantasies of power and pleasure. The main appeal of the Victory project is to grant every male member power over a female companion. Therefore, the women will always primarily be concerned with the men's well-being rather than their children's. This argument is supported by the daily routines and activities the women partake in. Unsurprisingly, the women's central preoccupation on a day-to-day basis is limited to the "duties" of a wife. These duties include free labour in the form of housework. The women unconditionally care for their homes and, most importantly, their husbands. The wives' "care" and "love" for their husbands often translates into pleasing them sexually. This is due to the importance the Victory men and incels place on sex. For these men, sex with women is a natural right that they are entitled to (Cottee 96). Sex, therefore, becomes one of the most important duties of a wife. It is very clear that

outdated gender norms and ideas about femininity mark this view of women. What is especially jarring, though, is the women's confinement to their role as wives.

The women have no real chance of existing or living in Victory outside of their marriage because the role of the single woman does not even exist. Victory only has couples and families - no single women or men. Even the language used to refer to women in Victory confines them to their prescribed role, as the women are often only referred to as "wives" by Frank (*DWD* 00:20:41). The other men rarely use the women's names, either. Instead, they only speak about the women in relation to their male colleagues and neighbours. The men are more likely to state, "Your wife is drunk" instead of "Peg is drunk" (00:01:36). This means that breaking with the prescribed role of the wife becomes increasingly difficult for the Victory women because the language itself does not allow them to be anything other than a wife. Moreover, the women's inability to attain a job or drive a car also keeps them reliant on their husbands. The Victory men's sentiments about female interests and their role in society offer glimpses into the lives incels want women to lead. Unsurprisingly, this means that the men have many ideals concerning a Victory wife's perfect personality. The ideal Victory wife is not only meant to be caring and sexually available, but she is also supposed to be coy, compliant, docile, and only concerned with topics of the "female" world. Curiosity and inquisitiveness are punished by the whole community, as seen in the case of Margaret, Victory's scapegoat. Margaret is curious and asks critical questions about Victory, which goes against everything the Victory wives are expected to do. The things she wants to discuss are beyond the range of topics that women should discuss. These womanly topics include neighbourhood gossip, being or becoming a mother, shopping, and their husbands. Similarly, Victory does not offer women many opportunities to engage in activities outside of stereotypically female pursuits, such as shopping, ballet, or hosting dinner parties. So, the very structure and organisation of Victory show that the women are not supposed to have interests outside of what Frank and their husbands imagine for them. These facts, along with the very structure of Victory, attest to the creator's vision of a 1950s utopia —a supposed time before women gained independence and agency.

The Victory men's anti-women sentiments also become evident in the treatment of their wives in the real world. Whilst the treatment of women in Victory clearly shows the men's

anti-feminist stance, their behaviour in the real world shows their disdain and hate for women. Like incels, the Victory men seem to harbour immense negative feelings towards women. The reasons for this hatred are never explored explicitly in the film, but research on real-life incels can offer some insight into potential reasons for the Victory men's hatred of women. Researchers have found that incels often claim to have been hurt by a woman, which leads them to make generalisations about all women (Cottee 97). These generalisations include conclusions, such as all women are evil (O'Malley et al. 4981), inherently manipulative (O'Malley et al. 4993) or deserve to be mistreated (Cottee 97). Moreover, incels dislike women because they are dissatisfied with how much supposed power women hold in society and the "sexual market" (O'Malley et al. 4991). This dissatisfaction can quickly turn into hatred because incels see themselves stuck in an unfair system. The common denominator throughout all these hostile generalisations by incels is misogyny. It is a combination of misogyny and personal anecdotes that leads incels to have grievances with all women. Incel's fictional counterpart, the Victory men, are likely to indulge in similar or even more extreme beliefs, as evidenced by Jack's transition into the movement. The film shows that Jack turned to the Victory project because he was dissatisfied with his life and resentful about how Alice had treated him. He seems annoyed at her because she worked long hours, leaving little time for him. The supposed last fight between Jack and Alice in the real world is portrayed as a pivotal moment in his journey. This moment occurs just after Alice sets clear boundaries and signals to Jack that he has failed her, and that their relationship is about to come to an end (*DWD* 01:30:17-01:31:31). Jack's feelings are hurt by Alice expressing her feelings and denying him intimacy. This situation knocks Jack's self-esteem and leaves him highly susceptible to the dangerous messaging Frank spreads in his podcast.

4.2.4. Recruitment of members through technology

Research into incel forums has shown that chatrooms on websites such as Reddit or 4chan serve as community-building platforms (Regehr 144). Men who first stumble upon such websites are drawn in because they find solace and comfort in knowing that other men also struggle to find partners or their place in society. This comforting effect, however, becomes dangerous, as the men find themselves in echo chambers (Regehr 153). Echo chambers are environments that reinforce existing political leanings, opinions

or other beliefs through interactions with members of their group or peers (Cinelli et al. 1). In the case of incels, this means that negative ideas about women, feminism and society, alongside incel-rhetoric, are spread and reiterated in the forums (Regehr 149). Repeated exposure to these arguments and rhetoric helps cement pre-existing notions and, in turn, indoctrinates and radicalises men to become part of the community (Regehr 153). Frank's recruitment of his followers through social media and a podcast works similarly. His podcast is called "Organized Chaos" (*DWD* 01:29:23) and appears to be the primary means of attracting new members for the Victory project. In his podcast, he promotes negative messaging about "modern society" because it has supposedly ruined men's lives by granting women more independence and freedom (*DWD* 01:30:53-01:31:32). This mirrors the content of podcasts by leaders of the manosphere, like Andrew Tate (Herro 44-45). Additionally, Frank also discusses various other topics, the main ideas of which can be divided into two overarching themes: addressing "social problems" and uplifting his listeners. Frank uses his platform to name and identify social problems and injustices that he claims men face. These issues are strongly aligned with incel rhetoric. In a pivotal scene, Frank can be heard saying:

I mean, I suppose, the primary question is, do you know anyone who's truly happy? Right? Or truly satisfied? Modern society has smothered our true selves, and driven us from, uh, biological destiny. I see that version of yourself that you've buried deep and that everyone else ignores. And that, that is the real you. I know that you are the man you say you are. (*DWD* 01:30:53-01:31:32)

In the first half of this quote, Frank states that "modern society" has led to the demise of happiness and satisfaction for all humans. He does not differentiate between genders in this instance. This is due to his belief that women and men alike suffer from the consequences of "modern society". The "modern society" Frank refers to is undoubtedly meant to represent contemporary society, which numerous economic changes and social movements, such as feminism, civil rights, and the LGBTQIA+ movement, among others, have shaped. In his podcast, however, Frank only focuses on the latter. He frames social movements as having created an unnatural and oppressive society. Interestingly, the term "modern", as Frank uses it in the quote, is a misnomer. Modernity refers to the historical period that spanned from the 16th century to the early 20th century, ending just before the Second World War (Everett 2025). The term "modern" has, however, often been used to "deploy a loss of greatness of the past" (Wagner 9949). Frank's misuse of

the historical term is aligned with Wagner's interpretation of "modern", because Frank frames "modern society" as being worse than "traditional society" - a society where (white) male supremacy goes unchallenged. The underlying message is clear. Frank believes that the aforementioned social movements, most importantly feminism, have resulted in this loss of "biological destiny". I focus on feminist movements specifically because Frank's opposition to the social changes that they have brought about becomes evident in the statement above. His mention of the notion of "biological" or "natural" differences between men and women shows that he subscribes to a deterministic view of gender. Consequently, standing in opposition to canonical feminist concepts, such as Butler's gender performativity, which argue against a deterministic and for a constructivist view of gender. Unsurprisingly, then, Frank's simulation heavily relies on the myth of the 1950s. He promotes a false image of the 1950s as a utopia, where men and women were said to have fully embraced their "natural" differences and were supposedly completely satisfied and happy. This is not only misleading but also blatant misinformation, as historical and sociological examinations of the decade have shown (Coontz 2000). Nevertheless, Frank uses this myth of the 1950s as a basis for his simulation. His vision, then, is not about returning to the past, but about creating a utopia where male supremacy goes unquestioned. The second half of the quote emphasises this point further.

In the second part of the quote, the men are framed as victims of contemporary society. They are unhappy because their true selves, meaning patriarchs, have been ignored and disrespected by everyone around them. This framing puts the blame and source of the men's dissatisfaction on contemporary society, absolving them of any fault they might have for their current situation. In doing so, Frank validates the men's feelings and creates a space for their delusions to grow. The listeners' perceived oppression is validated because it is not their fault that everyone except Frank ignores their "unbridled potential" (*DWD* 00:18:57). In the last two lines of the quote, Frank positions himself as the only person who can truly understand and see the listener. Frank's statement is a vote of confidence, which is specifically used to uplift and boost the listeners' self-esteem. Consequently, the listeners' self-esteem is inextricably linked with Frank and the Victory project. Frank establishes that listeners can only excel in his world and his proximity. For this reason, the listeners grow dependent on Frank and the Victory project. This

dependency, coupled with Frank expressing understanding for the issues that the male listeners are experiencing, makes the podcast the perfect tool for recruiting and indoctrinating vulnerable men. In the end, these men turn to Victory and its promise of a “traditional” society because Frank’s arguments and the Victory community reinforce and escalate their skewed worldview. The reassurance they get acts as a positive feedback loop for these frustrated men, helping to push them over the edge into the abyss of incelism.

Similarly, to real-life incels, recruitment for the Victory project solely takes place online. Online tools and media, such as chat rooms and podcasts, are used as forms of recruitment and indoctrination and are integral to the success of the Victory project. This means that the recruitment process for the Victory project and the incel community share several similarities, as research has found that the incel community targets vulnerable and susceptible men specifically to recruit them for their cause (Regehr 153). The main difference between the recruitment of Victory men and incels is the medium. The Victory men appear to get drawn in by Frank’s persona and podcast. Previous research into the indoctrination of incels has primarily focused on their use of social media platforms and chat forums to recruit new members (Cinelli et al. 2020; O’Malley et al. 2022; Regehr 2022). Podcasts as a medium and tool of indoctrination are, consequently, under-researched. However, recent news articles on the influence of popular manosphere podcasters, such as Andrew Tate or Joe Rogan, on their often young audience, suggest that podcasts are a successful tool for spreading manosphere ideologies (Fazackerley 2025). The Victory project similarly seems to thrive without placing immense importance on chat forums that have previously been associated with the spread of manosphere rhetoric. Instead, Frank’s podcast, his promises, and charming cult-leader personality suffice to convince men to become part of Victory. Though I do want to mention that Jack can also be seen using a website that looks like a chat forum, in which he presumably chats with fellow Victory men (*DWD* 01:31:06). However, aside from this one scene, chat rooms do not play a massive role in the Victory project, despite their relative importance in its real-world equivalent. I suspect this change in medium is likely due to advancements in technology. These advancements enabled men to communicate in person through virtual reality rather than chat rooms. Consequently, chat rooms have become somewhat obsolete because the VR technology proposed by *DWD* allows the

men to talk freely without relying on social media platforms and their chat forums, which have restrictions and rules. This is an interesting aspect of *Don't Worry Darling* because it explores the potential for radicalised parties to misuse technological advancements to their advantage.

Lastly, it must be mentioned that the focus that I have placed on the importance of echo chambers and Frank's podcast is not meant to absolve the men who partake in the Victory project of their agency. Instead, I want to highlight that becoming part of Victory is a gradual process. This gradual indoctrination or radicalisation mirrors the process that real-life incels go through. One of the members even described the process as a "slippery slope" (Regehr 150). This phrase also perfectly describes Victory men's process of becoming part of the simulation. These men are situated on the fringes of society, lonely and dissatisfied. They seemingly stumble through life because of their perceived inability to find a partner, social isolation, financial status, or other factors. Frank's ideas and understanding represent the last push these men need to stop wanting to fit into the society or world from which they have been rejected. Drawn in by Frank's promises, the men slip further and further into the ideology and the world of Victory. A world that caters to them exclusively and even absolves them of their unattractive looks, poor financial status, and lack of romantic connection. After the men join Victory, they are unlikely to turn their backs on their ideal world or their leader, Frank. This fact is figuratively reflected in the structure of Victory, as it is not built on a grid format, unlike most towns. Instead, it is built on a spiral that grows outward from a single centre point, Frank's house. This placement of Frank's home is a physical manifestation of his place in Victory. As the creator and first person in Victory, he gets to stay at the centre of it all, surrounded by people who believe him to be special. On the one hand, the physical structure of Victory mimics how the male residents get drawn into the world of Victory. Frank is the centre of a downward spiral, drawing men in and guiding them down a rabbit hole or into an echo chamber. On the other hand, this structure shows that Victory inherently centres patriarchs/men. The women's lives revolve around the patriarch of the family, and the men's lives revolve around Frank's approval. Frank is, therefore, placed in a sort of uber-patriarch role at the centre of Victory. Figure 3 shows a miniature version of Victory's unusual layout with Frank's house in the centre of the town and the spiral (DWD 01:43:57). In this scene, the camera slowly moves closer to the model, as the shrill sound

of a phone pierces the background. The slow pan of the camera gives this scene a claustrophobic and menacing feel. The warm light on the model resembles the setting sun, hinting at the end of Alice's entrapment and possibly all of Victory. This is not the first time the model has been shown in the film. It was also used to foreshadow Alice's journey to headquarters in the first half of the movie. At Frank's party, Alice is shown admiring the model, her finger following the road to a sign that says, "Victory headquarters this way"

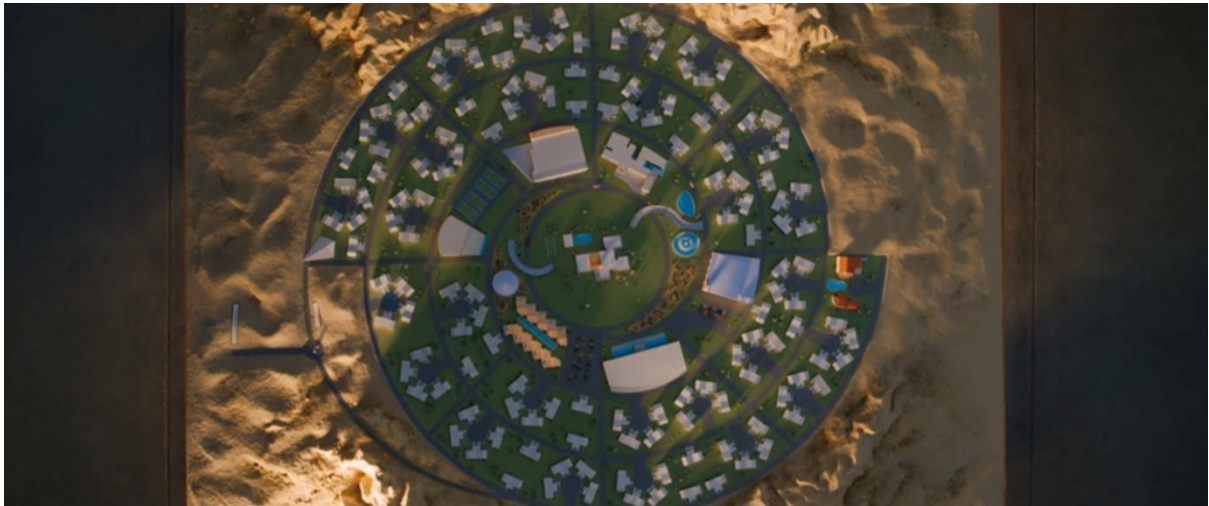


Figure 3: A model of Victory showing its unusual layout (DWD 00:14:36-00:15:06)

(DWD 00:14:36-00:15:06). Later on, Alice uses this road to find her way to the headquarters. Additionally, the model shows that the centre of town is where all of Victory's amenities are located. This is an interesting aspect of the town's setup, because these amenities and the routines tied to them play a significant role in controlling the Victory women's gender performance. Therefore, the centre of town acts as a control centre for the female residents with Frank and his institutions at its heart. The layout of Victory then symbolises the downward spiral and echo chamber the men are in, and Frank's need to feel superior and in control. This need to be in control also manifests in Frank's use of his voice, which is inescapable in and integral to the simulation. His voice is integral to the simulation because he is the narrator, facilitating every entry and exit from Victory. Frank's voice can be heard when entering the simulation: "We can fall deeper into what we know is true, that we crave order. Can we yield to nature's hierarchy? Allow your consciousness to sink into this world. Into this truth. Sink deeper into the way things are supposed to be" (DWD 01:37:49- 1:38:20). The entry text into Victory is reminiscent of the podcast's rhetoric, though the style is different. It seems that the style is inspired by texts for guided meditations. The focus lies on preparing the listener to fall

into a passive and susceptible state. Words like “fall” and “sink” are used to create an accommodating atmosphere. Despite this difference in style, the themes of the entry text and the podcast are largely consistent. This is exemplified in the introductory sentence. In it, Frank talks about wanting order; the implication here is that it is a patriarchal order. His mention of “nature’s hierarchies” in the context of his political standing alludes to his belief in male supremacy and female subordination. To further exacerbate his power over the women, he has also created a radio show that the women listen to daily. This radio show is called “Frank’s Radio Hour” (*DWD* 00:05:59). The show is a way to make Frank’s voice omnipresent and inescapable in the lives of the female residents. In it, he holds supposedly spiritual and motivational talks. The women listen to this radio show daily while they do their chores. In doing so, they are practising a ritual that, on the one hand, cements Frank’s importance and his untouchable status as the creator of Victory, and on the other hand, also cements the women’s place as homemakers and wives. The radio show is only one aspect of the routines that comprise a large part of the women’s daily lives.

4.3. The Victory Women

In the following chapters, the focus lies on the women of Victory. The women’s lives and routines are laden with meaning and lend themselves to close analysis in terms of gender performativity, tropes in the horror genre and race. In particular, the women’s daily routines will be critically analysed, as I hypothesise that these routines are used to ensure their adherence to the prescribed gender roles and performance. Their gender roles and performance are intertwined because in Victory, the role of “wife” goes hand in hand with a specific performance of femininity. It is also important to mention that the film only shows Alice’s morning routine in detail. However, it can be assumed that most women’s mornings and days share a similar structure because of the nature of the simulation and its goals. Additionally, the Final Girl trope (Clover 1992/2015) will be used to analyse two female characters, Alice and Margaret. The overlaps and differences with the original trope will be explored in detail. Lastly, I will analyse the implications of race on the success of becoming a Victory wife. I hypothesise that the movie’s portrayal of Margaret highlights the difficulties women of colour face in becoming Victory wives due to the intersections of race and gender.

4.3.1. Daily Routines

For Alice, a typical morning in Victory begins by making her husband breakfast. She fries eggs and bacon, spreads butter on toast and pours cups of coffee (*DWD* 00:03:21-00:05:10). These actions are filmed close-up and edited to happen in quick succession, creating a fast-paced and efficient feel to this part of the morning routine. After Alice and Jack are done in the kitchen, she sees Jack off to work with a kiss and then begins to work around the house. All of these acts are part of the social script she is expected to participate in as a wife. Interestingly, before Alice starts cleaning, there is a noticeable change in her appearance that is not addressed otherwise. She changes from Jack's shirt into a beautiful white dress and floral apron with her hair styled in an up-do, including a hair scarf (*DWD* 00:06:01-00:06:04). The audience does not get to see her go through these changes by applying make-up or getting dressed. Instead, Alice's impeccable appearance is mystified by a jump cut, implying that a Victory wife looks put together with little to no effort for all occasions. The subsequent film sequence highlights this sentiment because Alice is shown making the bed, cleaning windows, scrubbing the bath, and dreamily Hoovering the living room, all the while impeccably dressed and styled (*DWD* 00:06:04-00:06:25). Once Alice has finished with her morning clean of the house, she spends the day attending a ballet class, gossiping with her friend and neighbour, Bunny (Olivia Wilde), and finally preparing for the arrival of her husband by cooking dinner. However, dinner is quickly abandoned and even flung to the floor when Jack returns home because he orally pleases Alice immediately after his arrival (*DWD* 00:12:03-00:13:21). Since this is the introduction to Alice and Jack's lives, it can be assumed that this is what a typical day for them looks like. Alice's daily routines unmistakably centre around her husband. Even though she participates in activities throughout the day, it is evident that she spends a lot of time waiting and preparing for her husband to come home to serve and tend to him. I assume that the other female residents of Victory have similar daily routines due to the simulation's nature and the fact that Alice and other wives are shown doing various activities together, often simultaneously.

The women's routines are set up to fulfil their roles as wives, ergo their husbands' fantasies, which include a home-cooked meal, a clean home, and a beautiful wife waiting

for them after work. The routines also ensure that the women perform their gender in “acceptable” ways. Butler’s theory on gender performativity states that gender is a performance that relies on repeated acts over time (*Gender* 34). When this concept is used to analyse the Victory wives’ daily routines, it becomes clear that their lives are structured in ways that enforce a strict gender performance based on what the men deem acceptable. The women are always smiling, calm, well-dressed and styled, embodying a type of femininity that the men idealise. These repetitive behaviours are part of the identity-creating process for the women. Their gender and identity are deeply intertwined with these ideals, though they seem to be unaware of it. Similarly, the women’s hobbies go hand in hand with the specific performance of womanhood that is expected of them. That is to say, the simulation does not offer the Victory women activities that would deter them from achieving the desired gender performance. Instead, they are offered the illusion of choice. The only hobbies Alice seems to have are swimming, ballet, and shopping. Unsurprisingly, all of these activities have stereotypically been associated with “classic” femininity and are consequently deemed acceptable to be pursued by the Victory women. So, by keeping up with their daily routines, the women are unknowingly and unconsciously limited to a specific way of expressing their gender. The women’s repetitive behaviour is highlighted in the film through repetition and jump cuts. The shots depicting Alice’s routines are very similar and even identical in a few instances. In total, the film shows Alice’s morning routine six times (*DWD* 00:03:23-00:06:25; 00:27:14-00:27:53; 00:38:36-00:40:55; 00:47:46-00:48:54; 01:08:19-01:08:50; 01:33:38-01:34:10) and the evening routine twice (*DWD* 00:11:51-00:13:25; 01:34:17-01:35:20). The first long sequence showing Alice’s morning and evening routine, establishes a baseline and makes the viewer familiar with them. This is important to know later in the film, when the routines start to become hard or impossible to follow for Alice because of strange occurrences. At the beginning, Alice continues to follow her routines despite the strangeness. That is, until the peculiar happenings reach a point where she can no longer ignore them and calls for help after wrapping her head in clingfilm (*DWD* 00:48:13-00:48:54). After this incident, there are two more depictions of the morning routine, the last of which is used to highlight Alice’s return to her simulation self. Alice makes Jack’s breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee towards the movie’s end, symbolising her brief return to her “correct” gender role. She also sports the same dress and hairstyle as she

did in the first morning routine that the audience got to see. This fact adds to the narrative and shows that she is back to her usual self, able to perform her femininity “right”. Before returning to the correct gender performance and role of docile Victory wife, though, she becomes a sore point in the neighbourhood because she deviates from the routine, and consequently, from the prescribed norms and gender performance.

Alice begins to stray from her routine after she goes into the desert. At first, the changes are minor. She screams and storms out of ballet class (*DWD* 00:41:54-00:42:27), asks uncomfortable questions (*DWD* 00:45:04) or speaks the truth about her friend’s death (*DWD* 00:43:18-00:46:30). However small these changes may be at the beginning; they symbolise that Alice is beginning her journey of uncovering the truth and finding her way back to her real self. Her performance falls apart, and any of the usual routines Alice tries to do leave her confused or hurt because her reality is shifting (*DWD* 00:34:50-00:38:36; 00:48:00-00:48:55). The simplicity and ease with which she was previously able to perform her duties are entirely gone, which points to the constructed nature of Alice’s life as a Victory wife, and Victory as such. This journey of uncovering the truth is by no means comfortable or pleasant, as deviations from the norm are commonly punished by society (Butler, *Trouble* 190). Unsurprisingly, then, Alice’s breaks with the Victory wife routine and its consequent norms create problems for her. For one, her place in the community is affected by her deviations. Her best friend, Bunny, abandons her, her husband and doctor gaslight her, and Frank’s wife reprimands her publicly. Moreover, when Alice becomes too inquisitive and proactive to be the ideal Victory wife, Jack sends her away for electroshock treatment. This final step in trying to keep Alice docile is the ultimate punishment for deviating from her prescribed role. She is not only sent away against her will but also has her memories stripped to shape her into the perfect wife again. Jack and Frank put in all of this effort because Alice’s refusal to cook, clean, and be a “good” wife is not just a personal rebellion, but a disruption of the gendered system Victory proposes. Her disruption is so dangerous because it draws attention to the constructed nature of the women’s lives in Victory, inviting the other women to question their reality too.

Another important aspect in the Victory women’s lives is their performance of “ideal” femininity through their appearance. The women are all dressed and styled to represent the ultimate fantasy for the Victory men. Alice’s appearance at the beginning of the film strongly aligns with this statement. However, once she begins her journey of uncovering

the truth, her appearance dramatically changes. During this period, Alice looks increasingly dishevelled. Her hair is unkempt, and she frequently wears a loose white or blue floral nightgown instead of the form-fitting sundresses and up-dos she had worn previously. This change in appearance further highlights her break with the prescribed gender performance and the role of the Victory wife. This is because the perfect Victory wife is always prim and proper - but Alice is no longer that perfect wife. Instead, Alice's appearance becomes closely intertwined with her appearance in the real world. In the real world, Alice wears little to no make-up and is mostly shown wearing her blue shrubs or the same loose white nightgown she wears in Victory (*DWD* 01:29:00; 01:37:09). These colours and silhouettes resemble each other and show the real Alice peeking through despite the manipulation. Her changes in appearance, then, on the one hand, symbolise the mental and physical toll Victory has on her. On the other hand, they symbolise a return to her real self, the one Jack has tried very hard to sedate and oppress. Interestingly, though, in the final fight scene between Jack and Alice, she has once again returned to her perfect Victory wife look. This choice to style Alice as Jack's fantasy during her escape and killing of him emphasises her rejection of the fantasy. She may look the part, but her actions are not aligned with the docile, compliant and passive wife Jack has dreamt of. Instead, she is becoming a subject that demands her opinion be heard, no matter her looks. In doing so, she shatters the illusion of Victory wholly. Her ability to kill Jack dressed as his fantasy, soiling her feminine white dress in blood in the process, symbolises this shattering. By killing him, Alice commits the ultimate transgression and rebellion against the restricting scaffold that Jack forced her to live in. Something that the Victory men were told was impossible. It is this strength, fighting for her survival and killing her primary oppressor, that makes Alice a perfect contender for the Final Girl trope.

4.3.2. The Final Girl(s)

The Final Girl is the victim-hero and protagonist of the film. The female character was initially characterised as intelligent, courageous, watchful, different from her peers, "boyish", or sexually inactive (Clover 36-39). This concept was based on slasher films of the 1980s but has since become a common trope in and outside of the horror genre (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 4). Alice exhibits many overarching traits that are aligned with the original trope of the Final Girl. She is the protagonist of the film, intelligent, courageous,

watchful and different from her peers. The latter is important because Victory confines the women to rigid societal roles, namely those of mother and wife. Most of Alice's friends fulfil or want to fulfil both roles. Interestingly, though, Alice has no desire to become a mother. This distinguishes her from her peers. Alice's child-free life is even a topic of discussion amongst the women. Bunny comments: "I live next door. You wouldn't believe the things I've heard. It's like they're on a perpetual honeymoon. No, Jack and Alice only have time for each other" (*DWD* 00:13:59-00:14:06). Alice takes this light-heartedly and states that having children is "not what we want" (*DWD* 00:14:07). Her disinterest in having children does not fit into the picture of the usual Victory wife. At first, it seems this might be a more emancipated aspect of Alice's life. However, considering that Jack has dictated her environment and opinions, their child-free life is probably due to him wanting to be the sole subject of Alice's attention. Bunny's comment on Jack and Alice's relationship also reveals one important aspect of Alice's character that differs from the original concept of the Final Girl - her active sex life.

The Final Girl, as imagined by Clover, was uninterested in sex or sexually inactive (36). This is vital to her survival because slasher films often punish sexual activity with death (Clover 33-34). In *Don't Worry Darling*, however, Alice is not punished in the way sexually active women usually are in slashers. She can even assume the role of the Final Girl, despite her active sex life. This divergence from the original concept supports the view that the Final Girl is a "living trope" that changes with time (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 5). Alice, being sexually active, is then an update on the Final Girl suited for contemporary audiences. Alice's hyper-feminine appearance is also a reinterpretation of the Final Girl trope. Clover described the Final Girl as "boyish" (40), which Alice's simulation self is not. In Victory, Alice dresses "traditionally" feminine, wears make-up and has long hair. Additionally, her hobbies and likes are confined to stereotypical female interests, such as ballet or shopping. Consequently, Alice is framed as a feminine Final Girl. It appears as though there is no need for her to be masculinised to withstand the struggles she faces. She is capable and strong enough to do so without approximating manhood. Similarly, to her child-free marriage, these aspects, her femininity and active sex life, first appear to be empowering or liberating, when they are anything but. The idea that these aspects of Alice's life are liberating is a false assumption because she has no say in them. The reimagining of the Final Girl trope in Alice is then interesting because she challenges

the trope on a surface level. Her sexuality is coerced and curated for Jack's desires only, and her ability to consent is completely stripped away. The same principle applies to her appearance. She does not dress hyper-feminine or go to ballet because she wants to; she does so because she is programmed to. It is unclear how much of Alice's interests and personality can shine through despite the simulation. Nevertheless, I contend that Alice's character is an interesting take on the Final Girl trope because the ideals of womanhood that are attached to the Final Girl and the housewife differ vastly. The original concept of the Final Girl's masculinised self is sharply contrasted with Victory's embodiment of femininity – the housewife. I believe that Alice's (albeit forced) femininity brings a subversive quality to her reiteration of the trope, despite its limitations, and especially because the men in the simulation believe the women to be unable to commit harm.

Alice also fulfils another aspect of the Final Girl trope, namely killing and/or fleeing from the perpetrator. She manages to escape the confines, not only of Jack but also of Victory, the ideological monster of the film. Her escape from the simulation is, however, fraught with physical and mental pain. For most of the movie, Alice's mental pain is highlighted and focused on. She hallucinates, has nightmares and is gaslighted after witnessing Margaret's suicide. Nobody seems to take her concerns seriously. Instead, Alice is repeatedly gaslighted into thinking that her concerns are unfounded, verging on paranoia, and caused by "run-of-the-mill exhaustion" (*DWD* 00:49:19). This leads her to become increasingly isolated and paranoid throughout the movie. The extent of the physical pain she is subjected to only becomes apparent in the last third of the movie. She is ripped from Jack's car and is taken to an undisclosed location. There she is, violently strapped to a hospital bed, receiving electroshocks. Alice is shown convulsing from the shocks, visibly in pain (*DWD* 01:27:15-01:27:22). Moreover, her forceful entrapment by Jack and its consequent physical harm are also revealed. All these aspects align with the Final Girl trope, because Alice's struggles and peril are explored in the film (Clover 35). The Final Girl is, however, able to persevere and often ends up killing the monster or killer of the film (Clover 35). This also applies to Alice, who kills Jack after she finds out the truth about Victory (*DWD* 01:43:20). Moreover, Alice must withstand extreme levels of exertion to achieve her freedom in the final scenes of the film. She runs barefoot up a hill in the desert because Frank's men are chasing her. The physical pain is heightened by the mental pain Alice experiences in knowing that her life has been nothing but a farce. With the

information that Jack revealed beforehand, she also knows that by fleeing the scene, she is abandoning her friends, who are also trapped in the simulation. Knowing that they will continue to be forced to live in this simulation surely adds to the pain Alice experiences during her escape. Nevertheless, she withstands this pain and hurt because she is the Final Girl.

Lastly, there is one other vital aspect of Alice's character that is in line with Clover's original concept: her whiteness. Alice's whiteness is integral to her being the Final Girl because it is "a precondition for challenging the [...] patriarchal status quo" (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 6). Consequently, women of colour are rarely represented in the role of the Final Girl (Paszkievicz & Rusnak 4). This also applies to the film in question. Alice, *DWD*'s Final Girl, and Margaret, the only Black woman, share many traits. Margaret is the first to notice cracks in Victory's façade. She openly questions the project and its rules, is curious, outspoken, and committed to seeking the truth. Margaret also goes into the restricted area of Victory and loses her son in the process. Margaret's son is said to have died during their venture into the desert. However, it is not known what exactly happened to him because his body was never found. More information transpires when Alice, Peg (Kate Berlant), and Bunny discuss this incident while shopping. Bunny tells the story and mentions that Margaret claims that "they took him to punish her" (*DWD* 00:26:01). The scene is interspersed by flashbacks that show Margaret and her son struggling to walk in the heat of the desert (*DWD* 00:25:24-00:26:04). Margaret's story and Bunny's lack of empathy towards her are a cautionary tale for Alice and all other women. The message is clear: do not challenge the rules or you will get punished. In Margaret's case, her punishment is the loss of her son, credibility, and social standing. Nevertheless, Margaret persists. She asks critical questions (*DWD* 00:17:39-00:17:47), stands up for herself (*DWD* 00:21:44-00:21:59) and reaches out to find companionship in Alice (*DWD* 00:40:00-00:40:32) despite the pain and punishments she had and still has to endure. Consequently, Margaret is different from most of her peers. She is alienated from the community based on her actions and is childless. Based on these characteristics and actions, Margaret could theoretically have been the Final Girl in *Don't Worry Darling's* story. Practically, however, she is unable to assume the role because of her race. This is due to the different perceptions and stereotypes women of colour are confronted with in the media and real life. In the media, specifically horror films, demonstrations of strength

by women of colour are often framed as pejorative or overly manly (Brooks 464). These perceptions or readings of strong black women are detrimental and prohibit women of colour from embodying the trope because the Final Girl develops from a victim into a hero. The hero of a story cannot be seen as unsympathetic, pejorative or unnerving by the audience because that would defeat the purpose of the hero role. Instead, the hero must be sympathetic, approachable, and lovable. These things apply to the framing Alice receives in *DWD*. Alice's feelings, struggles, and humanity are explored thoroughly. Margaret's motives and emotions are not explored in such detail. This is mainly due to her role as a side character, where her actions and pain primarily act as a catalyst for Alice's awakening. Nevertheless, she is also perceived differently by the other characters in the film. Margaret, unlike Alice, is openly disliked. The women and men call her insane or hysterical; her boldness is demonised (*DWD* 00:24:40-00:25:17), and her resistance is made a spectacle by Frank (*DWD* 00:17:37-00:18:15). Alice is never treated as harshly for similar actions. Consequently, in comparing Margaret's resistance with Alice's, it becomes evident that the reactions to Margaret's actions are negatively impacted by her race. It is unsurprising, then, that these two women's stories have such vastly different outcomes. Alice is the Final Girl, a victim-hero who manages to escape the simulation and achieve a happy ending. Margaret's story does not have a happy ending or a redemption arc because she commits suicide. Her suicide is also a defining factor that keeps Margaret from becoming a Final Girl because she lacks the "enduring stubbornness to live that characterises the Final Girl" (Brooks 472). If this had not been the case, then her character would have been an intriguing reimagining of the trope. Margaret's standing within Victory is another interesting, albeit ambiguous, aspect to explore.

4.3.3. Margaret versus The White Nuclear Family

Margaret's position in Victory is fascinating because of two central aspects of her character. Firstly, she is the only Black woman among the central female cast. Secondly, she is a *failed* Victory wife. The film shows that these two aspects are interwoven, ultimately commenting on the difficulties Black women face in inherently white institutions or ideals, like the nuclear family. As I have already discussed, this family structure is integral to Victory because it is a mythologised ideal of the 1950s. Margaret is

unable to fulfil her roles within the nuclear family. She is a “bad” wife and mother. The audience first learns that Margaret struggles the most among the Victory women in assuming her role as a docile housewife. The instances in which the audience sees glimpses into Ted (Arie’el Stachel) and Margaret’s marriage are infinitely less harmonious than Alice and Jack’s. At a party, Margaret and her husband are shown standing away from the crowd. Their position shows their figurative standing within Victory, which is on the outskirts of the community. They are not part of the community anymore because of Margaret’s inability to fit into her roles. This is also exemplified in the pool party scene, when Margaret disrupts Shelley’s speech by asking, “Why are we here? We shouldn’t be here.” (*DWD* 00:17:38-00:17:48). All heads turn to face her, and everyone is visibly confused or annoyed by her interruption (Figure 4). As a result, she is forcefully grabbed and silenced by her husband, Ted (*DWD* 00:17:40-00:17:44). Figure 4 shows that Ted looks at her with disdain and ultimately drags her away so she cannot elaborate on her questions. The situation is reminiscent of a child being reprimanded by their parent. This



Figure 4: Ted drags Margaret away (*DWD* 00:17:40)

is emphasised by Frank saying “Now, Now.” (*DWD* 00:17:58), a phrase commonly used to address children, as he calms and gains control of the crowd. When the couple has left the scene, Frank openly shares that they are having marital problems. Though it is never explicitly mentioned, the locus of their issues is put on Margaret. She is too curious, too outspoken, and too critical to be the wife Ted needs her to be. This framing of Margaret aligns with how Black women are often portrayed in horror cinema, as asking too many questions or being too incisive (Orr 87). Shortly after this incident, Alice discovers Margaret sitting in a chair. Ted is standing in front of her imposingly and tries to force her

to take two pills (*DWD* 00:21:41-00:22:00). When Margaret sees Alice, she tries to engage her in conversation, saying, “They’re hiding me in here” (*DWD* 00:21:47). Ted puts on a happy face and turns to Alice to explain that Margaret is just tired, she will feel better soon. However, Margaret speaks up again, saying, “I’m not fine. Nothing is fine.” (*DWD* 00:21:50 - 00:21:54), openly defying her husband. Evidently, Margaret is not the docile and submissive wife that Ted was promised when he entered the simulation. This difference in actual versus promised wife puts a palpable strain on their relationship despite the couple's little screen time. Nevertheless, Ted seems determined to keep his spot in Victory, so he tries to sedate and silence Margaret. His efforts are largely successful because Margaret’s voice is ignored. The community at Victory ostracised her after it transpired that she had gone into the restricted area of Victory. Margaret’s visit to the desert led to her complete isolation, not solely because it is forbidden, but because she lost her son in the process. Bunny is the one to share her story as a cautionary tale (*DWD* 00:24:58-00:25:44). In this tale, Margaret is, once again, made out to be the root of the problem, and arguably worse, an active participant in harming her child and threatening her husband’s status in Victory. The framing Margaret is subjected to in Victory paints a clear picture: she is a failed wife and mother. Her failure is portrayed as stemming from her bold, inquisitive personality. However, I would argue that Margaret’s struggles in assimilating to life in Victory comment on the racist ideals that underpin the simulation. Victory strives for a patriarchal past with overtones of white supremacy. The simulations' visual indulgence in a 1950s aesthetic that has come to represent the “good old days” aligns perfectly with their patriarchal and racist ideals. Moreover, the American nuclear family is portrayed chiefly as “white, middle-class [and] patriarchal” (Chambers 49). This portrayal matches the families shown in Victory, aside from Margaret’s. The world Margaret is forced to inhabit is then a world that is rooted in white supremacist thinking. Victory is not made to accommodate people of colour, let alone families that exist outside of the heteronormative, white, middle-class ideal. Margaret’s struggle speaks to that. Her story points to the difficulties women of colour face in trying to assimilate ideals rooted in whiteness. Additionally, Margaret is criticised more harshly for her actions because of the intersection of her gender and race. Usually, class and age are other defining factors in an intersectional character analysis; however, in Victory, class can be left out of the equation because all residents are affluent and semi-wealthy. Age

is also unimportant because all adult residents appear to be around the same age. Consequently, only Margaret's race and gender negatively impact how the community in Victory perceives her. The intense scrutiny Margaret is under is shown in the repercussions of her visit to the restricted area of Victory. Not only is her son taken away from her as a result, but her friends, Alice and Bunny, and the rest of Victory paint her as a danger to the project and ostracise her. After Alice visits Victory, she is allowed to return to normalcy without real repercussions. Alice is afforded leniency when Margaret is treated with cruelty. This disparity reveals the impact of the racist ideals underlying Victory.

Whilst Margaret is unfairly treated because of her race, her unique position as one of the few women of colour in Victory is an asset. Her unique vantage point can be used to pinpoint, question and criticise dominant beliefs and ideas (hooks, *feminist theory* 16-17). This is why Margaret is the first woman to share her doubts. She was the first to see behind the pretty façade of Victory and critically question its rules. Naturally, her peers do not believe her because they lack Margaret's special vantage point. In this way, *Don't Worry Darling* mimics how early feminist movements dismissed women of colour's struggles and observations (hooks, *feminist theory* 7). This often left the women "ostracised and silenced" (hooks, *feminist theory* 9), which is the case for Margaret, too. Despite being ostracised from the tight-knit community at Victory, Margaret tries to rekindle her connection with Alice through a phone call. In this call, Margaret confronts Alice about her going to headquarters. She says, "You went out there. You saw it. They're lying to all of us! [...] No one asks any questions. We can't stay here anymore Alice. [crying] I'm not crazy. Alice, you know me..." (DWD 00:39:43-00:40:34). In this scene, Margaret risks her safety to find the support and sisterhood she once had in Alice. Margaret assumes that Alice will finally believe her after what she has seen. Unfortunately, Alice doubts herself and her memories because Jack gaslighted her. Therefore, she also doubts Margaret and shuts down her effort to find a companion in her fight to get out of Victory by saying, "You're being ridiculous and you need to stop this" (DWD 00:40:29-00:40:34). This sentence completely dismisses Margaret's concerns and even frames them as far-fetched and highly unlikely by using the word "ridiculous." Margaret's attempt to rekindle the sisterhood she had with Alice fails dramatically. The severity of Alice's reaction adds to Margaret's alienation. Additionally, Alice's refusal to

believe in and show compassion for Margaret seems to transport her into a state of hopelessness because shortly after this phone call, Margaret commits suicide.

Margaret's suicide is gruesome and loaded with meaning. The suicide scene shows Margaret slitting her throat with a kitchen knife while standing on the roof of her house. Alice is the only Victory resident who witnesses this scene. Alice is standing in her garden and looking up at Margaret. Figure 5 shows that behind Alice, light-coloured laundry hangs from various clothing lines. The clothes make the frame busy despite being a close-up of Alice's face. She



Figure 5: Alice looking at Margaret (DWD 00:42:49)



Figure 6: Margaret looking down at Alice (DWD 00:42:51)

looks confused and concerned (DWD 00:42:42-00:42:50). At first, Margaret's body is turned away from Alice. She only begins to turn her head after Alice screams her name. Margaret is also shown in a close-up. The perpetually blue sky, mountains and palm trees are shown in the background (Figure 6). These different backgrounds symbolise the very different states of mind the two women are in. Alice's busy frame represents her clouded mind. She is yet unable to see past the mirage of Victory. Figure 5 shows that her world is still highly saturated and bathed in the golden glow of a fantastical world. Margaret's comparatively empty background shows that she has found clarity. The openness of the sky allows her feelings to transcend in its spaciousness, creating an innately melancholic but imposing feeling. The composition of the scene, depicted in Figure 6, shows that Margaret is sure of her decision and has chosen the blank slate of death rather than further busying herself with domestic duties. This decision culminates when Margaret makes eye contact with Alice as she raises a small kitchen knife to her throat and, in one swift motion, slits her throat (DWD 00:42:50-00:42:57). Immediately, blood pools from her neck and Margaret falls to the ground. In this act, she not only fatally harms herself,

but she also severs her vocal cords – silencing herself just like the people around her have tried to do previously. The small kitchen knife is an interesting choice of weapon, as it is an object attached to patriarchal ideals of domesticity. Margaret presumably used the knife daily to cook meals for her husband and late son - a staple in any housewife's inventory and the only weapon she can wield in her home. Margaret's use of her kitchen knife to kill herself is a transgression and subversion of her roles as wife, caregiver, and mother. Margaret transgresses the patriarchal gender norms she is subjected to by using a tool, which once helped in her adherence to these very norms, to commit a violent act against herself. The kitchen knife, as Margaret's weapon, highlights the oppressive nature of Victory and its patriarchal ideals. Her death is then, by default, an act of defiance. She forgoes all future oppression at the whims of her husband by ending her life. Her death is her liberation from the oppressive system. She is taking back control of her agency, narrative and life by doing what the men deem impossible – women committing violence. Her suicide explicitly challenges and subverts patriarchal ideas about women's capability to commit harm. The Victory men never assumed or expected their wives to be able to commit violence on themselves or others. Margaret's suicide is the first instance in which the men's assumption is challenged. For Alice, Margaret's suicide and the following cover-up mark the first fundamental step in her journey of doubting Victory. That is because Margaret's suicide instils an uneasiness within Alice that ultimately leads to her liberation beyond death. There is, however, another aspect of Margaret's suicide that needs to be explored, namely her isolation and helplessness.

Margaret's suicide is the ultimate portrayal of the extreme levels of helplessness and despair she must have felt. These feelings were not merely prompted by the patriarchal system she had to endure. Instead, the tipping point was Margaret's inability to find sisterhood in Alice. Alice's role in Margaret's suicide is not to be disregarded. It is after their phone call, one last rejection from someone who supposedly shares her struggles, that Margaret kills herself. Margaret's situation, therefore, alludes to the fact that white women can be responsible for the perpetuation of women of colour's victimisation (hooks, *feminist theory* 15). This is especially apparent when Alice's and Margaret's endings are compared. Margaret achieves liberation by suicide, which can be read as an act of defiance and despair. Alice, however, achieves true liberation by killing her oppressor and fleeing the simulation. Both women face immense struggles and are

oppressed by the very same system and people. The difference in their success in fleeing Victory appears to come down to race. Margaret's race has an undeniable impact on the discrimination and oppression she experiences. From the argumentative viewpoint I have presented so far, *Don't Worry Darling* seems to critically speak to how women of colour face more difficulties, scrutiny and abuse than white women in performing gender norms and achieving the nuclear family. Nevertheless, another viewpoint could be presented in which *Don't Worry Darling* does not address these issues but rather perpetuates hegemonic portrayals of people of colour within the horror genre.

A commonly known trope of the horror genre is that people of colour die early on in the film. Often, they are even the first to die (Coleman 206). They get killed before any of their white counterparts. The first death in *Don't Worry Darling* is no exception to this trope. Margaret's son is the first victim and is said to have died because of their trip to the Victory headquarters. The audience does not get to see or feel the full impact of his death, as it happened before the story is set. However, the audience does learn about the incident as a cautionary tale told by Bunny. The death of Margaret's son plays into the trope, primarily because Margaret contends that "they" (DWD 00:26:01) took her son away from her. Thus, it seems her son was the first person to fall victim to the Victory project. It is then interesting that the next person to die is another person of colour, namely Margaret. As I have already described, Margaret's suicide scene is loaded with meaning and can be interpreted in various ways. It is, therefore, no surprise that her suicide is also ambiguous when it comes to the horror trope. Her death is, on the one hand, ambiguous because she is not the first person to die. However, her suicide is a pivotal moment in the film and is portrayed in detail, which is not the case with her son's death. On the other hand, Margaret's death is ambiguous because she has no killer. Usually, the first person to die in a horror movie is already a victim of the film's villain. Margaret's story is not as straightforward. Whilst she does commit suicide, the cause of her death can largely be ascribed to the abuse and isolation she suffers at the hands of her husband, fellow residents and the very structure of Victory. It is these circumstances that drive her to suicide. Metaphorically speaking, isolation from her peers, the death of her son, and unrealistic patriarchal ideals of womanhood killed Margaret. Consequently, I want to argue that her death is yet another example of people of colour dying first in horror movies. The continuation of this trope is a symptom of the historical and continuous

removal of black stories from the horror genre and the film industry at large. This also manifests in people of colour often being confined to roles as buddies or side characters, that is to say, as disposable characters (Coleman 313). These types of characters protect and help the white main character (Coleman 206). The same can be said for Margaret. The loss of her son is reduced to a story. Her questions create upheaval and gnaw at Alice until she starts to question Victory truly. Finally, Margaret's death is what ultimately prompts Alice to seek the truth. Margaret is then a side-character who helps Alice along her journey, unlike any other (white) character in the film, which is in line with Coleman's argument. Her early death, only 44 minutes into the two-hour-long film, solidifies her sacrificial role. Margaret's tragic suicide becomes nothing more than a narrative device meant to propel Alice forward. She is not allowed to tell her story: her husband drags her away when she asks questions (DWD 00:17:40-00:17:44), Alice cuts her off on the phone (DWD 00:40:25-00:40:30), and Bunny recalls the loss of Margaret's son instead of her (DWD 00:25:17-00:26:04). The film, consequently, frames her as a tragic black female character, without giving her complexity.

The arguments stated above show that *Don't Worry Darling* is a film that is ambiguous in its commentary on Black female characters in horror films. The film's dealings with race can, on the one hand, be interpreted as commentary on the difficulties racial minorities face in trying to approximate the white nuclear family. On the other hand, it could also be seen as perpetuating hegemonic views on women of colour. I am inclined to see the film as trying to achieve the former. The film's exploration and critique of the difficulties women of colour face when living in a patriarchal and white supremacist society is by no means ideal. Nevertheless, the movie does exemplify the heightened discrimination that women of colour endure in trying to achieve ideals that are rooted in whiteness. This happens not only pertaining to the nuclear family but also the Final Girl trope, as I have shown in the previous section. I especially find the different outcomes of Alice's and Margaret's lives striking because the movie clearly shows how women of colour are treated more harshly based on the intersections of their race and gender. The exploration of the female characters does, however, not feel exploitative, which I assume is mainly due to Wilde's commitment to the feminist gaze.

4.4. From spectacle to subject

In this chapter, I will explore how Wilde uses the male and feminist gaze in *Don't Worry Darling*. The dichotomy between the male and feminist gaze and their use within the film is an interesting avenue to explore, as the two gazes fulfil different but deliberate purposes. I hypothesise that the male gaze is deliberately used to create unease in the viewer. In the first part of this subchapter, three scenes are examined in which the male gaze is employed in this manner. The second subchapter focuses on the film's use of the feminist gaze, drawing on Soloway's concept. The three parts of Soloway's feminist gaze — the feeling-seeing, the gazed gaze, and returning the gaze — are applied to pivotal scenes in the film to argue that the feminist gaze is explicitly used as a tool to show Alice taking power. The analysis will demonstrate that each part of the feminist gaze works in tandem with Alice's journey of escaping the confines of Victory and becoming an autonomous subject.

4.4.1. The immobilising male gaze

The male gaze takes centre stage in *DWD* as the simulation is based on a male fantasy. The women are rendered according to the male gaze. Their appearance and behaviours are, therefore, designed to deny them autonomy and agency. This becomes apparent in the styling of the women and their daily lives, as I have already discussed. The women's daily routines and activities are based on patriarchal ideals. In this respect, the film shares similarities with the feminist horror film *The Stepford Wives* (1975). The women of Victory not only share the same 1950s housewife aesthetic with the Stepford Wives, but they also share similar interests and duties. This is because the idealised 1950s housewife is synonymous with the nuclear family and the American Dream that, to this day, unequivocally represents patriarchal fantasies about women and their place in the world. This is why the styling and setting of Victory are likely to evoke unease in a 21st-century audience due to their implications, such as female subordination, dependency on men, and lack of job opportunities. Additionally, the male gaze also penetrates the filmic language of *DWD*. This is not done unconsciously but deliberately to increase the innate horror of the film. In particular, there are three scenes where the use of the male gaze is notable. The first of which is the film's opening scene.

The opening scene shows Alice spinning and dancing in front of Jack while balancing a tray with a glass on her head (Figure 7). She looks at Jack, who is sitting across the room, drinking and talking to the other men whilst admiring her. Alice laughs and makes eye contact with Jack, who looks at her desirously. When she sees his desirous look, she holds his eye contact and laughingly revels in his gaze. Jack sees Alice as an erotic



Figure 7: Alice and Jack eye-line match (DWD 00:01:36-00:01:47)

spectacle in this moment, which she is aware of and playfully engages in. Their desire for each other is palpable, and Alice appears to be an active participant in this scene, performing for Jack. Consequently, this scene reads as a moment of shared affection, seemingly aligning with Deffenbacher's concept of the mutual gaze. The mutual gaze is a way of looking where desire is shared between two equally empowered individuals (Deffenbacher 460). The camera angle, setting, and music add to this feeling. Figure 7 shows that both characters' faces are framed in close-ups straight on, which does not favour one point of view. The warm glow of the lamps and soft furnishings in the background create a warm, homely, but sensual atmosphere that adds to the impression that Alice and Jack share a happy, loving and sensual relationship. This framing of Alice and Jack's relationship is upheld for most of the movie, which makes the plot twist even more horrific. Once the truth is revealed, this scene becomes retroactively disturbing because Alice is not an active participant in their relationship but only an object of Jack's desire. The opening scene is the male gaze masquerading as the mutual gaze because Alice's sexual agency is an illusion. It does not show two equally empowered individuals sharing a sensual moment, but an oppressor revelling in the success of his fantasy. Jack's fantasy is the blueprint for Alice's life. Her personality, desires and sexuality are scripted for Jack's pleasure and fantasy only. This truth stays hidden throughout the movie because the audience largely follows Alice's point of view. She does not believe Jack to

be the perpetrator and root of all her problems; he is her blind spot. Instead, she focuses on Frank, who is positioned as the villain. His characterisation as the villain manifests in Frank being the embodiment of the male gaze. The two scenes I analyse next support this claim.

The second scene occurs early in the film during a party at Frank's house. Alice is looking for Jack, who mysteriously disappeared during Frank's speech. As she walks away from the crowd, she is framed in a *mise-en-scène* reminiscent of a classic horror film (*DWD* 00:21:28-00:21:34). Cacti, yucca plants, and other small shrubs frame the forefront of the shot. In the background, a wall separates Alice from the party. The camera moves alongside Alice, following her movement. Similar framings or *mise-en-scène* are commonplace in the horror genre. The filmic language is used to create tension and implies that the person in the frame is in danger. The scene perfectly exemplifies this. The many plants surrounding the shot create a sense of Alice being secretly watched. This framing, paired with Alice's isolation from the party, the sudden silence, and her repeatedly calling out Jack's name, creates an uneasy feeling. After a short and uncomfortable encounter with Margaret and Ted, Alice seems to be relieved once she finds Jack in Frank's bedroom, trying on one of Frank's ties. She tentatively walks into the room and fixes the tie. While Alice redoes the tie Jack has on, he starts kissing her passionately and proceeds to pleasure Alice with his hand, despite her having some reservations at first. This spontaneous sexual act creates tension and culminates when Frank walks into the room. Jack is turned away; therefore, unaware of Frank watching them. Alice, however, notices Frank watching them with a satisfied look on his face. Strangely, Alice seems unable to speak up or react to Frank observing them (*DWD* 00:23:30-00:23:45). His gaze has transfixed her, immobilised her as an object of his desire. It seems as if he feels entitled to watch them, enjoying the outcome of his project. Meanwhile, Alice can only look back in horror, confused by Frank's audacity to stay and watch them. This scene establishes Frank as the film's villain and provides the first genuine insight into his character, inviting viewers to question him and his motives. This idea is driven home by his power over Alice, the film's heroine. His desirous gaze repeatedly transfixes Alice, cementing his role as the villain and embodiment of the male gaze.

The third scene unsurprisingly also involves Alice and Frank. At a dinner party, Frank sits on the couch and looks towards the kitchen (*DWD* 01:10:47). This shot is followed by an eye-line match that shows Alice's upper body from behind while she is cutting vegetables. Another close-up of Alice's face from the front shows her utterly engrossed in this task. These shots of Alice imply that Frank is closely watching her. Once again, the movie employs framing that is commonplace in the horror genre to create unease. Alice is framed as unassuming prey, with her neck exposed and back turned. The tension and unease created through the framing are heightened because Alice is entirely unaware of Frank's presence in the room until he speaks up. Once he does, she jumps a little and quickly turns around with a frightened and quizzical look on her face. Her look conveys the discomfort of being the recipient of Frank's gaze. This time, however, Frank's look does not seem to transfix her wholly because Alice continues cutting vegetables. That is, until he says, "I'm sorry Bunny didn't believe you" (*DWD* 01:11:22-01:11:24). In this quote, Frank refers to Alice's breakdown after Jack's promotion. Alice decided to confide in Bunny about Margaret's suicide, her trip to the headquarters, and what she had seen there. Bunny gaslights Alice, saying that she sounds crazy and should get a hold of herself for Jack's sake. The conversation took place in the women's bathrooms while Frank was onstage, which should make it impossible for him to know about. Alice is shellshocked because of Frank's reference and stops all activity. She stares straight ahead into space while Frank looms in the background, still looking at her. Frank continues speaking, while Alice listens to him silently and motionless. During his monologue, Frank projects his fantasies onto Alice, asking her to challenge him further. It becomes clear that he derives pleasure from Alice's resistance, though he does not see her resistance as an autonomous action. Instead, he sees it as something she does because of and for him. To Frank and his unabating gaze, Alice is simply another body to project a fantasy upon with the goal of his betterment and satisfaction. The camera stays close to Frank's and Alice's faces, revealing his pleasure and her unease. As the scene progresses, Frank moves closer, penetrating Alice's personal space, yet she still does not move or look directly at him. Alice's stagnancy and silence show the effect of what it is like to be seen through the male gaze. Additionally, this scene also drives home the idea that the male gaze is about power and ownership of the narrative. Alice remains silent and is unable to challenge the narrative throughout the entire kitchen scene. Her emotional turmoil plays

out on her face, which, combined with the absence of her voice, shows the detrimental effects of the male gaze on its object of desire. Alice is powerless and immobilised because of Frank's fantasy.

These two scenes use the male gaze in a rather conventional manner, but the outcome is anything but conventional, because the focus is on Alice's face. During Frank's monologue, Alice's face is repeatedly shown through close-ups, which demand that the audience share her emotions. These close-ups of Alice's face reveal that the male gaze creates discomfort and unease in its recipient. The impact of the male gaze is then not only felt and expressed by Alice but also by the viewer, who is forced to experience Alice's emotions. Thus, the male gaze is appropriated, subverted, and challenged by the feminist gaze in the second and third scenes. Moreover, I want to argue that Soloway's feminist gaze can be applied to *DWD* to show how it counteracts the immobilisation and simplification of female characters rendered through the male gaze. The feminist gaze focuses on the internal world of its characters, and more importantly, on their agency. The "feeling-seeing" and "gazed gaze" are two parts of Soloway's feminist gaze that can be found in the two scenes with Frank. The feeling-seeing camera clearly shows Alice's full range of emotions during her encounters with Frank. The camera also demands that the audience feel alongside her. The gazed gaze showcases what it is like to be subjected to the male gaze (Soloway 00:21:15-00:21:41), hence highlighting the negative repercussions on the female characters. The third part of the feminist gaze, namely, returning the gaze, is employed shortly after the kitchen scene. It is used to depict a transformative moment for Alice, where she finally and unabashedly looks back, creating an empowering and empathetic antithesis to the male gaze.

4.4.2. Returning the gaze

As Frank leaves the kitchen, Alice's shocked and confused face is shown in a close-up, with the sound of the guests chatting in the background. The next scene begins by showing the guests walking to their seats as Alice watches them from the corner. Her mood has visibly shifted. The change in demeanour is palpable even without a close-up of her face. Alice stands menacingly in the corner, watching them all sit down. She is standing in a variation of a power pose. Her left hand is on her hip, and in her right hand, she carries a martini glass. Her body language and demeanour show that she is ready to

fight Frank now, to expose him to the entire dinner party (*DWD* 01:13:05-01:13:11). First, however, she establishes her power by pointedly snatching Jack's seat at the head of the table, and across from Frank (*DWD* 01:13:14). Frank is visibly intrigued by her action. The rest of the guests, however, fall silent because they are aware of Alice breaking the conventions of their social circle. Her place as a wife is not at the head of the table but on its side, next to her husband. Alice defies this norm and, in doing so, displays her willingness to uncover or fight for the truth. Additionally, she creates a level playing field for her and Frank, who sits directly across from her. Both Alice and Frank are shown from the waist up, regarding each other with sly smiles, waiting for the battle to begin (*DWD* 01:13:30-01:13:32). Alice is the first one to speak. She opens the conversation with questions about Violet's background, who is the newest wife in Victory. In this conversation, it is revealed that Violet's personal history is identical to that of a few other female residents. Alice draws attention to this unusual occurrence. Meanwhile, the camera moves closer to Alice, showing her from the shoulders up. Her inquisitive look has become the primary focus. Slowly, the other guests' attempts to make light conversation die down, and silence befalls the table as Alice keeps pushing, asking more questions, and daring everyone to look where they should not. While her questions are what drive the conversation forward, the intensity of her look and demeanour is what keeps everyone quiet and listening. The dinner guests all appear to be startled and confused by Alice's questions; however, the newest couple in Victory, Violet and Bill, is visibly shaken by her comments. There are two reasons for their discomfort. Firstly, Alice is mostly directing her questions at Violet. As the newest couple in the neighbourhood, being questioned in such a way is bound to create discomfort because they are still trying to find their place in Victory. Secondly, as the newest couple, they have not had the time to build relationships with their neighbours, let alone Frank and Shelley. Therefore, it must be nerve-wracking to sit next to the creator of Victory and five other people whom they hardly know while being subjected to unusual questions and strange "coincidences". Alice's behaviour elicits doubt and confusion in Violet, whereas fear is the primary emotion on Bill's face. He is scared of what Alice's questions and actions might result in. He was promised a docile wife who would and could not stand up to or deny him anything. Alice's behaviour shows that this is a false promise. Her personality and gaze are disruptive to what he believes to be true about Victory. Alice demands that

Bill and all other dinner guests pay attention to her thoughts and feelings. She is demanding to be seen as more than a body to project fantasies upon. Unsurprisingly, Frank tries to break Alice's spell on the dinner guests. He uses arguments based on science, like psychology or biology, alongside ad hominem attacks to discredit Alice. To discredit Alice and to reassure the other guests, Frank says the following:

"Delusion, memory problems, hysteria. We saw these issues with Margaret, and know that it's, uh, completely curable. Dr. Collins prescribed you a suite of medications, which you are clearly not taking. The question is why? Bunny, your best friend is worried about you. She thinks that you need help. [...] Is that why you went out there? To headquarters. You wandered out by yourself. You ignored every rule. And she put all of your lives in danger." (*DWD 1:16:10-01:16:35*)

In this excerpt of Frank's speech, it is apparent that he never addresses Alice's concerns or questions. Instead, he smugly uses his insider knowledge about Alice to make her seem unreliable. He compares Alice to Margaret, who is the scapegoat of Victory because she failed to live up to the expectations of the docile Victory wife, thus establishing her as unreliable and dangerous. Frank's words have enormous weight in this crowd because he is the creator and beloved leader of Victory. The camera plays with the power dynamic between Frank and Alice. It is almost as if the viewer is watching a tennis match. The camera juts back and forth between close-ups of Alice and Frank. Frank has gained more screen time during his speech. He addresses the room, looks at the others, and plays with the (narrative) power his gaze has on his followers and their wives, before focusing on Alice whilst he shares more incriminating and unknown information about her. Previously, Frank's power and gaze would have resulted in Alice being transfixed; however, that is not the case in this scene. Alice keeps pushing and asking questions. Her questions and feelings are the focal point of the scene, which is a testament to the feminist gaze. The camera work shows Alice returning the gaze, rebelling by critiquing and asking questions about Frank and Victory. It is only when Shelley, Frank's wife, verbally accosts Alice that the intense conversation stops, and the guests leave. The scene ends with Alice and Frank staring at each other. Alice is furious and is staring at Frank hatefully. The scene is charged with her fury at Frank, at being dismissed and belittled. The camera lingers on Alice's face, giving her the necessary space to show her emotions. As a result, Alice's anger transcends her face as it takes up the whole frame and demands that the audience feel with her. Alice's rebellion might not have resulted in the desired outcome, which was to discredit Frank and achieve her emancipation. Still,

the message is clear: Alice will no longer be suspended by Frank's gaze. She has found her power in looking back and actively seeking the truth. The feminist gaze highlights this internal change by staying close to Alice's face and making the audience feel her rage and empowerment alongside her. Alice's rebellion is so disruptive that she is forcefully removed from Victory after this dinner party scene. This is unsurprising, as "anyone who casts too much doubt on the world inhabited by the ghost, or slasher, or otherworldly bogeyman is usually not long for the narrative" (Orr 87). The same principle applies to Alice. Her questions and rebellion have made her a liability to the programme's success. As a result, Frank and Jack send Alice away to receive electroshock treatment. The electroshocks are used to erase her memory and brainwash her into the perfect, docile housewife. Her compliance with Victory's norms, however, does not last long and results in a fighting scene between her and Jack.

In the fighting scene, the feminist gaze is used to portray Alice's journey to uncovering the truth. The scene is vital to the narrative and Alice's emancipation because she can finally rebel against her oppressor, escape the confines of the male gaze, and become a fully autonomous subject. Similarly to the dinner scene, Wilde's feminist gaze stays close to Alice's face. Many close-ups of Alice highlight the range of emotions she experiences. The opening shot of the scene shows Alice preparing dinner while Jack hums and turns on their vinyl player. The song Jack is humming triggers Alice's memory, and she falls to the floor from the shock of her memories flooding back. She is cowering on the floor, panting and completely distraught. Jack rushes towards her, but Alice puts up a tentative hand and says, "Don't" (*DWD* 01:38:35), signalling for him to stop coming closer. As she slowly turns around, her face is obscured by her hair. She looks up at Jack from the floor with a look of shock and disbelief as she says, "What did you do?" (*DWD* 01:39:04). Alice's distress and anger are visible despite her hair partially covering her face. Her slow turn and the camera's steady position highlight the gravity of her emotions. An eye-line match shows Jack standing hunched over and looking at Alice. The camera pans closer towards his face as the realisation of his secret being exposed washes over him. Another shot of Alice, still on the floor, breathing heavily and staring at Jack with shock and disgust, is shown. The camera stays close to Alice's face, reflecting the emotional journey she is going through. Then another eye-line match that shows Jack. This time, however, it is not a close-up, but a cowboy shot. A cowboy shot, also called a medium-long shot,

portrays characters from the knee or mid-thigh to their head (Medium long shot). This shot creates tension and implies that Jack is ready to fight for his fantasy life in Victory. Alice's inferior position on the floor makes her appear vulnerable compared to Jack. This dynamic quickly changes when Alice jumps to her feet after Jack tries to come closer. The camera stays close to Alice, framing her from the chest up. The emotional turmoil she experiences is at the forefront of these shots, largely due to the presence of the feeling-seeing camera. Her shock and distress slowly transform into anger and hurt right in front of the audience. Jack, however, is shown from wider angles. This dichotomy highlights that Alice's perspective takes precedence. It puts her emotions and experience above anyone else's. Hence, the audience experiences the shock of the plot twist from her point of view. Jack's inner world is kept at a distance, literally and figuratively. That is, until Alice accuses him of being psychotic and Jack tries to dispute it by explaining his motives (*DWD* 01:39:56). The camera moves closer to him, and many loose close-ups of Alice and Jack follow. Similarly to the dinner scene, the camera alternates between shots of Alice and Jack, reminiscent of an intense tennis match. A switch in camera angles marks the climax of their fight. Alice does not accept the lies Jack tries to tell her about her real life. She takes her power by refusing to believe the man who forced her into this simulation. The camera angle and Alice's body language reflect this empowerment and acquisition of agency. In Figure 8, Alice is framed in a cowboy shot. She is standing in the middle of their living room, fist punching on her chest, screaming, "It was my life. My life. You don't get to take that from me!" (*DWD* 01:40:15). This shift from loose close-ups to a cowboy shot adds to Alice's display of resistance. It shows her as an active participant in this fight



Figure 8: Alice in the living room (*DWD* 01:40:15)

because in this scene, the cowboy shot was previously only used to show Jack. Alice's display of anger is now clearly anchored in her physical body, creating a contrast with how Jack is framed. As he explains his "reasons" for participating in the simulation, he is shown in close-ups. The camera slowly draws closer while he explains why he turned to Frank and the Victory project. His anger and dissatisfaction with the world are allowed to manifest in these shots. In this way, Jack is humanised, granting the audience and Alice insights into his, albeit twisted, psyche. An eye-line match stays close to Alice's face throughout his rant. These shots are not voyeuristic or indulging in Alice's pain; instead, they highlight the variety of emotions Alice experiences. These shots show what it feels like to be betrayed, gaslighted, and controlled. Jack is also portrayed through the feminist gaze, allowing Alice and, therefore, the audience to be momentarily lured in by his argument and apology. This is a turning point in the fight. Jack and Alice get closer to each other, and for the first time throughout the scene, they are shown together in one frame. This framing toys with a possible reunion of Alice and Jack. However, Jack shows no patience for Alice's plea for space and more answers, holding onto her waist against her will. He cannot cope with her demands because they go beyond his fantasy of her. He loses his temper as Alice tries to move away and holds her so tightly around her waist that she is unable to breathe, immobilising her and once again trying to turn her into the passive, docile wife he wants her to be. As a result, Alice panics and tries to free herself from Jack's grip. She is defying his affection and fantasy. In a frenzy, she grabs a whiskey glass that is close by and hits Jack on the head, ultimately killing him. This scene's high number of cuts creates a clouded and untethered feel, mimicking Alice's state of mind after learning that her whole world was a mirage and losing the person who anchored her there.

Consequently, the camera work employed in the dinner party and fighting scene attests to Wilde's use of the feminist gaze. Alice's emotions are at the forefront of these shots, as proposed by Soloway, showing her complicated journey through uncovering the truth. The camera never immobilises Alice; instead, it allows her full range of emotions and agency to take up the screen. Her internal journey is prioritised, and the audience can easily identify with Alice's perspective. Within these scenes, Alice fully embodies an autonomous subject who reclaims control despite her surroundings and circumstances. The dinner party and the fighting scene both show what this transformation feels like, as

the camera is aligned with her. The feminist gaze in *Don't Worry Darling* is then primarily used to create empathy and to portray Alice's journey of reclaiming control and transcending into an autonomous subject rather than an object. Nevertheless, I find it interesting that the feminist gaze is not only used to portray Alice but also Jack. In this way, audiences are invited to see him as more than a psychotic monster who abuses his ex-girlfriend. By exploring his reasons rather than dismissing them outright, Jack is deconstructed and humanised, shown to be a deluded man instead of an undefeatable monster. I want to highlight that this does not mean Jack's actions or person are romanticised or dismissed. Instead, the camera demands that he be seen as a complex human. This is a clear testament to the feminist gaze, where emotional experience takes precedence over spectacle. Jack's reasons and emotions are shown from Alice's perspective. His attempts at convincing her, using vulnerability and confessions of love, are exposed as nothing more than emotional manipulation. The camera's alignment with Alice's perspective effectively conveys this point. The audience is not meant to sympathise with Jack; rather, they are forced to see him through Alice's eyes as a manipulative and power-hungry man. He is not portrayed as an omnipotent monster but as an average, disillusioned man. This framing emphasises the innate horror of the film, which is that it does not take a monster to participate in Victory.

Unlike Jack, Frank is portrayed as an omnipotent monster for most of the movie. He is the embodiment of the male gaze - the real villain for Alice. Her opinion of him shapes his framing in *DWD*, which is why the audience views Frank as the ultimate villain, too. He is portrayed as a charismatic master manipulator — a “visionary” patriarch — the reason why the men turn to the Victory project. This framing puts the blame on Frank rather than the systems he embodies and profits from, because he is made to personify them. Frank's grandeur and status are upheld until the very last minutes of the movie, where he is killed by his wife, Shelley. Shelley walks up to Frank and pushes a kitchen knife into his stomach, saying, “You stupid, stupid man.” (*DWD* 01:51:28-01:51:38). Frank looks down at the knife in Shelley's hand in a perplexed manner, before looking up at her. In this moment, Frank's status as the untouchable and omnipotent creator of Victory is diminished. He is humanised, made flesh and bone, as the blood pools from his wound. The camera stays close to his face, showing his surprise at being killed by his own creation. This is another testament to the feminist gaze, as Frank and Shelley's emotions

take centre stage in the scene. His agency and power are taken from him by Shelley – something that he surely deemed her incapable of. In this way, Frank is pushed from his pedestal and made an ordinary man, just like Jack. Additionally, unlike to the rest of the film, he is silent, entirely speechless. His voice, which is integral to the simulation, is gone. This alludes to the end of not only his life, but also Victory as such. The film’s ending, then, is at first glance a happy one, because Victory appears to combust with Frank’s death. However, I want to argue that this framing simplifies and undercuts the film’s feminist potential and cultural commentary. By positioning Frank as the ultimate villain, the story runs the risk of blaming one “special” man, rather than the pervasive structure(s) needed for Victory to work. In a way, this mimics how society tends to pin systemic injustice on individuals rather than confronting the widespread complicity that is required for a patriarchal system, like Victory, to work. So, while it might be satisfying to the audience to see Frank’s demise, the implications of his death are ambivalent.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored distinct, but interwoven aspects of the psychological horror film *Don’t Worry Darling*: the Victory men and overlaps with the incel community, the Victory women’s gender performance, Alice and Margaret’s embodiment of the Final Girl trope, and the complex interplay between the male and feminist gaze. The analysis has shown that *DWD* offers pointed reflections on gendered power structures, misogyny and race, as well as horror’s ability to reflect contemporary anxieties. However, the film’s cultural critique is not without ambiguity or shortcomings.

In the first part of the analysis, I argued that the male characters in *Don’t Worry Darling* act as cinematic stand-ins for the incel community. Frank, Jack and all other Victory men embody many of the ideological dogmas of the incel community. Most notable are the men’s obsession with the “sexual market” and their misogynistic and anti-feminist sentiments. The former describes the idea that romantic or sexual attraction operates on a hierarchical economy where women have the most power (O’Malley et al. 4990). Following this “logic”, women choose men based on their looks and financial status. This concept describes incel’s perceived loss of power and simultaneously gives reasons for their misogynistic and anti-feminist beliefs (O’Malley et al. 4982). The latter goes hand in hand with these concepts because misogyny is central to the movement (Cottee 94-95).

Jack's decision to trap Alice in the simulation echoes this hatred for women. After a failed relationship in the real world, he turned to a manufactured one that exclusively catered to his fantasy. Within the incel community, such fantasies of male domination and female subjugation are often based on and justified by the misuse of science and scientific terminology (O'Malley et al. 4993). Victory operates on the same premise. The simulation erases women's agency under the guise of "biological truth" or "biological destiny". The film also reflects how men become part of the incel community, and how incel ideology is spread and normalised through various digital media. Incels rely on chat forums and podcasts to spread their ideology and draw in dissatisfied men (Herro 2025; Ging 2019; Regehr 2022). These platforms serve as echo chambers where incel ideology is not only expressed but escalated and justified (Cinelli et al. 1). Consequently, the recruitment of new members and their indoctrination into the incel community prove to be a gradual process (Regehr 150). This is also portrayed in *DWD*. Jack's transformation from a frustrated, unhappy partner to Alice's jailer happens gradually and is guided by Frank's rhetoric and narrative. This result is not meant to absolve Jack's character of his crimes; rather, it is meant to show that Frank uses dissatisfied men in the pursuit of his utopia and wealth. Even though *DWD* portrays incels in a relatively accurate light, there is one aspect that is hyperbolised in the film, namely the men's ability and willingness to engage in extreme, literal acts of violence. In reality, incels rarely commit physical crimes; instead, they rely on the digital plane to spread their message and hatred of women (Regehr 149). *Don't Worry Darling*, however, constructs a dystopia where incels live out their violent fantasies with abandon. This exaggeration intensifies the horror of the film because it appears to be a logical progression of incel ideology. Hence, the film effectively critiques the dangerous potential of misogynistic online communities if they are allowed to exist without oversight.

The second part of this thesis examined the women of Victory, particularly how their repetitive, aestheticised and highly gendered routines are used to keep them docile and subservient participants in the simulation. I drew on Butler's concept of gender performativity to argue that the women's daily habits – cooking, cleaning, and styling – function as tools of quiet discipline. The women's routines not only prevent them from questioning the system, but they also reinforce gender roles. The Victory women embody an idealised femininity not because it comes naturally to them, but because it is

rehearsed, repeated and enforced by the system they live in. In her pursuit of the truth, Alice no longer partakes in her daily routines, thus deviating from the prescribed gender norms. These deviations leave Alice disoriented, paranoid and alone because anyone who strays from the norms is usually punished (Butler, *Trouble* 190). Additionally, I also explored Alice's position in Victory based on her alignment with the Final Girl trope. Alice investigates, fights, and ultimately escapes the simulation, making her the film's victim-hero. These are all aspects that align with Clover's original concept of the Final Girl. Nevertheless, other aspects of Alice's character, such as her active sex life and feminine appearance (albeit to live out Jack's desires), were shown to be a reinterpretation of the trope. This underscores Paszkiewicz and Rusnak's (5) reading of the Final Girl as a trope that changes with the times. Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed that whiteness is still a prerequisite for fulfilling the Final Girl trope. Margaret, the only Black woman in Victory, fails to embody the trope fully despite sharing many attributes with Alice. Margaret's fate highlights that survival in *DWD* is reserved for those with racial privilege. This complicates the film's otherwise empowering ending. Margaret's character arc generally shows the film's ambiguous messaging when analysed from an intersectional lens. Her rapid removal from the story, alongside her inability to be a successful wife and mother, could be viewed as perpetuating stereotypes about Black women. However, I have argued that the problems Margaret faces in assimilating into Victory are meant to highlight the difficulties people of colour face in attaining the nuclear family or any other concept that is based on ideals of whiteness. Additionally, her family's story emphasises the white supremacist ideals that underpin Victory's ideology.

The third and final section of my thesis analysed the visual language of the film, specifically the use and subversion of the male gaze. The film engages deeply with the male gaze because it lies at the heart of the simulation. As the creator of Victory, Frank is shown to be the embodiment of the male gaze. His gaze repeatedly silences and immobilises Alice because Frank casts his fantasies onto her. His embodiment of the gaze also positions him as the ultimate villain of the film. Interestingly, Jack is initially framed to share a mutual gaze with Alice. However, after Jack is shown to be Alice's jailer, this framing is revealed to be misleading. All along, Jack was masquerading the male gaze as the mutual gaze. Retroactively, this makes many scenes, especially intimate sex scenes, in the film horrifying and uncomfortable to watch. This retroactive horror

highlights that Wilde did not mindlessly perpetuate the male gaze. Instead, she used it as a tool to create unease in the viewer and enhance the horror of the film.

Wilde's subversion of the male gaze is also notable. While the male gaze is omnipresent in the women's styling and Frank's immobilising gaze, Wilde frequently redirects the camera back to Alice's emotional world and journey. This alignment with and dedication to Alice's subjectivity: her fear, confusion and rage, subverts the traditional effect of the male gaze. It invites viewers to identify with Alice rather than objectify her. This identification with Alice is an integral aspect of the feminist gaze as conceptualised by Soloway (2016). The feminist gaze also underscores Alice's empowerment. In *DWD*'s final act, Alice reclaims her body, subjectivity and narrative. She is returning the gaze, the third and final part of Soloway's feminist gaze, when she kills Jack and flees the simulation. The feminist gaze facilitates her emancipation, not only from Victory but also from Jack, who is revealed to be a flawed, disillusioned man rather than an omnipotent monster. The feminist gaze also humanises and deconstructs him, which once again adds to the horror of the film, because it reveals that the horror of Victory is based on ordinary, male entitlement. The framing of Frank's death is more ambiguous. His death alludes to the end of Victory because his persona and voice are critical to the simulation's facilitation. If Victory ends with Frank, then he is positioned as the ultimate villain and scapegoat, taking all the blame for the horror that the simulation inflicted. This undercuts the message Jack's framing sent out, namely that everyday patriarchy is to blame for the simulation.

To summarise, *Don't Worry Darling* is a film that thrives in its ambivalence. It visually indulges in patriarchal ideals whilst critiquing and exposing them. It is a film that centres female resistance but does so within a narrow frame of white female survival, all the while commenting on the difficulties women of colour face in challenging the status quo. The film also highlights the pervasiveness of misogyny and reveals the dangers of ungoverned male entitlement. This drives home the film's horror as it reflects the very real fear of problematic groups misusing quickly changing technology for their gain. The use of the feminist gaze allows the viewer to identify with and ultimately overcome this fear through Alice's escape.

word count: 31 188

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Appendix

A1: Abstract (English)

Don't Worry Darling (2022) is a psychological thriller directed by Olivia Wilde. The movie follows the storyline of Alice Warren (Florence Pugh), who discovers that her life is a simulation – a virtual reality that she is forced to live in by her ex-boyfriend Jack (Harry Styles). The movie draws on well-known motifs and ideas from popular films, such as *The Matrix* (1999) and, most notably, *The Stepford Wives* (1975). This paper will explore how the “fake reality” storyline is updated in *Don't Worry Darling* to reflect current anxieties and fears in the wake of advancements in virtual reality and growing problematic online groups, such as the incel community. Incels, a portmanteau of the words “involuntary” and “celibate”, are part of an online subculture comprised of men who share misogynistic beliefs and hatred for women and feminism (Cottee 2021; Ging 2019; O'Malley et al. 2022). For this paper, the representation of incels' cinematic stand-ins, the Victory men, was critically analysed and investigated. The analysis showed that the film's iteration of incels is more likely to commit physical abuse than their real-life counterparts. However, significant overlaps in the recruitment process, ideologies and beliefs were found. Furthermore, the gender performativity of the female characters in the simulation was explored through a critical and intersectional feminist lens. The investigation showed that the daily routines help reinforce a rigid, patriarchal form of femininity that Alice and the other women are forced to live out. This thesis also explored the Final Girl trope (Clover 1992) and found various similarities and some reiterations of it in Alice's and Margaret's characters. Lastly, it was shown that an appropriation of the male gaze was deliberately used to create unease in the viewer. The feminist gaze was also used to humanise Alice's struggle in escaping her entrapment, and to criticise the suspension created by the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), which reflects current trends in the horror genre.

A2: Abstract (German)

Don't Worry Darling (2022) ist ein Psychothriller von Olivia Wilde. Der Film folgt Alice Warren (Florence Pugh), die entdeckt, dass ihr Leben eine Simulation ist. Genauer gesagt, wurde Alice von ihrem Ex-Freund Jack (Harry Styles) in einer virtuellen Realität eingesperrt. Der Film greift bekannte Motive aus populären Filmen, wie *The Matrix* (1999) und vor allem *The Stepford Wives* (1975) auf. In dieser Arbeit wird untersucht, wie dieses Konzept der virtuellen oder falschen Realität in *Don't Worry Darling* aufgegriffen wird, um aktuelle Ängste rund um Fortschritte in der Technik und problematische Online-Gruppen wie „incels“ widerzuspiegeln. Incels, eine Wortkombination aus „involuntary“ (unfreiwillig) und „celibate“ (zölibat), sind Teil einer Online-Subkultur, die hauptsächlich aus Männern besteht, die frauenfeindliche Überzeugungen und Hass gegen Feminismus und Frauen teilen (Cottee 2021; Ging 2019; O'Malley et al. 2022). Für diese Arbeit wurde die Darstellung der filmischen Stellvertreter der Incels, die Victory Männer, kritisch analysiert und untersucht. Die Analyse ergab, dass die Victory Männer eher zu körperlicher Gewalt neigen als ihre realen Pendanten. Es wurden jedoch signifikante Überschneidungen im Rekrutierungsprozess, in den Ideologien und Überzeugungen festgestellt. Darüber hinaus wurde die Geschlechterperformativität der Victory Frauen aus einer intersektionalen feministischen Perspektive untersucht. Hierbei stellte sich heraus, dass die Victory Frauen, durch ihre täglichen Routinen eine spezifische und patriarchal geprägte Femininität ausleben. Diese Arbeit untersuchte auch das „Final Girl“-Motiv (Clover 1992) und fand Überschneidungen und Differenzen davon in den Figuren von Alice und Margaret. Schließlich wurde gezeigt, dass eine Aneignung des „male gaze“ (männlicher Blick/Starren) angewendet wurde, um Unbehagen in den Zuschauer:innen auszulösen. Es hat sich zudem herausgestellt, dass die Verwendung eines „feminist gaze“ (feministischer Blick/Starren) Alices Kampf mit und die Flucht aus der patriarchalen und misogynen Simulation auf einer visuellen Ebene unterstreicht. Der „feminist gaze“ wurde also als Instrument verwendet, um die Suspension des „male gaze“ (Mulvey 1975) zu kritisieren, was aktuelle Trends im Horrorgenre widerspiegelt.