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The American Dream of Authentic Personhood: Homosexuality, Class, and the Normative Individual in U.S. Queer Male Impostor Films (1970-2009)

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Intersecting Key Concepts

- 1 Impostors/Fraudsters assume an inauthentic identity or character, engage in phoney communication, and form disingenuous relationships (such as confidence tricks) as part of their identity/class boosting projects. They are considered to be either vicious criminals with psychopathic attributes,¹ or suffering from a severe identity disorder—in either case, psychologically abnormal, antinormative subjects. Impostors show intense upward class and status² aspiration, and (try to) pass as members of a certain class or bearing a certain social status, to which they would have no legitimate claim, for the sake of financial (and other subjective, such as identity-related) gains. The Impostor is a perplexing figure in terms of its relation to the ideal of authentic personhood: on the one hand, it seems to be an antinormative embodiment of authenticity who is not “one with itself” but who counterfeits a self (or multiple selves), and engages in non-genuine communication and relationships; on the other hand, in its very social illegitimacy and illegality, the Impostor seems to practice a kind of freedom from “societal forces” and discipline that may be read as the very radical realization of individual authenticity.

In the present article, I refer to the impostor figures in question as “queer” or “homosexual” quite interchangeably. I do so because what I want to highlight is the shared sexual/gendered anti-normativity of the characters created in different

historical moments; secondly, such queerness always involves (but is not necessarily exhausted by) the characters' engagement with homosexuality: sexual attraction or activity with persons of the same sex, with or without an explicit reference to them, their legal or subjective identification as "homosexual" or its quasi-equivalents. This usage of the relevant terms for the present purposes enables us to recognize what crucial attributes these impostor characters share, without having to unnecessarily detail or cover up the nuances of their contextually embedded identities. Homosexuality as our chosen concept has been one of the central discursive formations through which personhood as inherently sexual, and sexuality as inherently connected to the essence of subjectivity has been constructed in Western modernity. Crucially, it was used to draw the line between normal and abnormal forms of (sexual) personhood as such (Foucault). Thus, the Homosexual was for long marked by accusations with "inauthenticity" (as opposed to "authentic," "natural," "original"; e.g. Butler).

Individual authenticity/authentic personhood refers to the moral guideline of being true to one's own, unique self (Taylor); of realizing a core self unhindered by societal forces (Kernis and Goldman 294). That is, authenticity is individualist and democratic in its setup, insofar as it prioritizes the autonomous individual over a conventional society, and, crucially, posits an ultimate equality of all persons regardless of (ascribed or achieved) social status.

I assert that the American Dream unmistakably embraces the ideal of individual authenticity. The founding ethos of the US is still very much alive, and in circulation in various (political and cultural) discourses as an ideological fiction, variously idolized, criticized, challenged, repudiated, with constant attempts being made at its resignification. Nevertheless, the words of American writer and art historian James Truslow Adams—who coined the term itself in 1931—are representative of the core idea still unchanged:

[the American Dream is] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Truslow 214-5)

- 5 The American Dream valorizes authentic personhood, the unique individual who shall be able to thrive in their very own way—in a social system where the "value" of each individual should not be determined by "the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position," that is, their (supposedly unfixed) location in social hierarchies. At the same time, a certain level of material prosperity, too, is (re-)acknowledged to be an inherent part of the Dream. As such, the latter cannot help but contain an inner tension between the ideal of the authentic individual regardless of class/status, and that of socially sanctioned accomplishment and prosperity. That is, while it declares a foundational and final equality of persons, the Dream nevertheless promotes the project of high performance and the effortful elevation of one's class and status. Thus, while it assumes a foundational equality (of opportunity) as a democratic principle, it also implies inequality of achievements as an outcome.

The Dream and the American Way of Life like to know themselves as emphatically anti-aristocratic in their ideals of government, social system, and work ethic. The concept of aristocracy (hinted at by Adams as “the European upper classes”) means a social class small in numbers and endowed with various, including legal, privileges, embedded in a premodern and distinctively anti-democratic, rigid social hierarchy; it entails a partly practical, partly imaginary superiority in terms of both class (material goods) and status (rank, “noble blood” or genetics)—which are, crucially, hereditary. Aristocracy also involves a lifestyle without the practice or necessity of (strenuous) work; instead, it assigns the latter to the lower classes, as a source and consequence of degradation—clearly clashing with the Protestant work ethic inherent to the Dream. Because it assigns key importance to the circumstances of birth, and bestows *de jure* (not simply *de facto*) superiority to its members, aristocracy as a class and concept is oppositional to the democratic ideal of individual authenticity. Indeed, in the modern, post-revolutionary public/private sphere division (Horwitz), personal authority in the public sphere should come from individual, earned credentials and sincerity (e.g. Trilling 24-6), instead of status *per se*—erasing the authority of aristocracy. As Eszter Timar argues, in the modern political discourse of (Rousseauian) anti-theatricality, where democracy is imagined as a *fraternity* of (nominally) equal, ideally authentic citizens transparent in public, the figure of the actor and the homosexual are both constructed as counterfeiting and hollow.³

Putting together what has been said so far, I argue that if the (earnest) Self-Made Man is the hero of the American Dream, then the Impostor is a queer Self-Made Man: concurrently, *he*⁴ strives towards prosperity while not relying upon privileges of birth and family status, his main source being himself instead; however, his upward mobility and self-making are sought through socially illegitimate and illegal means. Thus, the Aristocrat, the Impostor, and the (by default, male) Homosexual, are all traitors to American Democracy with a distinct yet co-dependent public and private sphere, and a socio-economic system that knows itself as based on fairness, honest work, and mobility. As discursive figures, they are deviant individuals corrupting a community of patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist wholesomeness.

The present essay will focus on the Homosexually Queer Impostor bearing aristocratic sensibilities, as a quintessential figure of un-American antinormative personhood. It is interested in what queer impostor movies tell us about the ethical clashes between, and reconciliatory potential of, authentic personhood, queerness, and pur/chasing the Dream. It looks at how the Homosexual, once seamlessly embodying antinormativity, will be normalized and transformed into a potentially authentic subject, fellow citizen, and legitimate dreamer of the Dream, who will carry on his discursive significance in negotiating key conflicting values related to personhood, society, and American identity.

Before the film analyses, let me briefly position historically the queer impostor in US film.

Positioning the Cinematic Queer Impostor

In the time of exacerbated homosexual paranoia in post-WWII United States—related to, among others, homosexuality’s association with Communism (Corber)—Hollywood started to connect villainy and queerness more than ever before: notable

examples are film noirs (Dyer), thrillers and other crime fiction, such as Alfred Hitchcock's movies (Barton; Berenstein; Hepworth; Knapp; Miller; Wood). The partial abolishment of the "sex perversion" taboo of the Production Code in 1961 (Russo 121-122), and, eventually, the final elimination of the Code in favor of the ratings system by the end of the 1960s (Thompson and Bordwell 385-386) enabled more and more explicit representations of the identities and sexuality of queer characters for long almost always located on the continuum between the criminal psychopath and the pathological homosexual victimized by his own nature or the intolerance of society.

The post-Code era, on the whole, has brought about great discursive multiplication in terms of queer representations—now new and old tropes, themes, and genres co-exist, interact, and are constantly reappropriated by films of (potentially radically) different artistic, ideologico-political, and commercial investments, in and outside the Hollywood industry. Likewise, one of the prominent traditional (and in its origin, homophobic) Hollywood tropes, the deceptive queer villain with aristocratic sensibilities and pretensions (e.g. Dyer; Russo; Hanson; Benshoff and Griffin) has never lost its popularity.

On this background, I have identified a proliferative substream of mainstream queer-themed US films that co-feature the issues of homosexuality and identity fraud, and that which overarch the whole post-Code era, including: *The Gay Deceivers* (1969), *Something for Everyone* (1970), *Cruising* (1980), *Deathtrap* (1982), *Partners* (1982), *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor Victoria* (1982), *M. Butterfly*⁵ (1993), *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), *The Birdcage* (1996), *The Jackal* (1997), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *I Love You Phillip Morris* (2009), and *Albert Nobbs* (2011). I argue that this relative numerousness of queer impostor movies in the midst of a generally still very limited and biased mainstream visibility of queerness signifies substantial libidinal investment on part of American culture in the constant renegotiation of the interrelationship between homosexuality, authenticity, class, and normative personhood. In the present essay, I will deal with those films among the listed, whose queer impostor protagonists commit confidence tricks that unquestionably exhaust the (legal and moral) category of criminality and are clearly marked as anti-normative social subjects. Furthermore, *Something for Everyone*, *Deathtrap*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *I Love You Phillip Morris* are from four subsequent decades over a forty-year period, with 6-11 years between any two films, which provides remarkable opportunity for a diachronic comparison. Before the plot summary and a close reading of each film followed by their joint analysis, I would like to put forward the trajectory this series of films points constitute. First, there is an advancement towards construing separate etiologies of homosexuality and of impostorness; while early films treat queerness and being a fraud as intertwining phenomena, or two sides of the same coin, more recent films position the origin of homosexuality as essentially different from the origin of impostorness. Second, instead of "objectifying" the queer impostor character (keeping cinematographic distance from him, construing him as a mysterious Other to be observed), these films tend towards a "subjectification" of queer characters by constructing them as sites of empathy, sympathy, and even identification, and they often function as focalizers and narrators. Concurrently, while earlier films characterized queer fraudsters as monstrous psychopaths, or used them as allegorical figures, more recent portrayals are decidedly individualized, and the protagonists are depicted as capable of experiencing "true love." At the same time, the

co-conceptualization of sexuality and class through associations between male homosexuality and “aristocracy” continue to be subtly kept alive, partly supplemented-substituted by male homosexuality’s association with indulgent consumerism.

Satirical but Serious Queer Psychopathy: *Something for Everyone* (Harold Prince, 1970)

In the 1970 black comedy *Something for Everyone*, a queer drifter named Konrad arrives in Ornstein, Austria, and sets out acquiring the town’s castle for himself, currently inhabited by an impoverished aristocrat widow and her children. Putting away their butler, Konrad successfully seeks employment under the Countess. He then starts an affair both with Helmut, the Countess’s son, and Anneliese Pletchka, a girl with rich parents—and persuades the Countess to arrange a marriage between the two, as this would bring money to the impoverished house of the Countess desperate for old times’ abundance, and status to the newly rich Pletchkas eager to buy into an aristocratic identity. Caught with Helmut by Anneliese, Konrad fakes a car accident to get rid of all the Pletchkas. He then starts a relationship with the Countess herself, their wedding already announced when, however, eyecandy Konrad is outsmarted and blackmailed into marriage by the teenage daughter of the Countess.

On the face of it, *Everyone* is easily read as a farce about the money-chasing and ego struggles of members of the old aristocracy and the newly rich snob, and thirdly, a queer impostor apparently lacking any social embeddedness (a figure with completely obscure background, without any family or place of origin, etc), an uncanny outsider. Directed by Broadway mogul Harold Prince, set in an imaginary European town of the past, *Everyone* functions, to a great extent, as a site of positive identification with values broadly defined as American mostly through the ridiculed characters (representative of social groups) with their sense or desire for aristocratic entitlement, and their criminal or immoral chasing of money, who are displaced to a non-American context. The characters’ repudiation of the new world order/ the order of the New World serves as a further site for American disidentification, against which values and attributes broadly associated with the US and US global domination can be affirmed.

At the murdered butler’s funeral, the Countess delivers a self-absorbed and narcissistic speech, lamenting her own anachronistic being as an aristocrat: “When your world has gone, you’re your own ghost,” which lost world is contrasted to that of “the upstarts, the American tourist, and the plastic drindls.” These figures connote the fall of an aristocratic and traditionalist world-view, the rise of a newly emerged common middle-class conquering the world in a consumerist way (tourist instead of conqueror), and, perhaps, (a cosmopolitan) mass production and culture superseding national/ist production and traditions. Likewise, “the upstarts” are repudiated by the Countess as common people (instead of aristocrats) with an upward class mobility—basically, the successful dreamers of the Dream also known as “self-made men.” Such sweeping social transformations resembling a very American kind of democratization and world domination referred to by the Countess in this scene and elsewhere, constitute the background to the farce of class and status aspirations going awry, which unfolds as the main plot. Thus, the film practices a kind of easily affordable class politics, where contemporary and real social and economic relations invisible in the film may actually be re-legitimized through a mocking presentation of an (even more)

anti-democratic, premodern past social system and ideology, displaced to a bunch of non-American ex- and wannabe aristocrats who are distinctively pretentious and non-genuine persons.

The puppeteer of this decadent bunch is a stealthily queer, psychopathic and uncanny male character outside the fabric of society, who appropriates the homosexual closet for his impostor scheme. In his case, queer sexuality, impostorness, and a lopsided investment in upward class/status mobility are inextricably linked, with some additional motifs of homosexuality⁶ carefreely drawing on homosexuality's association with insufficiency, inauthenticity, and an adverse fate (Butler; Dyer; Nunokawa). Konrad's uninhibited sense of entitlement and complete lack of moral or empathic concern for others, in a fatal combination with his overwhelming sexual magnetism and manipulative power suggest a superior identification that marks the queer male as alienated from, disloyal to, and as such, a monstrous threat to society—and a close kin to the classic cinematic trope of the aristocratic queer criminal (Dyer).

Queer Fatales in Peril: *Deathtrap* (Sidney Lumet, 1982)

Based on Ira Levin's 1978 play, 1982 black comedy thriller *Deathtrap* features Sidney, a middle-aged Englishman living in Long Island with his rich and neurotic wife, Myra. After yet another flop, the once successful playwright carefully plans then executes the murder of Clifford, a former student of his, in order to publish the latter's masterpiece *Deathtrap* under his own name. That same night, however, known-to-be-dead Clifford breaks into the couple's bedroom, giving Myra a lethal heart attack. Sidney and Clifford kiss, and are revealed to be lovers who are after Myra's money. Clifford moves in as Sidney's assistant, and starts writing the actual *Deathtrap* closely resembling the true story of Myra's death, which he intends to publish to Sidney's utter dread: not simply to make a hit, but for the thrill of it. Through several plot twists, the two men try to outsmart (and outlive) each other, until they eventually kill each other—with Helga, a Dutch psychic taking credit for *Deathtrap*, which turns out to be a sweeping success.

It is the dishonest, or even criminal chasing of money, success, and fame, which constitutes the main motivational background for the characters, including the two murderous queer male lovers: both charming, manipulative, and absolutely egocentric and remorseless—in other words, psychopathic. While Sidney is far from shameless but apparently obsessed with his public image as a straight writer, Clifford is characterized by sensation seeking and shamelessness in his criminality and queerness. In their closeted relationship, homosexual desire and criminal instrumentality are inextricably merged; indeed, it functions as a confidence trick in opposition to the outer world (where they present it as a merely professional relation), but ultimately, in and for itself, as the lovers are ultimately against each other, their love indistinguishable from (a criminal and intimate) fraud, where closeness is utterly threatening and instrumentalized.

Deathtrap thematizes a lack of traditional (work) ethics, and the American Dream gone awry: the characters draw on ruthless means to feed their rather powerful class and status urges—while some will lose this game (and are ultimately punished, as Sidney and Clifford are), others may very well reach their goal (as Helga seems to). On the one hand, greed (as opposed to earnestness and honest work) for wealth, success

and fame, and antisocial impulses, actions, and the lack of belonging to the social fabric (such as lacking empathy, remorse, and a form of adjustment to conventional morality), are foregrounded by queer male impostors bypassing the work ethos of the Dream, appropriating old associations between homosexuality, psychopathology, and criminality, reiterating the trope of the narcissistic (male) homosexual as an outsider with a superiority complex and a threat to the system of a wholesome heteronormative society.

On the other hand, however, the kind of mindset and immorality described above is hinted at to be present in other characters, too: Myra is not simply horrified by Sidney's evil plan (Part of me tonight—Oh Sidney... Some terrible, unknown part of me... ahh! Oh, God. Was hoping that you would do it. At the same time that I was terrified that you would, part of me was really hoping. I saw your money. I saw the name and...”), and Helga actually opportunistically steals the play from the dead men as the film's final punch line. The implication is a perhaps universally human inclination towards greed, egoism, and consequential dishonesty and instrumental violence. In this, the film may very well reiterate an important part of the discourse of authenticity: “much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason” (Trilling 11). In other words, the movie may work in revealing the “true”—and as such, far from morally perfect—natures of its characters, raising the issue of the ideal of authenticity clashing with certain widely shared moral norms. At the same time, one cannot help but notice how, through this assignment of greed and antisocial impulses, the characters are made to be seen as rather similar, as, indeed, ultimately all just the same; which impression, in turn, may question the baseline of individual authenticity, according to which individuals are ultimately unique, and emphasize, instead, a universal human nature that is rather insincere. In either case, the background of the moral questionability and insincerity of, perhaps, all, would put the aristocrat-complex assigned to the psychopathic queer male impostor in a different light: the superiority complex of the Homosexual, his “queer nature” may be less specifically his but rather shared by humanity in general. If read this way, *Deathtrap* subtly conveys a disillusioned view of the Dream as an ethical ideal.

The Lure of Authenticity: *Six Degrees of Separation* (Fred Schepisi, 1993)

Based on John Guare's 1990 play, *Six Degrees of Separation* is a drama-comedy-mystery, in which the uncanny impostor Paul cons several posh couples living in Upper East Side, New York—among them art dealer-socialites Flan and Quisa. They take the young man, who claims he has just been robbed in Central Park, into their home for a night, as he seems to know their Ivy League children, and claims to be Sidney Poitier's son. Paul's wit, sophistication, celebrity stories and culinary talents charm Quisa's and their gold magnate friend/business partner Geoffrey—only to find Paul with a male prostitute in bed the next morning, and kick them out in shock. Later on, they find out about Paul having conned others from their circles. They start investigating Paul's story and real identity—with only limited success, and Paul disappears without trace after being taken, voluntarily, into police custody. Quisa is left shaken to the core by

their encounter with Paul. Perceiving their life as void, she walks out of a high-class dinner and breaks up with Flan.

As it turns out, Paul was picked up from the streets by Trent, who, in exchange for sexual favours, provided Paul with insider information about the “rich people” he knew, and gave Paul “a new identity,” a full class-makeover. The closeted young man did so in the hope of making their homosexual relationship viable and tolerated as an upper-class friendship—a vain hope, as Paul suddenly vanishes one day with Trent’s address book and other belongings. Trent, the “Henry Higgins of our time” as Quisa puts it, clearly fits into the tradition of the cultural tropes of the Wildeian dandy with an upper-class sensibility, and a literary and cinematic history populated with stealthy and well-groomed queer criminals feeling simultaneously superior and ashamed, like Bruno from *Strangers on a Train*, or Waldo from *Laura*. Indeed like a now artful and explicitly gay Higgins professor, Trent teaches Paul how to *act*—intertwining the two senses of the word: class-dependent proper behavior, and the ability to pretend.

The figure of the queer male master of class and sexual stealth can be read in multiple ways. It can serve as a discursive whipping boy for an anti-aristocratic (and, at least seemingly democratic) political orientation in conjuncture with homophobia and usually, masculinism and sexism, where he would mark the effeminate void of the aristocracy, and the illegitimate and despicable sense of superiority on the part of the homosexual male who troubles the supposedly egalitarian fraternity of the so-called common men. Alternatively, the flamboyant homosexual would simply essentialize the difference between himself and supposedly masculine straight men.

If class/status aspiration and illegitimate passing rather than an inner sensibility is stressed, the figure of the aristocratic queer male will stand not only for an inherently dishonest, deceptive (closeted) homosexuality, but possibly for homosexuality as inauthentic being, where the homosexual would, mistakenly, seek recognition through superficial means (like status symbols) instead of facing and accepting who he “really is.” Thus, the figure of the homosexual posing as upper-class may very well function as reassuring the ideal of individual authenticity which is supposed to supersede class/status belonging that should be regarded as an attribute of secondary importance. Such a view, on the one hand, has a real democratic appeal in the sense of mitigating the significance of economical and other differences; on the other hand, precisely by doing the former, it may work towards a relative blindness and passivity about changing the economic status quo.

Substantial subversive potential lies, however, in the figure of the class-passing queer male homosexual: his ability to pass may raise suspicions about the class and social system, its potential dysfunctionality and injustice—which is the case, to a great extent, with Paul in *Six Degrees*, which satirizes the privileges, the pharisaic political correctness, and the utter paranoia of the white racist homophobic bourgeoisie. Indeed, Paul as a poor, black, homeless queer prostitute and impostor (believed to be a drug addict and HIV-positive), with no identifiable past, origin, and in the end, identity really, functions much like an allegory rather than a realistic human character.⁷ He embodies the very hidden fears of the elite, what the latter has ejected from itself and paranoidly externalize—all the more dreadful for his undeniable charm, talents, and ability to fit in, and claiming membership and family ties even,⁸ as if he in fact had been a part of them all along. As a fascinatingly quick study, the figure of Paul functions as a screaming attack on a still rigid social system that likes to know itself to be fair and

equal-opportunity, and that which, implicitly, still embraces racist and classist essentializations. As such, Paul's character is a call for the (auto-)correction of the American social system, the real realization of the Dream.

Besides abjection, Paul calls forth (sexual) desire, fascination, and a yearning for authentic personhood in his "audience." As a haunting and uncontrollable entity who intrudes and disappears by turns, Paul is a postmodern figure à la Judith Butler and Diana Fuss, who troubles identity by showing up its inherent instability, impurity, and its dependence on its Others, thereby activating identity categories "as sites of necessary trouble" (Butler 308). Shape-shifting, deceptive, trust-abusing, and a real survivor, Paul is like a virus ("a menace" as Flanders calls him), threatening with infection⁹—with queerness, perhaps, but even more apparently a sense of existential anxiety, which is the unavoidable precursor of a potentially authentic being in existentialism. On the one hand, Paul literally intrudes into the home and private sphere of the self-identified pure (the straight, white, well-off bourgeois), and has promiscuous, interracial, commercialized, gay sex in it, disturbing the identity borders of his hosts, and uncannily abusing their trust. On the other hand, he is powerful in stirring up people's enervated and inauthentic lives, make them feel alive, and inspire them to change from impostors into authentic beings themselves. Exemplified, among others, by his (stolen) speech about *Catcher in the Rye*'s William Holden who "hates all phonies and only lies to others," about the importance of the imagination that which "is most uniquely us" and of "facing" and "dealing" with ourselves, Paul is telling a cautionary tale about authenticity representative of the gist of the movie itself. In the end, as an impostor with real talents, he simultaneously embodies inauthenticity and authenticity. Haunting other characters' dreams and daydreaming, he might be the very embodiment of imagination chased around, the specter that haunts the characters who have lost their ability to face themselves, but that which is also too volatile to be caught and figured out in its fixity; the potential link to one's own authentic inner self.

Concomitantly, *Separation* as an unbelievably rich and self-reflexive cinematic text raises intriguing issues about the concept of the original and the copy, of authorship as ownership, and many more. The aspect in which *Separation* does convey a rather unambiguous message, I assert, is a reiteration of individual authenticity as a value superimposed on class/status, the overrating of the latter going hand in hand with an inauthentic, and consequently, ultimately unhappy, life and being.

The elevation of individual authenticity as the essential condition of a full life, in contrast to upper-class aspiration as that which can lead one astray in the existentialist sense, makes 6. *Six Degrees of Separation* an ideological kin to *The Talented Mr Ripley*.

The Captive of the Closet of Inauthenticity: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999)

The 1999 psychological drama thriller takes place in the 1950s US and Italy. Mistaken for someone else, Tom Ripley, a poor but sophisticated young man is sent on a mission by a ship factory mogul to persuade the latter's son to go back to the US and take up the family business. Tom becomes a double agent, and a close companion to the jazz-lover Dickie and his girlfriend Marge. Tom grows obsessed with the upper-class lifestyle and Dickie himself, who, however, eventually grows tired of Tom. In the heat

of a confrontational conversation about their relationship, Tom ends up killing Dickie, then assumes his identity and money—while he keeps living as Tom as well. As he starts a relationship with Peter, a wholesome gay man who is a friend of Marge and Dickie, while also being courted (as Dickie) by Meredith, a friend of Peter, Tom's double identity becomes more and more complicated to maintain. Being found out by Dickie's friend Freddie, he kills him, then, because of Dickie being accused of the murder by the police, he fakes Dickie's suicide, and gets away with the murder, even Dickie's money being awarded to him by Dickie's grateful father who considers him to be an "exceptional young man." Tom travels to Greece with Peter as his lover in great comfort—until he bumps into Meredith on the boat, who still believes him to be Dickie and who also saw Peter with him. To avoid being found out, Tom murders Peter.

While the movie has been accused of trivializing the critical edge on class of the original novel by Patricia Highsmith, and telling a simplistic story of sexual repression (Shannon; Straayer; Decker), I will argue for and explore *Ripley* as a tale primarily of a class-bound sense of inferiority and self-hate, which mediate between sexual-romantic frustration and murderous criminality, rather than one of sexual oppression imposed by the homophobic self or society.

In the penultimate scene of the film, Tom engages in an intimate conversation about himself with Peter. He is seemingly approaching Peter physically as a lover, but he is actually getting into position to strangle him, which he carries out in tears. The conversation simultaneously functions as an intimate self-revelation, a painful penitence, and a deceptive preparation for murder, and it constructs the emotional peak and the ultimate motivational revelation as delivered by the main (evil) character himself (a scheme very familiar from mainstream US films).

32 Tom: 'I've lied... about who I am... and where I am. Now no one'll ever find me.'

33 Peter: 'What do you mean, lied about who you are?'

34 Tom: 'I always thought it'd be better... to be a fake somebody... than a real nobody.'

35 The latter line offers a compound summary of the character's psychopathology, and it is a straightforward juxtaposition of two criteria of the worth of the individual: the ideal of authentic personhood (being "real") versus a class-bound ideal of being publically recognized in one's status, power, possessions, and achievements (being "somebody"). Tom renders the latter, even if "fake," as superior to a "real" person who are themselves but without any prominent position in a social hierarchy (a "nobody"). In other words, Tom superimposes class and status on individual authenticity—and thus suffers the tragic consequences, the film implies.

With the audio track of the murder scene continuing, in the very last scene we see Tom coming into the cabin in a wide shot, then there is a cut to his face in close-up. Then his face is shown in an arch shot, as if the camera were scanning Tom, who is looking into the distance. It also captures the "two faces" of Tom: his profile exposed in light against a dark background, which, by the continuous movement of the camera, transforms into a similarly high-contrast image of Tom's other profile in the dark, its silhouette contrasting the bright background. The next shot frames the sitting Tom in a wide shot, as if seen from the interior of a closet with closing doors having a mirror each on their inside, reflecting Tom before the doors close altogether, with the view on

Tom being gradually superseded by that of the closet doors (i.e. a black screen). End titles. During this last scene, the dialogue between the sobbing Tom and the suffocating Peter is gradually superseded by the continuing non-diegetic music and the diegetic closet noises. The narrow sense of space, Tom's multiplied mirror images, and the vertical montage of him lost in his thoughts and the audiotrack of the murder (as if remembered by Tom) constructs a disturbingly strong sense of claustrophobia and isolation, of Tom's inner self. This highly symbolic scene, with Tom as the subjective focalizer, is part of the project ubiquitous throughout the movie, of intensively calling forth the viewer's empathy for and identification with Tom. Indeed, this "closet sequence" literally creates a point of view that is simultaneously Tom's as it seems to manifest his very mental, subjective state, and the viewer's imaginary spatial-physical point of view from which they are looking at Tom. In this way, the closet doors are not only shut on Tom, with the black screen swallowing him visually—rather, the closet doors are shut at the viewer, too, who would be the one literally sitting in the diegetic closet. Thus, the figure of Tom and that of the viewer are curiously merged: this sequence not only draws on the imaginary of the homosexual closet, but it engages associations of multiple personality and dissociative identity disorders, and infects the viewer with those. *Ripley*, in contrast to earlier queer impostor movies under scrutiny in this essay, clearly "subjectifies" rather than objectifies (and thereby, distances or mystifies) its queer fraudster, which I interpret as one marker of a general tendency of LGBT normalization in US popular culture in full effect since the 1990s.

Let us get back to Tom's self-revelatory monologue. He will be "stuck in the basement," as he says—another recurrent visual and verbal motif, which, on the one hand, stands for the self-seclusion of the secretive, shameful subject, and for low class-position, on the other. In the exposition, Tom is shown living in a despicable basement, and later, climbing the backyard stairs with his heavy baggage when starting his trip to Italy—a foreshadowing of Tom's social climbing unfolding later in the narrative. Being "stuck in the basement" entails the idea of class deprivation that Tom will bypass at the expense of his individual authenticity and through illegitimate means. While the film clearly emphasizes Tom's being underprivileged in contrast to his sophistication and musical talent, it does not perform a straightforward class critique of the system and the viability of the American Dream. Instead of naming social injustice as the closest cause behind the series of tragic events and Tom's misery, it constructs Tom's unfortunate sense of being "a nobody," his overemphasis on class-status and simultaneous disregard for the moral guideline of individual authenticity as the main personal pathology leading to his wrongdoings and ultimate fall. As such, *Ripley* remains compatible with the Dream as Tom can easily be read as a lost Talent who could have been just become anything had he followed the path of patient, honest work, instead of deception, freeloading, an aristocratic lifestyle, and desperately trying to be someone else than who he really is.

To repeat my argument, Tom's story is not a tale of sexual repression. While certainly closeted about his sexuality to a great extent, he does make a considerably explicit move on Dickie more than once, and gets involved with out-and-proud Peter with considerable ease. Regardless of the authors' potential intentions and occasional pedagogical lessons on being closeted, Tom's character is hardly interpretable as a self-hating homosexual, but much more as a self-hating "nobody." *Ripley* is a tragic tale of the inauthentic individual who mistakenly cared for class / status too much, where

homosexuality is just another site for their real tragedy of not being able to face and love themselves.

Disregarding one's true self and an illegitimate shortcut to success will prove unviable in *I Love You Phillip Morris*, too, a romantic drama-comedy based on Steve McVicker's 2003 biographical book on conman Steven Russel.

A True Love Story of Elevation: *I Love You Phillip Morris* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2009)

Steven was shocked to learn as a child that he had been adopted. He made a resolution to be the best person he can. As an adult, he lives as a churchgoer father and policeman—while having secret sex with men on the side. After a life-threatening accident, he comes out as gay, and becomes a conman so he can live as “high on the gay hog” as possible. Ending up in prison, he falls in love with fellow inmate Phillip, with whom he sets up a life upon their release, continuing his frauds, only to be found out again—with the clueless Phillip arrested as an accomplice. Phillip breaks up with Steven, who loses his will to live; he is diagnosed with AIDS, then dies. Learning the news while still in lockup, Phillip is devastated. When taken to see his lawyer, the bewildered Phillip encounters Steven, who apparently faked his own death to see Phillip again. They make up. When Steven, again as a fake lawyer, is trying to arrange Phillip's release, he gets caught, and is sent back to prison. In the film's epilogue, Steven is sentenced to life. In his prison cell, he daydreams about Phillip. The movie ends with Steven in the middle of another escape attempt.

Typically for mainstream Hollywood films, the (anti)hero's character's flaws and moral deviance are shown to be rooted in a childhood trauma: in Steven's case, learning that his biological mother gave up on him, which made him try to be the “best person” he could be, ending up living a Rousseauian nightmare in being governed by the desperate eagerness to please and be loved, developing fake ideal personas and lives, like that of WASP wholesomeness, or the top of the “gay hog.” Crucially, the flashback sequence on Steven's adoptive parents' confession is later extended with the moments preceding the announcement, when little Steven insists he sees a “wiener”-shaped cloud in the sky, at which he is smiling pleased—a scene introduced by the adult Steven as a narrator that he has been gay as long as he remembers. Thus, in *Phillip Morris* homosexuality is explicitly ruled out of the etiology of criminal impostorness: a crucial gesture towards the cultural normalization of gayness (further strengthened through male homosexuality's inclusion into the romantic comedy genre that Ficarra and Requa's movie also performs). Contrasting a historical series of queer conmen whose sexuality was merged with their antinormative impostorness and criminal inclinations in an ambiguous or straightforwardly homophobic way, Steven's gayness, the movie makes sure the viewer knows, had nothing to do with him becoming a fraudster. Rather, as we learn from Steven's omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent narration and constant focalization, it is his unfortunate sense of worthlessness and unloveability (as a child who had been given up on) that pushed him into the trap of inauthenticity.

After Phillip breaks up with him, Steven seems to fall into total despair, delivering a remorseful apology on lost authentic personhood:

- 43 'My whole life was nothing but a bunch of lies. Lies to make people give me their money. Lies to make people love me. And lies to keep them from leaving me. And in the process, I lost track of who I was. Maybe [Steven's biological mother] had me pegged right from the beginning and that's why she gave me up. Whatever the case, how does a person who doesn't exist go on existing? The answer is, he doesn't.'
- 44 Steven used to fake personalities he thought were the best possible ones, to gain class and status in illegitimate ways,¹⁰ and earn queer money—so he could be the best provider for his loved ones and, as such, be loved. Yet love always supersedes money, which ultimately cannot buy love anyway, so the story of *Phillip Morris* goes, where remnants of social criticism, compared to its queer impostor film precedents, lose ground.¹¹ The charming, escapist film's primary ideological investments lie in reaffirming the moral superiority of individual authenticity over class/status, and the ideal of romantic love and its supposed power over matters of the latter; thereby, at the same time, including gayness into the sphere of normatively authentic personhood and idealized romantic love.

From *Something* Monstrous to True Love: A Trajectory of Authentication

Queer sexuality, especially if closeted, has had the excellent potential to stand for the antinormative human subject whose sexuality—a core attribute of the “true self”—is inauthentic, and whose public identity is insincere and as such, prone to deception or being blackmailed. Consequently, the Homosexual has often been constructed as a sly threat, or a weak link in the web of patriarchal-heteronormative society. Such a conception of homosexuality has been developed on the Hollywood silver screen, a key mirror and agent of US popular culture of global significance. For the last two to three decades, however, we have definitely witnessed a certain authentication of homosexuality in US cinema, represented as just another variation of sexual identity that is psychologically healthy and compatible with normative intimate relationships and social belonging. I argued that an especially rich source for the research on the exact ways of such normalization are Hollywood movies that feature a queer impostor protagonist: such a character is located at the very crossroad of discourses on sexuality, authenticity, and normative personhood, but also class/status and social mobility, thus offering key insight into how the Homosexual is made to be seen un/fit for the American Dream as the national ethos of the US.

Picking five mainstream queer impostor films from different decades, a powerful ideological and representational turn in popular US culture that has been documented based on different material, can be reaffirmed: since the second half of the 1990s (referred to as the “gay boom” era on US television by Ron Becker), the Homosexual has been embedded in a robust line of mainstream films promoting a kind of moderate, assimilationist anti-homophobia, which is aimed at legitimizing the social existence of the out homosexual. The kind of normalizing that has been occurring entails, in my view, the line of thought that grants the status of an essence, authentic nature to homosexuality, which then the individual has the moral obligation to express and realize, as prescribed by the ideal of authentic personhood ubiquitous in popular

culture (“be yourself”). Accordingly, while the out homosexual may legitimize *his* own social existence by being out, closetedness has usually been repudiated as an unhealthy, immoral, and altogether unviable option in mainstream film—an apotheosis of which is the cult film *American Beauty* (1999).

Indeed, *Ripley* and *Morris* are qualitatively different from *Everyone*, *Deathtrap*, and *Separation*, in terms of their robust compassion and subjectivising look on their protagonists. As opposed to the much more vague and doubtful, or quite stably monsterizing cinematic grasp of Paul, or Konrad, and Sidney and Clifford respectively, Tom and Steven are brought close to the viewer, humanized, and their criminality and impostoriness *explained* and *understood* in individualized ways, which always works against essentializations and generalizations for the social groups a character functions as a representative of (in this case, likely homosexuals/gays). In contrast, no special causes or personalized etiology are offered for Sidney’s, Clifford’s, or Konrad’s anti-normativity, it is simply presented as their “nature” (with Paul’s monstrosity allegorized and intellectualized to a great extent, subtly calling attention to his character as a trope). Crucially, in both Tom’s and Steven’s case, it is their inferiority complex, their unfortunate and ultimately mistaken lack of belief in themselves, which put them on the path of the criminal impostor—in other words, their arrested development of authentic personhood. More than that, *Morris* explicitly and unequivocally cuts any potential causal links between Steven’s homosexuality and impostoriness: at the time of his childhood trauma of learning about his biological mother giving up on him, Steven had already been happily gay (signified by his content amusement of seeing a “wiener” formed by clouds on the sky). The early human monster psychopathic queer impostors turn, by the new millennium, into fully humanized subjects yearning for love. Konrad, Clifford, and Sidney are seamlessly psychopathic, including their cold manipulation and abuse of intimate relationships; primarily motivated by financial and narcissistic gain (that is, class/status climbing). *Separation*, again, constructs a rather ambiguous picture—Paul is shown as coldly capitalizing on others’ sexual, romantic, or intimate orientation towards him, yet his potentially authentic yearning for human connection and intimate belonging is also flashed—which puts its own truth claims between multiple quotation marks. *Ripley*, however, has the issue of the im/possibility of love (for the self and for the Other) at its very narrative and ideological center. Tom’s ultimate tragedy is that his misguided striving for a raise in class/status overpowers his impulse to be his true self recognized by a loving other: At the same time, however, homosexuality’s compatibility with authentic personhood and love is clearly put forward as an ideological claim first and foremost through the wholesome character of Peter. The ideas planted in *Ripley* are fully blown in *Morris*, a distinctively *romantic* drama-comedy that *ends happily*. Thus, it includes the queer impostor in one of the most classic escapist, very American genres of Hollywood that was kept clear, for long, from anything that would deflect from heteronormativity.

Morris is a tale of “true love” that conquers everything else—crucially it conquers the love of money, comfort and glitter, too, thereby proving not only the truth/authenticity of the love between the two persons (of the same sex), but also, the normative individual personhood of those involved and who choose love over money. Accordingly, while the enjoyment of excessive consumption is shown with jovial complicity in *Morris*, the ultimate power and superiority of true love (and the human desire for it) reorders this enjoyment and the striving for it as secondary at best: Phillip

may like their glamorous lifestyle Steven provides, but it is Steven rather than money that he cares about; while in Steven's case, material abundance was always just the (ultimately inadequate) means through which he tried to secure another's love.

In fact, *true romantic love* should be identified as a general mediator between a radically egalitarian individual authenticity, on the one hand, and on the other, a class/status system and the drive for distinction necessarily hierarchical in their outcome, as contained by the American Dream. It is acceptable to strive for class/status if you strive for true love (founded on the supposed mutual recognition and embracement of true selves) more. Thus, the trope of a supposedly class-free and class-blind love may obliterate disturbing doubts related to the valorization of prosperity, success, and the accompanying drive to distinguish oneself from the many, which cannot help but threaten with a certain disillusionment of the American Dream. If the Dream likes to know itself as high-minded as opposed to “faithlessly” materialistic and utilitarian (more than “a dream of motor cars and high wages merely”), dreamt by a community of equals, then the supposedly disinterested love between Americans superimposed on their chasing wealth and success, i.e. the freedom to prosper intimately rendered superior over the freedom to prosper materially would help the Dream to avoid facing its own potential inauthenticity.

At the same time as, in the chain of queer impostor movies over our time period of forty years, homosexuality gains the status of authenticity while getting acquitted from the charges of the inherency of impostorness and criminality, the ideological functions the queer fraudster characters perform will change accordingly. While Konrad embodies anti-normativity and the psychopathic greed and dishonesty's failure, complex stories of tragic failure or redemption are told with more humanized fraudster characters. For instance, Steven is more like a prodigal son who strayed from the path of authentic personhood but who found his way back through an epiphany of self-knowledge, a moment of personal truth. Interestingly, he will not stop working as a conman, but his relevant activity is reframed: instead of marking his grandiose delusion and inauthentic pursuit of love, it can be now seen as the realization of his very real talents.

In fact, if “true love” moderates the authenticity vs. class/status tension on the interpersonal level, then *talent* may be identified as the single most effective reconciliatory concept between the Dream's ideal of individual authenticity and its valorization of wealth and success. Namely, talent means something intrinsic to the individual, deep-seated, part of their core self, and, furthermore, strongly associated with originality, a close kin concept to authenticity. At the same time, talent is clearly dependent on the specific social context and refers to areas of human activity that are conventionally recognized as significant, and as such, are part of established systems of assessment and rewards. Being “talented” may lead to wide social recognition and practical rewards (that is, status and class elevation) yet, “talent” perfectly suits the Dream's work ethic as well, as it refers to an innate potential that needs strenuous effort and a good character to be realized and enabled to flourish, otherwise it may be wasted or abused, and lead to an inauthentic life.

Paul or Tom's talents are not only highlighted but contrasted with their low social standing, a kind of discrepancy that is made to be seen as predominantly a matter of structural unfairness in the supposedly egalitarian system (Paul), or a psychological complex leading the subject existentially astray (Steven), even to final

failure (Tom). Yet the relevant films make those talents seem impressive, and in Steven's case even adorable: the talent of those impostors points towards something very real and authentic in their person, suggesting they could have realized their true selves under different circumstances—or will actually do so, as Steven will thanks to his new-found self-knowledge.

Psychological drama-thriller *Ripley* constructs a highly intimate and subjective account of not only Tom the impostor's story but of his subjectivity as well. In the prelude, the animated movie title ("The... Mr. Ripley") lists adjectives describing Tom's very private nature—Mysterious Yearning Secretive Sad Lonely Troubled Confused Loving Musical Gifted Intelligent Beautiful Tender Sensitive Haunted Passionate—before settling for, and superimposing "Talented" as the film's actual title, using the term interchangeable with "authentic" and "real."¹²

Indeed, I argue that in the discourse of the Dream, "talent" equals "real," and functions as the imaginary core self of the idealized American subject whose authenticity entails their potential for upward social mobility. The cinematic queer impostor has transformed into a kind of character who would help convey these ideas, while simultaneously granting normative personhood to the Homosexual, now a potentially authentic dreamer of the Dream without aristocratic pretensions, reoriented from grandiosity, greed, and self-involved narcissism towards earnestness and true love, from psychopathy to humanness, from being a threat to society towards being a talent.

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NOTES

1. The concept of psychopathy is to be understood here as concordant with the work of psychologist Robert D. Hare, according to which the primary psychopathic traits are the lack of empathy and remorse, superficial charm, and manipulateness, while secondary traits include social deviance and criminality, impulsivity, sensation seeking, and aggression. I believe such personality traits are widely perceived as belonging to kinds of human monsters, and easily readable in many of the most prominent evil villains of popcultural imagery.
2. Max Weber's classic definitions on class and status should be sufficiently orienting here; while class position means an individual's property/wealth, i.e. their relation to the means of production in a given economic order, status situation refers to prestige and the social estimation of a given lifestyle including patterns of consumption.
3. Yet, as the homosexual's claim for identity works according to the same logic of performativity as the declaration of rights by the citizen, the modern homosexual is actually both "irresistible and unacceptable" to democracy (Timár 10).
4. In US cinematic imagery, up until recently, the queer impostor has been generally gendered as male; unfortunately, the present paper does not provide space to adequately discuss this otherwise intriguing issue. My basic assumption nevertheless is that this has to be interpreted on the background of sexist heteronormativity, in which the human subject has been imagined as male by default. Secondly, authenticity as a concept has been gendered itself, with masculinity and maleness positioned on the normative side, and females and femininity discursively tainted with inauthenticity in various ways. Third, as men have had more power in society, male individuals' potential inauthenticity and „treason" might have been a more relevant subject to deal with in cultural products. Nevertheless, it also has to be mentioned that female and FTM queer impostors, criminal and other, have started to appear in US cinema (*Boys Don't Cry*, 1999; *Monster*, 2003; *Albert Nobbs*, 2011, an international cooperation that is recognized by the US film industry as its own) and elsewhere (*Fingersmith*, 2005; *La Tourneuse de Pages*, 2006; *Affinity*, 2008) since the millenium.
5. A US production directed by Canadian David Cronenberg.
6. Such as sissy Helmut's characterization, and the subtle lesbian relationship between the Countess and the butch female Bobby.
7. Furthermore, he is never the narrator or focalizer but always only the object of the other characters' narration and focalisation.
8. Paul lies to a poor couple that he is Flan's disowned son.
9. The reading of Paul as an HIV-AIDS metaphor is further potentialised by the fact that it was made at the peak of the AIDS crisis publicity.
10. Steven pursues his impostor career with such fascinating talent and perseverance though, that it would put his antinormativity and the issue of his inauthenticity into question.
11. It is interesting, though, how material abundance is commented upon in a twofold way, in a sequence following Steven's coming out as gay: he introduces his new gay self, puppies, and boyfriend, where the bright and vivid colours, and the overall audio-visual glamour create a double sense of fabulousness and superficiality, raising associations of suspicious/unreal beauty.
12. Additionally, note the contrast between early titles including terms such as "something," "deathtrap," "separation," and the post-mid-1990s titles containing "love," and, crucially, proper names of persons (Mr. Ripley, Phillip Morris, Albert Nobbs), that is, prime signifiers of individual identity. As such, instead of denotatively and connotatively threatening and mysterious, most recent queer impostor movie titles promise an individualized story of queer persons, pin down the valid, personal identity of a character involved, altogether putting forward the normative status of their main subject, the queer impostor.

I am sincerely grateful to Eszter Timár and to Anikó Imre for their incisive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

ABSTRACTS

As a key discursive nodal point of abnormal personhood, the homosexual has been featured in an extensive stream of Hollywood movies from the early 1940s onwards. More specifically, since the end of the 1960s, a series of mainstream U.S. films have come out about queer fraudsters. Impostors assume an inauthentic identity or character, pretending to be someone else than they “really” are. They pass as members of a certain class or high-status professions as part of their criminal means for material gain and upward mobility. If they are, simultaneously, queer, this means that they operate from a closet (Sedgwick) that masks both illegitimate identity and queer sexuality, the latter predominantly conceptualized as abnormal sexuality for long, and discursively assigned successfully to a specific kind of person, the modern homosexual (Foucault).

Through their role-playing in everyday and even intimate relationships, fraudsters violate the moral guideline of authenticity prevailing in Western modernity, i.e. that of being true to one’s own, unique self (Taylor 28), the realisation of a core self unhindered by societal forces (Kernis and Goldman 294). Authenticity is individualist and democratic in its setup, insofar as it prioritizes the autonomous individual over a conventional society, and posits an ultimate equality of all persons regardless of (ascribed or achieved) social status. Authenticity is easy to identify as an integral part of the founding national ethos of the US, the American Dream (Adams, cf. Hochschild), according to which success, prosperity, and happiness is achievable to every American through honest effort and hard work, made possible by an essentially egalitarian political, social, and economic system on which the US is supposedly founded. However, while the ideology of the Dream includes the valorization of the unique individual, the simultaneous centrality of achievement and upward mobility points towards an ethical tension between its individualism and materialism, between equality (of opportunity) as a principle and inequality as an outcome. The figure of the impostor embodies much of this tension between the ideal of the true self and that of success and upward mobility.

I assume that the relevant stream of queer impostor films signifies a remarkable amount of libidinal investment on the part of U.S. culture in negotiating the relationship between homosexuality, class, authenticity, and as such, normative personhood in general. As extremely concentrated discursive matter on said concepts, such movies offer essential insight into the fluctuations of the moral imagery of (globalizing) US culture: What has homosexuality got to do with inauthenticity, illegitimate class/status identity, and criminality? How has the Homosexual been constructed as antithetical to the American national ethos, and later on perhaps, absolved of such charges? How and to what extent can the ideals of a non-hierarchical individual authenticity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the striving for conventional success and material comfort necessarily hierarchical in their outcome, be reconciled in the concept of the American Dream that wears the taglines of “equality” and “democracy”? Through exploring *Something for Everyone* (1970), *Deathtrap* (1982), *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and *I Love You Phillip Morris* (2009) as moral visions on normative personhood, sexuality, and class, my aim is to disentangle some of the inner tensions of, and negotiations around, individual authenticity as essential to the American Dream.

INDEX

Keywords: authenticity, class, homosexuality, identity fraud, impostor, love, personhood, queer, talent, the American Dream, US cinema

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