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# "One of Those Guys in the Movies": Juvenile Rebellion and Carnal Subjectivity in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*[1]

**Abstract**: J. D. Salinger's classical initiation novel *The Catcher in the Rye* starts out with a scene of blatant rejection of traditional Hollywood movies. "If there's one thing I hate," the first-person narrator Holden Caulfield tells us in the book's opening passage, "it's the movies." Despite—or maybe because of—this harsh initial claim, the novel continues to nourish the impression that the narrative voice is, in fact, enthralled by the world of cinema. In my essay, I will argue that the love-hate-relationship between the protagonist and the cinema is vital to an understanding of the literary aesthetics of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Furthermore, I want to show to what extent the paradoxical notion of resistance to / love of movie images is connected to the concept of juvenile rebellion cultivated throughout the novel. Interestingly enough, *Catcher* not only mimics its protagonist's tentative acceptance of a "movie-made" environment. It also, quite literally, absorbs and reconstructs the aesthetic patterns attributed to cinema via its vivid re-enactment of the character's personality. Cinematic texts, film scholar Vivian Sobchack holds, are capable of producing sensations in the audience that go far beyond the level of visualization. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, I argue, a "cinematic" process of involvement of the recipient is set in motion. The act of reading here becomes an act of passionate interaction *with* the novel which unleashes not only the figurative potential of the text but also the creative abilities of our own imagination. While perusing the novel, we are led to believe that we are actually *there* when Holden undertakes his odyssey through the city. By deploying sophisticated strategies of spontaneous activation and visceral involvement—techniques also used in film to achieve an effect of reality—the novel thus literally operates *as* a film.

**Keywords**: *The Catcher in the Rye*, carnal subjectivity, cinematic texts, rebellion, J. D. Salinger.

1 Some parts of this essay have been published in my article "The Literary Text as a 'Living Event': Visceral Language and the Aesthetics of Rebellion in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*." *Rebels without a Cause? Renegotiating the American 1950s.* Ed. G. Hurm and A.-M. Fallon (Oxford, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2007), 31–56.

## Salinger: An Undercover Story

When J. D. Salinger, the renowned author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, died in January 2010 at age 91, an unprecedented media campaign began which brought his personal life into the spotlight. The author who had shied away from the public arena throughout his life posthumously became the target of personal reports and revelations.[2] One example is the sudden appearance of nine letters which Salinger sent to his wartime comrade Werner Kleeman between 1945 and 1969. In a letter from 1961, Salinger tells Kleeman that he was deeply saddened by Ernest Hemingway's suicide, while also blustering about how his own children were growing up and how he felt like a "perennial sad sack" (Pitzke, "Best Always").[3]

The anecdote about the Salinger letters is revealing for two reasons. First, it illustrates the fact that the reclusive author was practically turned into a public event against his will. Salinger's long absence from the media went so far that *Esquire* magazine, in a 1997 cover story by Ron Rosenbaum on "The Haunted Life of J. D. Salinger," showed a white-haired man, presumably the famous author, who covered his face with a book, notably *The Catcher in the Rye*.[4] The second reason why the anecdote seems of importance is that the letters focus—as most of Salinger's fictional texts—on the complicated relation between youth and death. It is no coincidence that Salinger mentions Hemingway's passing in the same breath with his anger about his own children growing up. The author who refused to step into the public spotlight for more than forty years kept surrounding himself with the invisible aura of youth. His fear of becoming a "perennial sad sack"—or, one might add, *old sack*—ties in with his refusal to get into close contact with the media.[5]

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2 One of Salinger's biographers writes that the author was "in any real-life sense, invisible, as good as dead…. He was famous for not wanting to be famous" (Hamilton 4).

3 These personal letters were exhibited in the Morgan Library Museum in New York shortly after Salinger's death (Pitzke, "Best Always").

4 *Esquire*'s article is only the tip of the iceberg in a whole series of magazine essays which stressed the writer's endeavor to shield his private life from the grasp of fervent journalists, e.g., "In Search of the Mysterious J. D. Salinger" by Ernest Havemann (*Life*, November 3, 1961), "The Private World of J. D. Salinger" by Edward Kosner (*The New York Post Magazine*, April 30, 1961), and "Lost in the Whichy Thicket" by Tom Wolfe (*New York*, April 18, 1965) (Alexander xi).

5 Salinger's (self-)identification as the "perennial youth" was nourished and sustained in the media throughout his life. The contrast between this public image and Salinger's real-life appearance grew so strong that Paul Alexander describes his encounter with the author in the early 1990s as a genuine shock: "Haggard, hunched-over, his hair white and thinning, he looked like a very old man. If Holden Caulfield is frozen in time, always the youthful, evanescent teenager, his creator was not; it was shocking to witness Salinger in his mid-seventies" (Alexander 21).

I will argue in this essay that these two aspects—Salinger's distrust of the media and his focus on youthful rebellion—must be regarded as closely intertwined. My chief example is the author's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* in which a skeptical attitude towards the media ties in with a negotiation of youth and death. Most interestingly, the novel, despite its apparent criticism of Hollywood films, is structured in a distinctly *cinematic* fashion, employing aesthetic devices usually found in films. Reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, I will contend, is almost like watching a movie—an observation which is even more striking given the fact that the novel has never been adapted to the screen. And why should one make a film from a novel when the literary original provides readers with an equally strong tactile sensation? The interconnection of biographical and textual discourse in Salinger enables us to read and experience *The Catcher in the Rye*, in a phenomenological sense, *as a film*. The impression of the novel as a film is part of an overarching "text" which I want to call the "Salinger Text." By this, I refer to both the literary universe Salinger created and the symbolic presence of Salinger-the-author in public discourse.[6]

## *The Catcher in the Rye* as Cinematic Text

In no other medium the boundary between youth and death seems as fluent as in the movies. The cinematic image continues to stage a performer's youth and beauty even when he or she has already died. J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the* Rye is very much aware of the illusory potential of cinema. Its protagonist Holden Caulfield, a troubled sixteen-year-old, does not get tired of telling us how much he despises the movies, especially those made in Hollywood. "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies," the first-person narrator informs us in the book's opening passage (Salinger, *Catcher* 1). Despite—or maybe because of—this harsh claim, the novel keeps nourishing the impression that Holden is, in fact, fascinated by the world of cinema. In various passages, we encounter the protagonist as he imitates "one of those guys in the movies" (12) or as he talks about celebrated actors such as Cary Grant, Peter Lorre, and Gary Cooper (32, 64, 66).

There is a revealing background story to Holden's—and, by implication, Salinger's—ostentatious hatred of Hollywood movies. In the 1940s, Salinger had been eager to sell the film rights to some of his short stories. Success came in 1949 when the Hollywood movie *My Foolish Heart* was produced, with Dana Andrews and Susan Hayward in

6 For the concept of the "Author Text," see Comley and Scholes, *Hemingway's Genders*: "When we speak of the Hemingway Text we refer to a cultural matrix that we share with Hemingway, as this matrix appears when we imagine Ernest Hemingway as the center of it" (x).

the lead roles. However, the film, based upon the Salinger tale "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," deviated so extremely from the original that the author never again agreed to a film adaptation of one of his works.[7] It is no coincidence that *My Foolish Heart* premiered at New York's Radio City Music Hall in January 1950 while Salinger was in the middle of writing his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. "Holden himself," one critic cogently observes, "goes to a movie at Radio City around Christmas time, and if Salinger did any field research, he would have seen *My Foolish Heart* billed as a forthcoming feature—and billed also as based on 'a story by J. D. Salinger'" (Hamilton 107).

Holden's problematic relationship to the cinema is further complicated by the fact that his own brother, D.B., works as a playwright for the Hollywood Dream Factory. In Holden's view, this makes D.B. a "prostitute" (1). Just as Hollywood sells dreams, packaged in the form of films, D.B. has volunteered to sell his soul. Holden condemns his brother for what he is doing. Yet, he also seems to adore him: "He wrote this terrific book of short stories, *The Secret Goldfish*.... The best one in it was 'The Secret Goldfish.' It was about this little kid that wouldn't let anybody look at his goldfish because he'd bought it with his own money" (1).[8] The *old* D.B., who wrote touching short stories like "The Secret Goldfish," is clearly demarcated from the *new* D.B., who has "a lot of dough, now" and can afford a Jaguar (1). The contrast between the two types of creativity, one marked as *natural*, the other as *artificial*, culminates in an opposition between private and public, with Hollywood becoming a place literally *in the open*, detached from the secluded sphere of the home. "Now he's *out* in Hollywood," the narrator informs us, "being a prostitute" (1).

Fittingly, there is also a real prostitute whom Holden asks to come to his hotel room in one of the novel's later passages. When the girl reveals she comes from Hollywood, Holden suddenly backs off and pretends he has had an operation on his "clavichord" (87). Holden obviously scorns the fake reality of the movies and feels disgusted by their impulse to lure audiences into their spell. Yet, at the same time he constantly immerses himself in the realm of the cinema, smoothly integrating the aesthetics of film into his own actions and behavior.[9]

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7 According to Ian Hamilton, Salinger "was furious—not just at Hollywood, one suspects, but at himself for having let all this happen" (107).

8 Ian Hamilton rightly points to the numerous analogies between the character of D.B. and Salinger himself. The title of D.B.'s short story, "The Secret Goldfish," for example, sounds very much like Salinger's own tale "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" which the author published in an anthology of *The New Yorker* in 1949 (Hamilton 108).

9 It is telling that, at least geographically, the Dream Factory in which D.B. works is "not too far" from the "crumby place" where Holden is placed by his parents to come to rest. The actual proximity of these two worlds indicates that reality and cinematic fiction might be more closely connected than the protagonist wants to admit (*Catcher* 1).

Throughout the novel, Holden's experiences are staged in the fashion of clips from a Hollywood movie. We feel reminded of a *film noir* when Holden slips into the fictive persona of a hardboiled detective and tells us that "all the whory-looking blondes weren't around any more, and all of a sudden I felt like getting the hell out of the place" (72). In another passage, the scene of a fictional murder is vividly reenacted in front of our eyes. In the course of this scenario, Holden imagines he is being shot by a pimp he has met in a sleazy hotel:

> I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts. Old Maurice had plugged me.… I pictured myself coming out of the goddam bathroom, dressed and all, with my automatic in my pocket.… I'd walk down a few floors—holding onto my guts, blood leaking all over the place—and then I'd ring the elevator bell. As soon as Maurice opened the doors, he'd see me with the automatic in my hand and he'd start screaming at me, in this very high-pitched, yellow-belly voice, to leave him alone. But I'd plug him anyway. Six shots right through his fat hairy belly. Then I'd throw my automatic down the elevator shaft—after I'd wiped off all the finger prints and all. Then I'd crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. (93–94)

The passage contains all the ingredients of a typical B-movie of the 1940s: the wounded gangster, the *femme fatale*, the romantic *denouement*. Holden Caulfield transforms into a kind of Mike Hammer in a film adaptation of one of Mickey Spillane's pulp novels. In his wild fantasy, Holden goes to the point of visualizing "blood trickling out of the side of my mouth" (93). Both the setting and atmosphere of this passage are of a deeply physical nature—a major characteristic of the gory sites of crime in *film noir*.

The act of reading is marked here by a passionate interaction between the novel and the recipient. This deeply performative act not only unleashes the potential of the text but also the creative abilities of the reader's imagination. While perusing the novel, we are led to believe that we are actually *there* when Holden undertakes his odyssey through New York City. This is underlined by the fact that the first-person narrator often addresses us directly, in the second person singular (1, 68, 191, 192 & passim). By deploying strategies of spontaneous activation and visceral involvement of the reader—techniques also used in cinema—the novel literally operates *as* a film.

Film scholar Vivian Sobchack has argued that cinematic texts are capable of producing sensations in the audience that go far beyond the level of visualization. When we watch a movie, we are literally bewitched, caught in an aesthetic maze that involves not only our eyes and ears, but our whole sensual apparatus. Through the "tactile force of… images," Sobchack contends, a good film manages to establish a connection between the materiality of the screen and that of the viewer's imagination (53). Since we are, in the phenomenological sense, *living bodies* who experience the environment as an *enfleshed space*, we come to relate to all the *things* and *objects* we see on screen (or read in a book) in an entirely *sensual* fashion (Sobchack 53–84; cf. Merleau-Ponty

150–51). As Norman Holland and Georges Poulet have shown in their respective studies, literary texts can establish a sensual, even tactile, link between the reader and the text by speaking to us on an immediate, physical level. Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, we are confronted with events that require a deeply visceral reception. In his essay "The Reading Process," literary scholar Wolfgang Iser has offered the following, particularly useful model of the dynamics of reception:

> The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. (54)

Following Iser, the act of reading encompasses two fields of interaction that merge through the process of actualization: the fictional world of the text and the imaginative potential of the reader. These two discourses form the aesthetic opposites of what Iser describes as "the dialectical structure of reading" (68). Iser distinguishes between the following features of the text-reader relation: "the process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a *living event*, and the resultant impression of *lifelikeness*" (64, my emphasis). It is precisely the transformation of a literary text into a "living event" and the creation of "lifelikeness," to use Iser's words, which make Salinger's novel so tangible and almost cinematic to us.

Consider the following passage in which Holden is accompanied by his younger sister Phoebe at a Christmas fair. When the girl decides to take a ride on the carousel, it suddenly begins to rain: "Boy, it began to rain like a bastard. In *buckets*, I swear to God. All the parents and mothers and everybody went over and stood right under the roof of the carrousel, so they wouldn't get soaked to the skin or anything, but I stuck around on the bench for quite a while. I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants" (191).[10] Not only are we confronted in this passage with the physical notion of being "soaked to one's skin," but, moreover, this unpleasant sensation is linked to a specific action, or rather a lack of action. Instead of running for shelter under the roof of the carousel like the others, Holden decides to expose himself to the experience, in consequence getting "pretty soaking wet" (191).

10 The extensive use of italics throughout the novel is one of the essential aesthetic features in *Catcher*. By setting off certain words (such as "*buckets*"), Salinger reiterates on a linguistic level the novel's claims of spontaneity and authenticity. The effect is similar to that of cinematic (or theatrical) composition in which specific elements are highlighted or accentuated. Cf. Salinger, *Catcher* 1 ("he's my *brother* and all"), 17 ("*No*body won"), 18 ("Why won't you give me your *hand?*"), 32 ("*That* bastard"), 92 ("if I hadn't had just my goddam *pajamas* on"), 124 ("*thousands* of them"), 129 ("*anybody*"), 192 ("till you *do* it"), & passim.

The corporeal dimension of this scene is further stressed by the addition that "especially" Holden's neck and his pants have become soaked. At the same time, we are assured that Holden does not care if he gets wet. "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around" (191). In this image, the novel combines an extreme physical sensation with a notion of inner harmony and connectedness to one's environment. In the phenomenological sense, our body becomes a tactile instrument during the act of reading or watching a film—an instrument which deciphers, reconstructs, and expands the potential meanings of a given text. Salinger's novel continually prepares us for these moments of "carnal identification with material subjectivity" (Sobchack, 65) by capitalizing upon the immediacy and sheer intensity of Holden's experiences.

This emphasis on carnal experience is already contained in the original fragment of the Holden-Caulfield story published in 1945 in *Collier's*. The story starts with an image of physical coldness: "It was about eight o'clock at night, and dark, and raining, and freezing, and the wind was noisy" (Salinger, "I'm Crazy" 36). Since somebody has just stolen his camel hair coat and gloves, Holden feels freezing cold. "I stood there—boy, I was freezing to death—and I kept saying to myself, 'Good-by, Caulfield. Goodby'" ("I'm Crazy" 36). The story's opening passage, in which Holden waves farewell to his old high school on top of a hill, anticipates the pessimistic ending in which Holden lies awake and feels "lousy" ("I'm Crazy" 51).

In the book version, published six years later, the story's melancholic atmosphere is retained, this time expanded by a notion of cognitive memory. Caught in a despondent mood, Holden thinks nostalgically of all the people he has met. The character's bittersweet look back at his adventures in New York City recalls the technique of the flashback which Salinger borrows from Hollywood cinema, and especially *film noir*: "I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about" (192). The ostensibly negative tone of Holden's final words disconnects the novel's standpoint from that of a Hollywood film with its stereotypical happy ending. Shortly before Holden begins reminiscing about past events, his brother D.B. visits him from Hollywood together with a British starlet. When the young actress leaves the two brothers for a moment to go to the ladies' room, D.B. asks Holden what he thinks about the whole story. Not surprisingly, Holden does not know at all "what to think about it" (192). At this point, the novel's catchphrase, "If you want to know the truth" (1, 4, 30), is picked up again (192) to underline the protagonist's claim to verisimilitude. By emphasizing the spontaneity and immediacy of Holden's actions, the novel simultaneously revalidates the character's rejection of the "affected" and "phony" manners epitomized by Hollywood and its representatives. "Salinger's idea of joy and renewal," David Castronovo holds, "should be seen against the backdrop of Hollywood schlock; it's the awkward, hand-designed, and naïve sentiment that stands out against the formulaic and corny. Askew and spontaneous, the storyline is far from the calculated

mass product that Holden remembers from the movies" (111). However, by using the device of the flashback and by evoking *noir*'s unsentimental, realistic attitude, the novel itself, in a way, becomes a "cinematic" work.

## Juvenile Rebellion and the Rhetoric of Disgust

I have argued in the first part of this essay that Salinger employs modes of representation in *The Catcher in the Rye* that we are already familiar with from the medium of film. As I will demonstrate in the following passages, the events of the novel are staged in a highly performative and tactile fashion. In the course of the narrative, a link decisively *physical* in nature is established between the reader and the text which goes far beyond the level of a simply imaginative relation.

The formation of this sentient access to the novel goes hand in hand with the establishment of the key motif of adolescence and especially the character's desire to rebel against his environment. Any time Holden encounters a problem or mental crisis, he begins to feel physically sick, with sensations of nausea and the impulse to throw up. When his history teacher Mr. Spencer uses the word "grand" in a personal conversation, Holden instantly experiences symptoms of illness. "Grand. There's a word I really hate. It's a phony. I could puke every time I hear it" (8). Holden perceives his environment on an intensely physical level. He reacts to new experiences not just mentally, but with his whole body. The theme of throwing up is repeated in various other passages. When Holden describes the plot of a movie he watches at Radio City Hall, he exclaims: "I could've puked" (125). He cannot even bring himself to continue his own story since it evokes in him feelings of disgust: "I'd tell you the rest of the story, but I might puke if I did" (125).

The novel familiarizes us with such situations and emotions on a deeply carnal level, connecting the subjectivity of the places where Holden has these sensations with our own subjectivities. We are invited to go through the events as if they were happening to *us*. In his study *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller explains that sensations of disgust touch us in the most immediate fashion: "Disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves—not just by extension but at its core—smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing" (2). In other words, the notion of disgust touches upon categories of tactility as well as upon those of purity and bodily shame.

Even when Holden is joking with others, his nausea will never go away completely: "I would've laughed, but I was afraid I'd feel like vomiting again" (182). Interestingly enough, Holden's environment seems to experience a similar impulse: "The cab I had was a real old one that smelled like someone'd just tossed his cookies in it. I always get those vomity kind of cabs if I go anywhere late at night" (74). By using the established

codes of bodily revulsion, Salinger enables us, on an intense somatic level, to relate to the tale and viscerally imagine the events.[11]

Since Holden seems to grasp his environment almost haptically, we have no other possibility but to engage in this carnal experience ourselves in order to follow the narrative. Another climax in this visceral portrayal of events is reached when the prostitute 'Sunny' comes to Holden's hotel room. Confronted with the prospect of having sexual intercourse with her, Holden feels more miserable than aroused. "Sexy was about the *last* thing I was feeling. I felt much more depressed than sexy" (86). The novel here speaks to us on the level of affections and uncontrolled bodily reactions. It is not so much the actual depiction of physical performances but rather the obvious absence of these acts which creates an impression of carnal immediacy. The prostitute sits on Holden's lap, but the actual intercourse never happens. Fittingly enough, the protagonist's excuse for not having sexual intercourse with the girl recurs to the realm of the physical—a fictive operation on his "clavichord." To the reader, Holden reveals the true reason behind his refusal to have sex with the girl: "She made me so nervous, I just kept on lying my head off" (87). Holden's "nervousness" is clearly connected with his unwillingness to have sex with the girl. The obvious tension between the presence of physicality and the rejection of immediate physical contact contributes to the novel's intricate aesthetics of tactile representation. Although Holden declines the prostitute's offer, his own physicality is still at the center of the narrative, dominating our view of the events.

The novel's aesthetics of tactile representation is connected to a rhetoric of madness which links the protagonist's verbal rebellion to a form of neurotic behavior. *Catcher*'s association of youthful protest with possible mental dysfunction can only be comprehended against the backdrop of what Philip Rieff has called, in his 1966 book by the same title, "the triumph of the therapeutic," namely the dominance of therapy culture in the American Fifties. Salinger's hero is a good case in point for Rieff's argument. In his fight against the "phoniness" in his environment, Holden repeatedly loses himself in wild daydreams, during which he is shot or otherwise physically harmed. At one point he actually starts to believe he is dying from cancer (176). Holden's fantasies of bodily disintegration, we are assured, are a consequence of the character's mental problems. Psychoanalyzed at the age of thirteen after having broken "all the windows in the garage" (34), Holden is taken to a sanatorium near Los Angeles at age sixteen

11 Similar techniques of haptic narration are already used in the early version of the narrative published in *Collier's*. Here, a girlfriend of Phoebe's, Viola, is pestered by a housemaid's bad breath. As in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger operates with italics to enhance the bodily effect of his tale. "'Her breath is always all the time bad,' Viola told me. 'Her *breath*,'" Phoebe said. 'She told Jeannette [the maid] her breath was bad[.]' 'Jeannette *breathes* on me all the time.'" The effect is an extremely visceral one, since we can vividly imagine the odor associated with bad breath (Salinger, "I'm Crazy" 48).

where psychoanalysts try to solve his problems (192). Despite his own claims that he is simply "crazy" (113),[12] we sense a dimension of vulnerability and sensitivity behind the character's oftentimes offensive behavior.

In an early passage in the novel, Holden meets the mother of a former schoolmate on a train. To Holden's astonishment, the woman praises her son, a notorious roughneck, as a perceptive and sensitive young man. Holden's reaction is marked by astonishment: "Sensitive. That killed me. That guy Morrow was about as sensitive as a goddam toilet seat" (49). In the ensuing conversation with the woman, Holden decides to hide his inner disgust by pretending to be physically ill. He tells the woman that he has "this tiny little tumor on the brain" (51)—a fantasy that gradually takes hold of his imagination and later becomes a physical obsession. When he fantasizes about the possibility of actually developing this form of cancer, he has to think of "this sore on the inside of my lip" (176).

As Alan Nadel has trenchantly observed, *The Catcher in the Rye* constantly "anatomizes Caulfield's personal behavior" (353). Holden's actions and reactions are scrutinized as if they were, first and foremost, physical phenomena. The novel's "anatomizing" of Holden's behavior must therefore be seen as an important part within a wider strategy of embodiment employed by Salinger. Not coincidentally, Holden's protest against the "phoniness" of his environment, uttered a stunning 33 times throughout the novel (3, 8, 12, 14, 22, 45, 56 & passim), is outlined along the boundaries of the body. Several times in the novel, Holden's hatred for the other characters' insincere behavior is manifested in a sensation of anguish and alienation—a feeling he refers to as "royal pain" (24). Only in a state of physical pain, it seems, is Holden able to cope with the uncertainties of day-to-day life. This association between the character's mental and his physical condition becomes obvious in situations marked by bodily confrontation. At one point, Holden tells us that he would never hit another guy in the face, no matter how critical the situation was. "I'd probably go down to the can and sneak a cigarette and watch myself getting tough in the mirror" (81). Yet, seven chapters before this statement, we learn that Holden can get so mad at his roommate that he tries to "sock him, with all my might, right smack in the toothbrush, so it would split his goddam throat open" (38).[13] Holden's assurances that he would never hit somebody in the jaw even

12 Notably, one of the first published Holden-Caulfield stories in *Collier's* magazine is actually entitled "I'm Crazy."

13 In another passage, Holden tells us the story of James Castle, "a skinny little weak-looking guy, with wrists about as big as pencils" who evades a physical conflict with an older guy at his college by jumping out of the window. The subsequent description is full of violent bodily imagery that associates the student's psychological decomposition with his physical disintegration: "He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place" (153).

if that person stole something from him thus do not sound very convincing. Loaded with images of naked brutality, these statements rather reveal the visceral and latently aggressive character of Holden's *Lebenswelt*: "I'd rather push a guy out of the window or chop his head off with an axe than sock him in the jaw. I hate fist fights" (81).

The "physical response" that *The Catcher in the Rye* encourages in passages like this one—we are invited to visualize Holden's helpless rage and, to a certain extent, participate in it—is reminiscent of the strategy of tactile involvement used by Hollywood films. The somatic processes triggered and accelerated by such *tactile* texts can lead to what Vivian Sobchack calls the "ambient and carnal identification with material subjectivity" (65). The act of watching a film—or that of reading a literary text—may imbue us with sensations of intense physical involvement and even instant tactile shock. In her analysis of the opening sequence of Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993), Sobchack speaks of a blurring of the viewer's physical experiences when the heroine's fingers strike the keys of her piano. Confronted with nothing but a vague assemblage of visual allusions, the viewer already combines all these notions into one definable kinesthetic experience. "*[M]y fingers knew what I was looking at*," Sobchack summarizes her own experience of watching the film's opening sequence (63). The viewer's body, she contends, is enabled in such scenes to "connect" to the movie on a sentient level—that is, through the sheer force of the images and actions displayed on screen. The viewer is invited to mobilize all attention and tactile energy to make sense of the impressions:

> What I was seeing was, in fact, from the beginning, *not* an unrecognizable image, however blurred and indeterminate in my vision…. From the first (although I didn't consciously know it until the second shot), my fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, 'felt themselves' as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen. (Sobchack 63)

Likewise, *The Catcher in the Rye* utilizes a set of aesthetic patterns that enable the recipient to *feel* the actions experienced by the protagonist rather than to simply detect them. The story is structured in a distinctly *sensual* manner, employing images and plot devices that demand a visceral response. An important feature of this "carnal identification," to use Sobchack's terminology (65), is the discourse of sexuality. Published only three years after the Kinsey Report on male sexuality, *Catcher* incorporates many of the assumptions of the mid-century discourse on sexuality. While the original Holden-Caulfield stories published in *Collier's* (1945) and the *New Yorker* (1946) did not explicitly mention sexuality at all, the book version makes wide use of such references. As a constant subtext, the discourse of sexuality shines through in various anecdotes and metaphors, for example in Holden's repeated encounters with "F… you"

graffiti on school and museum walls (182–183) and in the stories about his roommate Stradlater whom Holden visualizes copulating with a girl in a borrowed car (37). "Most guys at Pencey just *talked* about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time… but old Stradlater really did it" (43). Earlier on, we are informed that Stradlater is "a very sexy bastard" who loves to hear stories about people walking around naked in their houses (28). Interestingly enough, such references are frequently combined with graphic descriptions of human bodies. In one passage, Holden mentions his friend Jane's stepfather, "[a] skinny guy with hairy legs" who "run[s] around in the goddam house, naked. With *Jane* around" (27). The focus on the sexualized body here forms a point of analogy between the experiential worlds negotiated in the text and the reader's own subjectivity.

Holden's emotional environment is literally filled with bodies. He is mysteriously attracted to them, but also recoils from them in an act of physical revulsion. This becomes clear in the characterization of Carl Luce and Mr. Antolini, two figures strongly associated with homoerotic, or even homosexual, behavior. When Holden meets Carl Luce, a former schoolmate from Whooton, in a swanky bar in New York, he is at once annoyed *and* excited to hear his never-ending stories about sex. "Old Luce knew who every flit and Lesbian in the United States was. All you had to do was to mention somebody—*anybody*—and old Luce'd tell you if he was a flit or not" (129). Alluding to the rhetoric of wild denunciation so typical of McCarthyism, the Luce passage also reveals the ambiguities within the negotiation of sexuality in U.S. postwar discourse. Although Holden suspects that Luce is "sort of flitty himself" (129), he keeps interrogating him about his private life. When Luce gets ready to leave, Holden even asks him to stay: "Please. I'm lonesome as hell. No kidding" (134).

The same ambivalent stance is recognizable in the portrayal of the figure of Mr. Antolini, Holden's former teacher, at whose apartment in New York he spends the night. Having fallen asleep, Holden suddenly awakes in the middle of night from a touch of Mr. Antolini's hand. He then jumps up in panic and stumbles out of the apartment, telling the readers, "I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they're always being perverty when *I'm* around" (173). This scenario of "homosexual panic" (Arrell 60) must be understood in the context of the frenzy that followed the famous Kinsey Report from 1948, according to which every third American male had engaged in sex to orgasm with another man. As Leerom Medovoi maintains, Salinger's novel "could no longer depend on the sexual innocence of close male relationships" (264). Not only does Holden use the typical Cold War terminology against gays and lesbians (speaking of them as "perverts" and "flits"; 54, 55, 96, 129, 130, 173), he also employs a rhetoric that Americans were specifically familiar with from the infamous HUAC hearings (cf. Nadel 354–355). However, *Catcher* does more than simply echo the inflammatory language of McCarthyism. The two Antolini chapters (23 and 24) portray Holden's reactions

as desperately hysterical, while also constructing the homosexual as a positive, even model-like figure.[14] Holden's hysteria, manifested by the physical signs of shaking and sweating, stands in stark contrast to the information we have received so far about Mr. Antolini. In previous passages we have learned that he is "very nice" and "witty" (157)—"the best teacher I have ever had" (163). Although Holden will run away from Mr. Antolini's apartment in terror a couple of pages later, there is no indication or foreshadowing of this behavior in the previous sections of the novel. Holden even states that "you could kid around with [Mr. Antolini] without ever losing your respect for him" (163). We gain the impression that Holden is quite comfortable with his teacher and even admires him. The novel here satirizes and, in a sense, undermines the homophobic discourse of the postwar years. This is underlined in the section that follows the descriptions of the nightly incident at Mr. Antolini's apartment. In these passages, we find an unusually long description of the bodily symptoms that Holden experiences after the incident: "Boy, I was shaking like a madman. I was sweating, too. When something perverty like that happens, I start sweating like a bastard" (174). Holden's hysterical behavior functions as an illustration of the general paranoia regarding sexual deviance in the American Forties and Fifties. "That kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid," the narrator tells us in his usual tone of blunt exaggeration (174). By employing the rhetorical techniques of overstatement and parody, the novel deconstructs the well-known stereotypes of bodily deviance as specters of a hysterical imagination.

Holden's mixed emotions towards other peoples' bodies reveal a lot about the character's world view. The adolescent body here emerges as a continuous site of embattled identity. The process of growing up is conveyed as an agonizing act of discovering and eventually coping with one's unruly and non-conformist body scheme. In the novel's first chapter, a whole passage is devoted to Selma Thurmer, the headmaster's daughter, who is described as "a pretty nice girl" with an awkward physical appearance and a vaguely disproportionate anatomy (163). Selma's idiosyncratic body scheme is constructed as a reflection of Holden's own ambivalence and insecurity: "She had a big nose and her nails were all bitten down and bleedy-looking, and she had on those damn falsies that point all over the place" (2). In this passage, we sense Holden's own timidity in dealing with issues of physicality and sexuality. When Holden later visits the Museum of Natural History, he curiously observes one of the exhibits, "that squaw with the naked bosom" (109). In yet another chapter, Holden unfavorably compares his own body to the athletic physique of Stradlater. "He was a very strong guy. I'm a very weak guy" (26). Holden's feelings of uncertainty and his lack of self-confidence seem to break through

14 In the original version of the story in *Collier's*, Holden himself is sitting at somebody's bed—that of his sister Phoebe—looking at her admiringly as she sleeps (Salinger, "I'm Crazy" 51).

when the character is touched in a "sexual" way by Mr. Antolini. After fleeing to a nearby recreational area, Holden happens to read in a magazine, which he finds on a park bench, an article on the effect of hormones on the human body. He immediately feels sick: "[T]his damn article... described how you should look, your face and eyes and all, if your hormones were in good shape, and I didn't look that way at all. I looked exactly like the guy in the article with lousy hormones" (176). Holden's strong reaction towards the article shows that his psychological crisis also involves elements of bodily self-awareness. The novel here plays with images of a *carnal subjectivity*, in other words, it portrays the character's mental and physical condition as two sides of the same medal. In the context of the American 1950s, this mode of tactile representation was capable of inducing in the reader reactions similar to those displayed by the protagonist himself. A look at the reception of the novel in the early Fifties shows that Holden Caulfield's own hysteria regarding the disorderliness of the body and the challenges of sexuality was obviously shared by many readers, however, with a different accent. When *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, it was vehemently rejected by conservative critics for its allegedly "crude," "profane," and "obscene" language. Other critics were worried about the innocence of the American postwar generation, a concern equally mirrored in Holden's furor against the obscenities scribbled on school and museum walls. Curiously enough, those who admired *The Catcher in the Rye* were also able to relate to the text on a corporeal level. In a way, the novel's rhetoric against *phoniness*, even though associated with a teenager's narrow-minded and rebellious perspective, anticipates and mocks the lurid responses that followed the book's publication (Whitfield 69).[15]

## Conclusion

It has been the aim of this essay to show that the act of reading Salinger's novel is based upon an aesthetic of *carnal identification* which turns the book into a *cinematic text*. The love-hate-relationship between the protagonist and the cinema is vital to an understanding of the literary aesthetic of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger's book not only mimics its character's cautious acceptance of a "movie-made" environment, which is part of his coming of age. It also literally absorbs and reconstructs the aesthetic patterns

15 The canonization of *Catcher* in schools and universities was strongly disputed. Although some colleges and universities had adopted the book as "required or supplementary reading" by the early Sixties, religious and conservative groups attempted to ban the book from the reading lists. "In perhaps most communities in the United States," Everett T. Moore noted in 1961, "teachers of English who assign or recommend the reading of such a book… and their librarians who stock the book, are risking censure from parents or others who have strong objections to exposing youngsters to this kind of literature" (Freese 187).

attributed to cinematic fiction. In this regard, *The Catcher in the Rye* almost functions as a cinematic event, establishing a close connection between the materiality of the written text and that of our imagination.

In his last letter to Werner Kleeman from February, 1969, Salinger declared that he no longer aspired to "go back anywhere in the flesh" (Pitzke, "Best Always"). As in a good film, however, the "Salinger Text" does not need the author's physical presence. In the carnal world of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the text itself is flesh enough to replace the author. Salinger must have realized this when he decided to retire from public life in the 1960s, from then on letting his fiction do the talking.

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