

Love Sick

by [Libby Ronon](#)

The title of Joanna Hogg's semi-autobiographical 2019 film *The Souvenir* comes from Jean-Honoré Fragonard's c. 1778 painting of the same name. The subject of the painting is a beautiful young woman who wears an elegant peach-colored dress. She is carving the initials of her lover into the trunk of a tree. Beside the woman, a spaniel – a symbol of obedience and loyalty – sits on a bench and gazes adoringly at her. The sky is light behind her. The scene portrays bliss, yet there is something eerie and menacing about the tree's dark silhouette hanging above her head.

The Souvenir follows Julie, an ambitious young film student, as she navigates her relationship with Anthony, a captivating and worldly man who claims to work at the British Foreign Office. Anthony makes a charming first impression, but as the plot progresses, the audience learns of the manipulative behaviors he employs in order to hold on to Julie and feed his debilitating heroin addiction. In one scene, Anthony brings Julie to a collection where Fragonard's *Souvenir* hangs. He asks if she likes the woman in the painting; "I love her," Julie replies. They debate whether she appears sad or determined, but agree that she is "very much in love" (00:14:13-00:14:35). Later, when Julie breaks off the relationship and attempts to move on, she finds herself much happier without Anthony. However, when Anthony returns – seemingly clean of heroin – Julie, in an instant, decides to take him back. Shortly after, Anthony experiences withdrawal, relapses, disappears for a few days, and is found dead of an overdose in a public restroom.

The Souvenir is a romance film – at least, it was advertised as such – yet it's also a story of dissociation and isolation. Viewers may quickly associate Julie with the woman in Fragonard's painting: they are beautiful, young women with strawberry blonde hair, seemingly in love. However, it is Anthony who seems to embody the woman in the painting, while Julie assumes the role of the spaniel. Obedient and adoring, she waits on Anthony, whose emotions are ambiguous. Julie "love[s]" the woman in the painting because she identifies with the pet. The painting acts as a mirror of Julie and Anthony's relationship: a mirror they can't quite see. The emotionally abusive quality of her relationship with Anthony, abundantly clear to the audience, is disturbingly overlooked by the lovers themselves. As Julie seems to suffer from dissociation, we ourselves feel isolated as we observe her trouble. Viewers ache to shake Julie by her shoulders and scream, "Look at what's in front of you!"

Julie and Anthony's struggle to see is illuminated through Hogg's careful positioning of mirrors. Reflections normally help us see ourselves and our surroundings better. By contrast, in *The Souvenir*, mirrors seem to expose the pitfalls of Julie and Anthony's relationship, but only to viewers. Early in the film, Julie sits across a table from several friends of Anthony, facing the camera at an angle. His friends are visible in the mirror behind her. At this moment, Anthony is absent. Muted shock and upset wash over Julie's face as his friends nonchalantly reveal a grave truth: Anthony is a heroin addict (00:44:15). To her embarrassment, she finds herself in a position where Anthony's friends know more about him than she does, even though she has a much more intimate relationship with him. Julie is caught – physically and emotionally – in a vulnerable position, where Anthony's friends have a much better view of Julie than she does of them. Julie speaks to Anthony's friends face to face, while they have an almost full-body view of Julie, courtesy of the mirrors surrounding her. When Anthony settles in next to Julie moments later, his back is also exposed by the mirrors. At this point, he too is unaware of something: Julie knows of his addiction to heroin (00:45:13).

In a later scene, when Anthony brings Julie to an exquisite hotel in Venice, a mirror shows viewers more than both characters can see. The hotel is beautifully appointed with tapestries, an ornate chandelier, scenic wallpaper, and soaring ceilings, but once settled into the space, Julie begins to cry. Sensing failure, Anthony sits next to her and implores: "Please tell me what I've done. Please, because this is punishing, seeing you like this and not knowing why." Julie does not respond. The scene suddenly ends (00:58:26-00:58:45). This terse interaction is barely captured through the reflection of a vanity mirror in a wide shot of the room. The reflection is the only part of the shot that has movement. Surrounded by lavish decor and frills, the room seems hollow and, consequently, their relationship less substantive. The small vanity mirror forces the viewer to squint in order to find the emotional heart of the scene.

In a subsequent scene, Julie sits at a table with Anthony, her mother, and the head of Julie's film school to celebrate her birthday in a room surrounded with various mirrors. Once they've sung and blown out the candles on her cake, the camera shifts focus to expose a shattered mirror. How the mirror shattered is never explained, but it indicates Julie and Anthony's increasingly destructive relationship. Members of the table, smiling and laughing, do not seem to notice the mirror at all (01:36:10). The brokenness of their relationship, as well as their ability to see, is overlooked by all of these characters.

In his essay "Cultural Diversity Of Romantic Love Experience," from *The International Handbook of Love*, Victor Karandashev explains the association between "lovesickness" and addiction: "manifestations of extreme passion, with irrational, intrusive, obsessive thinking about [the] beloved [and] acute longing for reciprocation . . . may resemble the symptoms of a psychological disorder" (74). In a 1999 Italian study, for example, researchers found that "the experience of passionate love resembles the symptoms of

obsessive-compulsive disorder and neuroticism. [B]iochemical similarities in the brain and body were found for these conditions” (74). Karandashev’s research suggests lovesickness is more than just experiencing life through rose-colored lenses: it can be seriously maladaptive and reflective of internal disorder.

Julie appears to suffer from such a condition. Yet while the audience might guess this from visual clues, we can never know for sure: while the camera reveals, it also distances. Seen through still frames that capture the entirety of the room, Julie looks like an experimental subject under observation. In some scenes, the music will build and then abruptly end as a new scene begins, alienating viewers from Julie’s experience and reminding us that we are audience members in a theater. Harsh cuts between scenes occur often in *The Souvenir*, whether it is via audio effects, scene decor, or general mood. Thus, Julie appears in a kind of “third person” perspective – a device usually reserved for narrative prose, but here used as a film aesthetic – that makes it quite difficult for the audience to get inside her head.

Richard Brody criticizes this distancing technique in his *New Yorker* review. Though Julie is supposed to embody a younger version of Hogg, her experience feels very removed from viewers. Disappointed by Hogg’s habit of cutting away “just as they’re getting going” – often a scene will end before confrontation has the opportunity to climax, Brody asserts that Hogg lacks “curiosity” about her semi-autobiographical narrative. The audience never sees anything from Julie’s point of view, whether that is the person she’s speaking to, the letter she’s reading, or the other side of the phone call she’s having. Thus, while *The Souvenir* is “a movie about experience,” Brody contends that it “doesn’t itself offer much of an experience” because of Hogg’s detachment from her semi-alter ego.

Rebecca Mead, in her *New Yorker* profile on Hogg, holds a more sympathetic view of *The Souvenir*’s self-distancing approach. Mead explains that the same detachment that frustrates Brody is intentional. When filming, Hogg provided Tom Burke (Anthony) with the script prior to filming, while Honor Swinton Byrne (Julie), already inexperienced in acting, was only briefed on each day’s work when she arrived on set. Burke had been cast in the role months in advance of shooting; Byrne was cast two weeks before. Maintaining Swinton Byrne’s psychological discomfort and drawing out her inexperience were aspects of Hogg’s attempt to replicate her own “original naïveté” (Mead).

In some cases, Hogg would deprive Swinton Byrne of any insight into her character’s psychology. On the first day of filming, which involved a party scene, Swinton Byrne felt very self-conscious about people looking at her. “That fear you see on my face is real,” she said. “I was saying, ‘Joanna, I am so sorry, can you please give me something about what I should be feeling, so that I can feel I am doing Julie justice?’ She said, ‘Just

feel uncomfortable.' I said, 'Right, O.K. Done'" (Byrne qtd. in Mead). Distance, which Brody and Mead identify as an artistic device used by Hogg, enhances the feeling of isolation Julie experiences. Hogg's choice to detach both the audience from the character *and* the actor from the role reinforces this effect, bringing the character closer to Hogg's understanding of her younger self.

Julie experiences love like a psychological disorder that tampers with her connection to the present moment. As a result, her experiences are portrayed as though she is dissociated from all that is happening around her. However, contrary to Brody's critique, Hogg's depiction of Julie in this way is deliberate and gives viewers an authentic perception of Julie's own experience: we are detached from her as she is from herself. At the same time, the distancing effect we feel not only alienates us from her but also makes us desperate to get closer and intervene, precisely because it also allows us to see what she can't. I cringe in recognition every time Julie offers a conciliatory apology to a man who has clearly wronged her: how many times have I done the same thing without noticing?

It seems Hogg wishes for people like Julie to see beyond our own limitations, our own pathologies. Armed with self-awareness, we might be able to escape dysfunctional relationships. Early in the film, as Julie and Anthony analyze Fragonard's *The Souvenir*, they note how his subject, dressed delightfully in peach, "looks determined and very much in love" (00:14:34). Seemingly innocent, this remark romanticizes what could reasonably be called an illness. In *The Souvenir*, Hogg has created a cautionary tale for young lovers. By exposing lovesickness as a pathology, she is giving us a way to critically observe ourselves in the mirror.

Works Cited

Brody, Richard. "'The Souvenir,' Reviewed: Joanna Hogg's Ambitious, Frustrating Autobiographical Drama." *The New Yorker*, 23 May 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-souvenir-reviewed-joanna-hoggs-ambitious-frustrating-autobiographical-drama.

Fragonard, Jean-Honoré. *The Souvenir*. c.1776-c.1778, The Wallace Collection, London.

Karandashev, Victor. "Cultural Diversity Of Romantic Love Experience" *International Handbook of Love: Transcultural and Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Claude-Hélène Mayer et al., Springer International Publishing AG, 2021, pp. 59-79.

Mead, Rebecca. "Joanna Hogg's Self-Portrait of a Lady." *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/joanna-hoggs-self-portrait-of-a-lady.

The Souvenir. Directed by Joanna Hogg. A24, 2019.