
Butterfly
Eagle


WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
Luce Martini

«Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
When the blazing sun is gone
When there's nothing he shines upon
Then you show your little light, and
Twinkle, twinkle, through the night»

CHAPTER ONE

Girl and the Fly

01. BUTTERFLY EAGLE / INTRODUCTION

Butterfly Eagle originates from a personal need to represent adolescence and its problems, while deliberately altering the filter through which these issues are usually observed. Rather than reproducing narratives of pathology, delinquency, or deficit, the work positions itself as a dedication to all the young people labeled as "difficult" or "problematic".
The title, borrowed from **Muhammad Ali's** celebrated phrase *"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"*, is deliberately reimagined.
The butterfly symbolizes fragility, metamorphosis, and beauty; the eagle, strength, dominance, and adulthood.
The combination of the two names generates a paradox that mirrors adolescence itself: a state suspended between vulnerability and power, innocence and assertion, beauty and aggression.
In this sense, the title signals the central theme of the work: growth as a process of doubleness, where contradictory qualities coexist and transformation is born from tension.

Historically, cinema, literature, and photography have frequently foregrounded adolescent suffering by emphasizing dysfunction, disorder, or visible distress. These depictions, while powerful, risk reinforcing stereotypes of adolescence as a stage dominated by negativity.
My approach is different.
Having been in close contact with many so-called "problematic" adolescents and having shared those struggles myself I would like to create a body of work that reframes their experience with dignity and complexity.

In this sense, I return to the words of **Fabrizio De André:** *"Dai diamanti non nasce niente, dal letame nascono i fior"* (Nothing is born from diamonds, from dung flowers are born).
Beauty often arises not from perfection but from imperfection, pain, and struggle.

My photographs therefore represent these problems in the form of a beautiful young girl who plays at being an adult, set within the ambiguous environment of a party that may never have actually taken place. The tension lies in the undecidability of the scene: is it real, imagined, or remembered? A potential space, where the adolescent negotiates between inner fantasy and external reality through play and performance.

Every element is intentional, carrying either an autobiographical trace or a symbolic weight. The vodka bottle containing a fly suggests the thin line between life and death, pleasure and contamination. The chessboard floor alludes to life as a game of strategy and consequence. These motifs operate not only as narrative devices but as psychological condensations of adolescent experience: oscillating between desire, rebellion, fragility, and existential questioning.

Formally, the images are conceived as film stills, single frames extracted from a larger, unseen narrative. This cinematic approach acknowledges the influence of film history, but it also serves as a metaphor: we, as spectators, only ever see fragments of the girl’s story, just as society glimpses only partial aspects of adolescent life before passing judgment. The viewer’s act of looking thus mirrors the broader social process of framing and evaluating adolescence on the basis of incomplete evidence.
At the heart of every image is a persistent tension: between childhood and adulthood, play and performance, attraction and disturbance, beauty and fragility.
This tension captures the psychological reality of adolescence as a phase marked by instability but also by potential transformation. Adolescence, often stigmatized as crisis, is reimagined here as a fertile, turbulent space of becoming.

02. THE BEGINNING / INT. PARTY GIRL

From the very moment I had to choose the focus of my final master's project, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. There was no hesitation: I wanted to explore the photograph of the girl and the fly that I took at a party in London this winter.
The image had stayed with me since I first captured it, and it felt natural and essential to build my project around the ideas and tensions it suggested.
It was a very specific and almost accidental moment: a party, a casual encounter, and a girl I had never met before.
What first caught my attention was not something dramatic or extraordinary, but rather something subtle, almost insignificant at first sight. She was holding a **vodka bottle**, and inside it, a small **fly** had accidentally fallen.
I remember her carefully explaining to me how she was trying to drink without swallowing the insect. That image struck me immediately. It was raw, slightly unsettling, and deeply fascinating.
What could have remained a simple anecdote, a fleeting scene at a party, instead stayed with me for days, then weeks.

The photograph I took of that moment became more than just a polaroid, it became the seed of a story, something that kept resonating in my head. I began to ask myself why it felt so important. Why did this echo so strongly in me?
From that single encounter, I decided to build a narrative.

I wanted to tell her story, or at least the story I imagined through her. I chose to focus on the broader themes of adolescence: the turbulence, the anger, the sense of isolation, and the often-invisible struggles that shape this period of life. However, I did not want to represent these struggles in a purely negative or stereotypical way. Instead, I was interested in showing their hidden beauty.
The idea of the party can be understood through the framework of *"rites of passage"*, as theorized by anthropologist **Arnold van Gennep** *(1909)*, rituals that mark transitions between distinct stages of life.

In this context, adolescence can be seen as a liminal condition in which the individual exists suspended between childhood and adulthood. **Victor Turner** *(1969)* elaborates on liminality as a period of ambiguity and transformation, during which conventional categories and social roles are blurred, and identities are continually negotiated and redefined.
From this perspective, the party functions as a symbolic liminal stage.
The meticulous preparations associated with it, the selection of clothing, the attention to detail, serve as markers of transition, echoing the preparatory rituals that accompany significant social transformations.

At the same time, elements of uncertainty and disruption, such as the choice of the absence of others at the party or unexpected details like the presence of the fly in the bottle of vodka for example, destabilize the ritual, emphasizing the tension inherent in liminality.
This ambiguity reflects the very nature of adolescence: a period characterized by the simultaneous presence of opposites.

On one hand, there is the lightness, playfulness, and fragility associated with still being a child; on the other, the emerging strength, self-awareness of adulthood.
In this way, the notion of the party highlights the complex interplay between preparation and performance, expectation and uncertainty, belonging and alienation.
The symbolic framework of the party allows for the exploration of how transitional moments shape identity.

Another important early reflection emerged during this period, for a long time I had understood photography in terms of objectivity, as a medium uniquely capable of documenting and proving that reality is as it appears. This perspective resonates with what **Roland Barthes**, in *"Camera Lucida"* (1980), calls the *"evidential force"* of the photograph, the idea that photography testifies to the existence of what it depicts.

However, through my encounter with **Miles Aldridge** and the sustained study of his practice and writings, I came to recognize how limiting such a conception could be. By reducing photography just to its documentary function, I was excluding its potential for invention, imagination, and play.
Susan Sontag reminds us in *"On Photography"* (1977) that every photograph is already an interpretation, a framing of reality that selects, excludes, and constructs meaning. In this light, the idea of photography as a neutral or objective medium becomes untenable. Working as **Miles Aldridge**'s assistant encouraged me to see the photograph not as transparent evidence, but as an artifice: an image that, like a painting, has the capacity to stage, and most important, it has the power to tell your own reality.

This shift has been transformative for my project and for my practice in general. I began to treat my images as visual constructions rather than proofs, as spaces where reality and fiction could intertwine. This shift allowed me to focus on what truly interests me, giving me the freedom to create images that express my own vision and passions.

CHAPTER TWO

The Research

03. ALICE IN WONDERLAND / TIM WALKER

At the outset, my initial idea was to reimagine the world of **Alice in Wonderland**, embracing its contrasts, surrealism, and dreamlike disjunctions. The narrative of **Carroll's** text, with its oscillation between childhood innocence and the absurdities of adult logic, offered a framework that seemed particularly right for a project concerned with adolescence and its paradoxes.
In this sense, the photography of **Tim Walker** represented an important early reference point.
Walker's photography is celebrated for its fantastical compositions, where elaborate set design, oversized props, and highly stylized costumes combine to construct immersive visual worlds. His work resists the documentary impulse, instead foregrounding the artifice of photography as a space for invention and theatricality.
Critics such as **Martin Harrison** (2008) have noted how **Walker** draws upon traditions of British surrealism and fairy-tale illustration, staging images that hover between fashion editorial and fine art, between cinematic still and dreamscape.

Reflecting more deeply, I realized that this theme, while visually fascinating, did not resonate with me on a personal level.
The world of **Alice**, as filtered through **Walker's** elaborate and whimsical aesthetics, felt distant, almost like inhabiting someone else's imagination rather than my own. Although the story's surreal logic and fantastical disorientation aligned conceptually with my interest in adolescence as a liminal stage. I began to sense a disjunction between the imagery I was drawing upon and the narratives I wanted to express.
I began to question what I genuinely wanted to represent: was I identifying with the girl in the scene? Which kind of party would I actually want to attend?
My reflections were immediate and clear: I found my attention drawn to the imagery of **Los Angeles** and **Hollywood** parties, and I decided to pursue this direction.
These cultural and visual references allowed me to connect more directly with my own interests and aesthetic inclinations.

This realization marked a turning point. Rather than continuing along a path that seemed visually rich but emotionally detached, I began to interrogate my practice more introspectively. I asked myself what I truly wanted to communicate, what stories I felt compelled to tell, and what aspects of my own experience and identity I wanted to see reflected in the work.

Through this process, it became clear that I wanted to construct a narrative with autobiographical grounding, a project that transform personal memory, cultural influences, and lived experience into an imaginative visual language.

In other words, I sought to move from appropriating a pre-existing mythology to constructing a mythology of my own, one that could merge the personal and the universal, the intimate and the theatrical.

What followed was a list of visual and cultural markers that would serve as guiding coordinates, helping me to move away from borrowed imaginaries and toward a more personal and coherent narrative framework.

These markers included:

- ★ ***Cowboys***
- ★ ***Spaghetti Western***
- ★ ***Cinematic vibes***
- ★ ***Los Angeles***
- ★ ***The advertising world***
- ★ ***Vintage***

This list subsequently functioned as a constant point of reference throughout both the research and production phases of the project.
It provided a means of verifying the coherence of my decisions at every stage, whether in relation to visual research, conceptual framing, or the practical organization of the shoot.
By returning repeatedly to these guiding markers, I was able to maintain a balance between experimentation and consistency.
The list did not operate as a rigid framework but rather as a flexible compass, orienting my creative process while still leaving space for unforeseen developments and intuitive discoveries, allowing me to translate a set of abstract inspirations into a coherent visual and narrative strategy.
This process started with the systematic consultation of magazines, journals, and books available at the London College of Fashion Library.

Beyond these more contemporary references, I also delved into historical archives, which provided a broader visual and cultural framework for my project.
Engaging with archival materials allowed me to trace recurring motifs across decades, such as the evolution of styling codes and the construction of archetypal figures within visual culture.

CHAPTER THREE

Books Selection

04. BOOKS / NADIA LEE COHEN - CINDY SHERMAN

Key sources of my book reaserch included *“Hollywood 1930”*, “*Woman*” and “Hello, My Name Is” by **Nadia Lee Cohen**, and **Dolly Parton**’s autobiographical work. The encounter with **Nadia Lee Cohen’s** visual universe (particularly in “*Woman (2020*)” and “*Hello, My Name Is (2021)”* marked a crucial turning point in the development of my project. What struck me most in her practice is not only the striking use of color, but the way in which she manages to construct an entirely personal imaginary, a world that is recognizably her own.
Cohen’s images do not aim to reproduce reality as it is conventionally perceived; rather, they emerge as extensions of her inner world, as projections of the universe she carries within herself.
This pushed further to reconsider the framework through which I had been approaching photography. In **Cohen’s** work, reality becomes secondary to vision the photograph ceases to serve as a mirror of the external world and instead becomes a stage upon which the artist’s imagination unfolds.

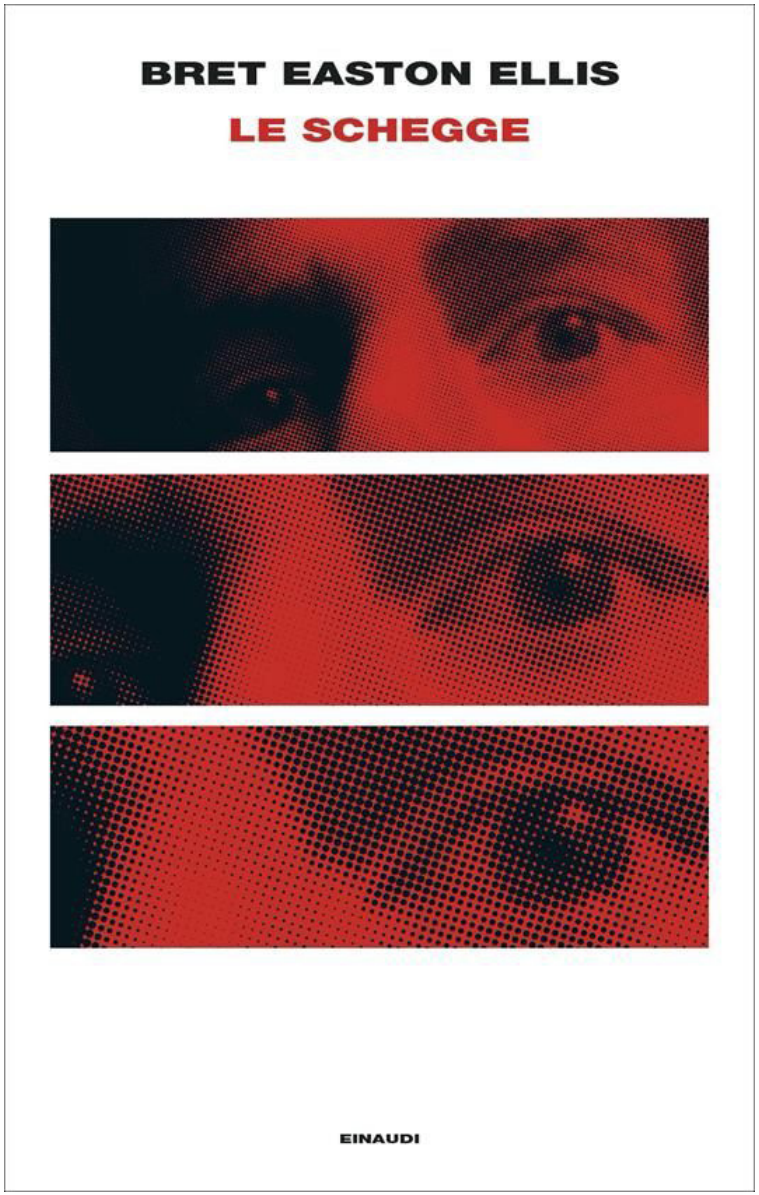
Like ***Sherman's*** *"Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980"), ***Cohen*** uses staged photography to construct characters that feel simultaneously familiar and unsettling, rooted in recognizable cultural tropes yet estranged through exaggeration and artifice.

Sherman's contribution was to expose the performative dimension of identity (particularly feminine identity) by demonstrating that photographic self-representation is never neutral but always mediated by role-play,costume, and narrative convention.
Cohen extends this lineage by amplifying these strategies through hyper-saturated color, stylization, and a distinctly contemporary sensibility.

For me, this connection was essential. Seeing how ***Cohen***, much like **Sherman** before her, creates work that is less about reproducing external reality than about manifesting an inner world, encouraged me to interrogate the symbolic and atmospheric dimensions of my own project.

05. LOS ANGELES / BREAT EASTON ELLIS

Equally influential was the fiction of **Bret Easton Ellis**, with *"The Shards"* standing out as a particularly relevant text.
Although not photographic in nature, **Ellis's** work provided a vital conceptual framework, offering atmospheres and character dynamics that deeply informed the visual and thematic direction of my project.
Ellis presents young, beautiful protagonists who appear to have everything: youth, wealth, and access to privileged environments.
Yet who are repeatedly confronted with the destabilizing presence of drugs, excess, and extreme, often destructive experiences.
These characters embody a paradox: they exist within worlds that are dazzling and desirable, yet at the same time alienating, empty, and permeated by violence.
Ellis's narrative strategy often emphasizes the seductive allure of these environments, portraying them as rich and glittering surfaces that captivate both his characters and the reader. Beneath this sheen lies a profound sense of fragility and disillusionment.



His protagonists are suspended between privilege and self-destruction, constantly negotiating the tension between appearance and reality, surface glamour and inner void.

This duality resonates with **Fredric Jameson's** (1991) account of postmodern culture as one dominated by surfaces and a diminishing sense of depth. **Ellis's** Los Angeles, for example, can be read as a quintessentially postmodern landscape: a space in which glittering exteriors mask the absence of stable meaning, and where youth culture becomes both a commodity and a site of existential drift. **Ellis's** work does not simply describe a generation but also critiques the cultural logic that defines it, exposing the contradictions of a society in which abundance and emptiness, glamour and despair, exist side by side.

This juxtaposition of beauty and danger, glamour and darkness, offered a crucial source of inspiration for my project.
It guided the atmospheres I wanted to construct: spaces that, much like **Ellis's** narratives, are at once captivating and unsettling, sparkling on the surface while concealing deeper tensions.
In drawing from Ellis's depictions of youth culture, I was not interested in replicating his stories, but rather in channeling the affective qualities they convey: the sense of adolescence and early adulthood as moments of intensity, contradiction, and instability, suspended between promise and collapse.

CHAPTER FOUR

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Cinema

06. CINEMA

Having decided how to develop my own narrative, I looked to cinema as a primary source of inspiration and methodological guidance. I spent entire days watching films, analyzing how different directors built their unique visual universes and distinctive stylistic languages to tell their stories.
This process was not limited to narrative structure; it involved a careful study of cinematographic elements (lighting, color, costume and spatial composition) and how these components collectively shape atmosphere, emotion, and meaning.
Cinema became a laboratory in which I could observe how visual and stylistic choices can convey psychological tension, narrative complexity, and the emotional essence of a story.
In particular, the work of **Quentin Tarantino**, **Wim Wenders**, **David Lynch**, and **Sergio Leone** emerged as key points of reference.

QUENTIN.

Quentin Tarantino inspired me particularly through his eighth film, *"The Hateful Eight (2015)"*.
While the film is firmly situated within the western tradition, **Tarantino** reimagines and reconfigures its codes in a manner that makes the work at once familiar and estranging. The cinematography, characterized by carefully controlled framing and a deliberate use of color correction, constructs a visual world that is heightened rather than naturalistic.
This negotiation between authenticity and artificiality demonstrates how cinema can stage a reality that is not bound by documentary accuracy but by expressive intent, a lesson that has been fundamental.

Equally significant is **Tarantino's** intertextual strategy, whereby cinematic references are combined, reworked, and reframed into new constellations of meaning. In *"The Hateful Eight"*, for instance, the influence of **Sergio Leone's** spaghetti westerns intersects with elements of *"Pulp Fiction"*, comic book stylization, and theatrical dramaturgy. **Tarantino's** cinema operates as a form of cultural collage, where diverse aesthetic traditions are simultaneously preserved and transformed.
Such hybridity resonates with my own desire to merge heterogeneous references (photographic, literary, and cinematic) into a unified but multilayered visual narrative.

Another central feature of ***Tarantino***'s work is his approach to narrative structure. His movies are divided into chapters, each marked explicitly within the filmic text, a technique that breaks linear continuity and foregrounds the constructedness of the story.
By segmenting the narrative into distinct but interrelated episodes, the director grants each part autonomy while maintaining coherence within the whole.

This fragmentation, paradoxically, produces a heightened sense of rhythm and anticipation, inviting the viewer to perceive narrative not as a seamless flow but as a series of encounters with different tonal registers.
In conceptualizing my project, this model proved instructive, suggesting ways in which a photographic narrative might be organized into discrete sequences that are internally coherent but gain meaning through their relation to the broader structure.

It is precisely this logic that guided my decision to divide my photographs into distinct chapters, each functioning as a self-contained unit contributing to the unfolding of a larger narrative.

Much like **Tarantino's** episodic structure, this division allows for shifts in tone, atmosphere, and symbolism without undermining the cohesion of the work as a whole. Rather than presenting a linear, monolithic account, the project invites the viewer to navigate through successive narrative fragments, each one layering new dimensions of meaning. In this way, the chapter-based organization not only reflects a cinematic influence but also underscores my interest in multiplicity, fragmentation, and the productive tensions that arise when disparate moments are brought into dialogue.

Where **Tarantino** thrives on excess, sharp contrasts, and heightened theatricality, **Wenders** works through silence, suspension, and the poetics of space.

WIM.

Among **Wenders's** films, "*Paris, Texas* (1984)" emerged as the most significant source of inspiration. What struck me most was the way in which the vast, rugged expanses of the American West are not presented merely as backdrops, but as active elements that shape the emotional texture of the narrative.
And this is what I wanted to riproduce with my photography.
The arid landscapes and raw architecture carry a sense of estrangement and desolation, which both contrast with and amplify the vulnerability of the characters.
The title itself "*Paris, Texas*" captures this dialectical tension: the evocation of *Paris*, delicate, classical, almost romantic, placed against *Texas*, which conjures associations of strength, roughness, and frontier life. This juxtaposition operates not only as a geographical paradox but also as a symbolic articulation of conflicting sensibilities.
Equally influential for my own project was the character of **Jane**, whose soft, almost childlike appearance (embodied in pastel tones and delicate pink costumes) stands in stark contrast to the gritty, masculine landscapes in which her story unfolds.
This visual dissonance became a key reference point for me, suggesting how the interplay of sweetness and harshness, fragility and rawness, can generate a powerful aesthetic and emotional charge.
In reflecting on these dynamics, I began to see how photography, like cinema, can construct meaning precisely through the collision of opposites where the setting and the figure, rather than harmonizing, enter into dialogue through their differences.

In conclusion, **Wenders's** cinematic landscapes, and particularly those in *"Paris, Texas"* prompted me to reflect on the potential of backdrop as a narrative device within my own project.
His use of the American West as both a symbolic and material environment foregrounds the dialogue between character and setting, where the vast, rugged spaces are not neutral containers but active participants in the story.
Translating this insight into my practice, I tryed to recreate a similar dynamic through constructed backdrops.

This interplay between gentleness and harshness, intimacy and vastness, became central to my visual strategy, underscoring how setting itself can function as a metaphorical extension of character and psychological state.

DAVID.

This awareness opened a path toward **David Lynch**, whose *“Wild at Heart”* similarly explores the friction between tenderness and violence, dreamlike beauty and grotesque excess.
In *“Wild at Heart”*, **Lynch** crafts a world where love and violence, tenderness and brutality, coexist in a heightened, almost surreal register. The film’s protagonists, *Sailor and Lula*, embody an exaggerated romantic ideal (youthful passion, intensity, devotion) yet their journey unfolds within a landscape permeated by danger, grotesque characters, and moments of extreme violence.
What is striking in **Lynch’s** vision is precisely this collision between the dreamlike and the nightmarish, the idyllic and the grotesque, which destabilizes the viewer’s sense of reality.
For my own project, *“Wild at Heart”* offered a crucial model of how narrative atmospheres can be charged through the juxtaposition of opposites. Much like **Jane’s** fragility set against the raw desert in *“Paris, Texas”*, **Lynch’s** universe also relies on contrasts.

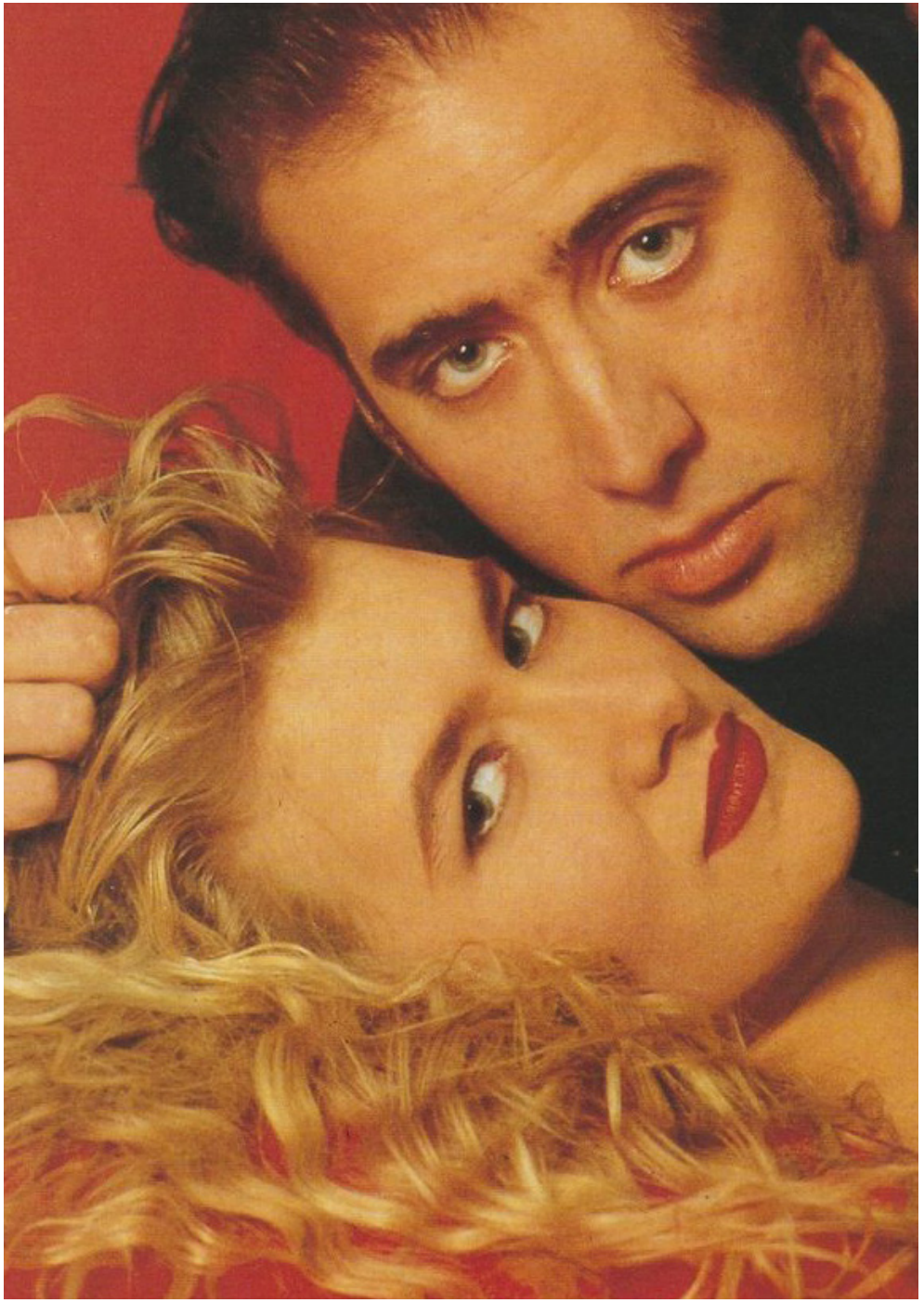
Throughout the film, even in seemingly idyllic or romantic scenes, there is an underlying sense that something is amiss. The characters often exhibit exaggerated or grotesque traits: behaviors, gestures, or appearances that destabilize the viewer’s perception and create a subtle, persistent tension. This pervasive sense of unease produces a psychological layer that coexists with the narrative, infusing every moment with ambiguity and unpredictability.

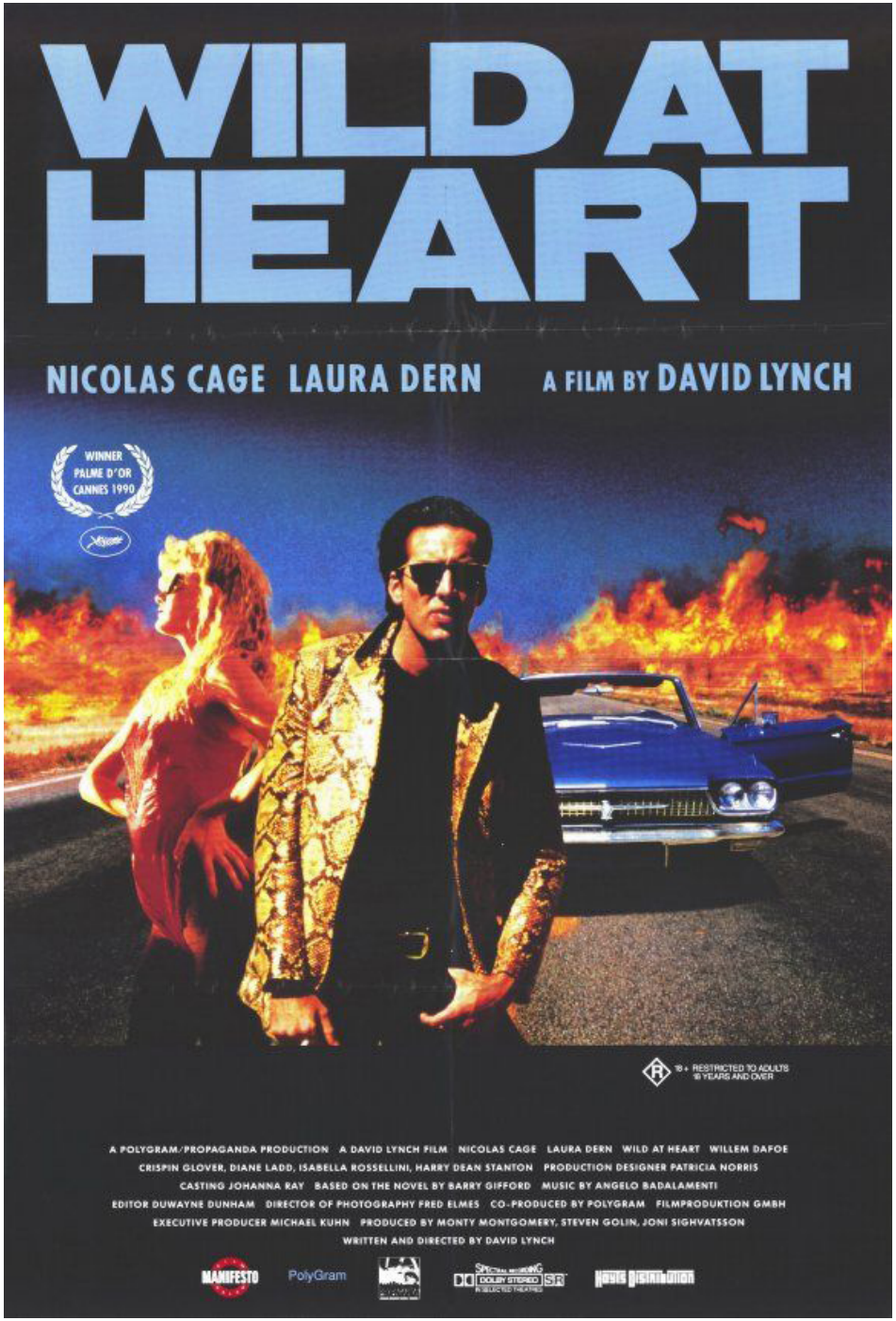
The interplay between surface beauty and underlying disturbance in *“Wild at Heart”* particularly inspired my own photographic sensibilities.

Just as **Lynch** stages moments of hyper-real intensity with a carefully calibrated sense of dissonance, working with **Miles Aldridge**'s photography has made me realise how he frequently introduces an element of disruption within otherwise perfect compositions, an anomaly or grotesque detail that unsettles the viewer and challenges the apparent harmony of the scene. In both cases, the tension between perfection and disturbance generates a psychological depth, compelling the audience to question what lies beneath the surface.

Following my tutorial with **Kim Coleman**, I began to reflect more deeply on the notion of the uncanny and its potential role in my work. Certain subtle, disquieting details can generate a persistent tension within a visual narrative, an effect that simultaneously attracts and unsettles the viewer.

This reflection led me to revisit my decision to include the element of the "fly inside the bottle" in my photographic story, recognizing it as more than a mere anecdotal element. In fact, the presence of the fly functions as a small but potent vector of disturbance, introducing an uncanny quality into the composition.





It disrupts the apparent perfection of the scene, creating a latent sense of unease that resonates with the tension observed in **Lynch's** work, where characters and environments frequently carry hints that something is not quite right, subtly destabilizing the viewer's perception while maintaining the aesthetic coherence and narrative of the image.

SERGIO.

A crucial moment in my research came when I began to question why I was so deeply drawn to the atmospheres of the western movies. Upon reflection, I realized that these films had been embedded in my visual culture from an early age, as I spent countless afternoons with my grandfather watching classics such as **Sergio Leone's** *"A Fistful of Dollars"* (1964) *"For a Few Dollars More"* (1965), and *"The Good, the Bad and the Ugly"* (1966).
These early encounters left a lasting impression. Returning to these films as an adult allowed me to approach them with a renewed critical awareness, revealing new layers of meaning and previously unnoticed details. This process of re-engagement opened fresh avenues for my own creative exploration, directly informing both my conceptual thinking and practical production. By revisiting these cinematic works with a more mature perspective, I was able to extract insights that guided the construction of my photographic environments, the staging of characters, and the orchestration of tension and atmosphere within my project.

In fact, what makes the spaghetti western especially compelling from both a historical and theoretical perspective is the context in which it was produced. **Leone** and his contemporaries often worked with limited resources and modest budgets, shooting primarily in Italy or Spain rather than the true American West.
Despite these constraints, they succeeded in crafting films of immense stylistic and narrative impact, achieving enduring recognition in the canon of global cinema.
This phenomenon underscores an important principle in visual culture: the ingenuity of filmmakers often emerges most strongly when constrained by economic or logistical limitations.
As **Bordwell and Thompson** (2010) argue in their discussion of low-budget cinema, limitations can serve as catalysts for innovation,encouraging directors to experiment with framing, lighting, sound, and pacing in order to maximize dramatic effect.
Leone's meticulous attention to composition, his innovative use of widescreen formats, and his manipulation of narrative tension exemplify this resourcefulness.

These strategies demonstrate that spatial and visual economy, careful control of framing, foreground-background relationships, and minimalism in set design, can produce maximum narrative and emotional effect.
Reflecting on these strategies prompted me to consider the role of low-budget aesthetics in my own photographic practice.
The spaghetti western taught me that limitations, rather than restricting creativity, can stimulate inventive solutions and reinforce conceptual rigor.
Returning to these films as an adult allowed me to approach them with a renewed critical awareness, revealing new layers of meaning and previously unnoticed details.
What once had seemed merely entertaining or stylistically striking now appeared as a rich field of creative strategies—choices in composition, lighting, color, and character that conveyed psychological depth and narrative subtlety.

This process of re-engagement opened fresh avenues for my own creative exploration, directly informing both my conceptual thinking and practical production.
By revisiting these cinematic works with a more mature perspective, I was able to extract insights that guided the construction of my photographic environments, the staging of characters, and the orchestration of tension and atmosphere within my project, demonstrating that impactful and visually compelling results can be achieved even under constraints.
This lead to a critical reflection on how to make strategic and creative use of the limited budget available to me, emphasizing resourcefulness, careful planning, and inventive solutions as essential components of the production process.

CHAPTER FIVE

Miles Aldridge

07. INT. MILES ALDRIDGE STUDIO

A significant role in my photographic development occurred when I began working as an assistant to **Miles Aldridge.**
My engagement with his studio has been akin to an extended, immersive research experience spanning several months.
This period afforded me the unique opportunity to engage deeply with **Miles's** work archival materials, both digital and analog, including contact sheets, negatives, and documentation of both his past and contemporary works.
Through this sustained exposure, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of his methodologies, particularly his approach to analog photography.
Working directly on set under **Miles** direction provided me with an irreplaceable form of experiential learning, one that extended beyond observation into active participation.
Each shoot became a site of practical education in the orchestration of all the elements that converge to produce a photographic image: the interplay of light and shadow, the costume and set design, the rhythm of collaboration between photographer, stylist, models, and technical crew.

Observing **Miles's** meticulous attention to detail revealed how every element contributes to the cohesion and impact of the final image. This hands-on experience proved invaluable when translating my own conceptual project into practice. For instance, the use of storyboards and moodboards (strategies **Miles** encouraged me to adopt) enabled me to articulate a clear visual language prior to the shoot.
By pre-visualizing each scene, I could anticipate potential challenges and establish a guiding framework that preserved coherence across the project. At the same time, I learned how to remain responsive to the contingencies of the set that could be absorbed into the process without compromising the integrity of the work.

The lessons learned in the studio were not only technical but also methodological.
I came to appreciate the importance of preparation as a condition for creative freedom.In this respect, my own approach shifted from one of intuitive spontaneity to one that balances careful planning with flexibility, a shift that proved crucial in the execution of my final project.

On set I observed how illusion is meticulously built: through lighting schemes that sculpt mood, through chromatic decisions that evoke particular atmospheres, and through props and staging that allude to narratives extending beyond the frame.

In applying these lessons, I was able to navigate the challenges of my thesis project with greater confidence and precision. Even when confronted with logistical difficulties, such as the unexpected replacement of the stylist, which could have derailed the visual consistency of the project: I relied on the preparatory tools and methods learned from **Miles** to maintain clarity of vision.
The result was not only a more organized and efficient workflow but also a more assured articulation of my creative intentions.

However, the mentorship I received from **Miles** extended far beyond technical instruction: it encompassed professional advice, critical discussion of my creative ideas, and constructive feedback on my independent projects.

This mentorship created an environment in which I could articulate my vision, interrogate my assumptions, and refine my approach in real time.
For my final master's project, I was fortunate to be granted access to **Miles's** extensive library and personal archive, which became an essential resource for the development of my ideas.
Many of the books and materials he recommended were instrumental in shaping the conceptual framework of my work, enabling me to situate my practice within a broader historical and theoretical context.

The months of preparation and research leading up to the project were spent in his studio, an environment that offered both inspiration and discipline. I remain deeply grateful for this unique opportunity, which not only represented an extraordinary academic experience but also provided a formative moment in my personal and professional trajectory.
To have been chosen by **Miles** as a studio assistant, and to have been entrusted with the possibility of developing my thesis project within his working space, is something I regard as a rare privilege.
It is an experience that I will carry with me as an invaluable memory, one that has left an enduring imprint on my creative process and personal outlook.

My gratitude to **Miles** for his generosity, trust, and guidance cannot be overstated.

CHAPTER SIX

Styling

08. EXT. STYLING / RAFFAELLA and DOLLY

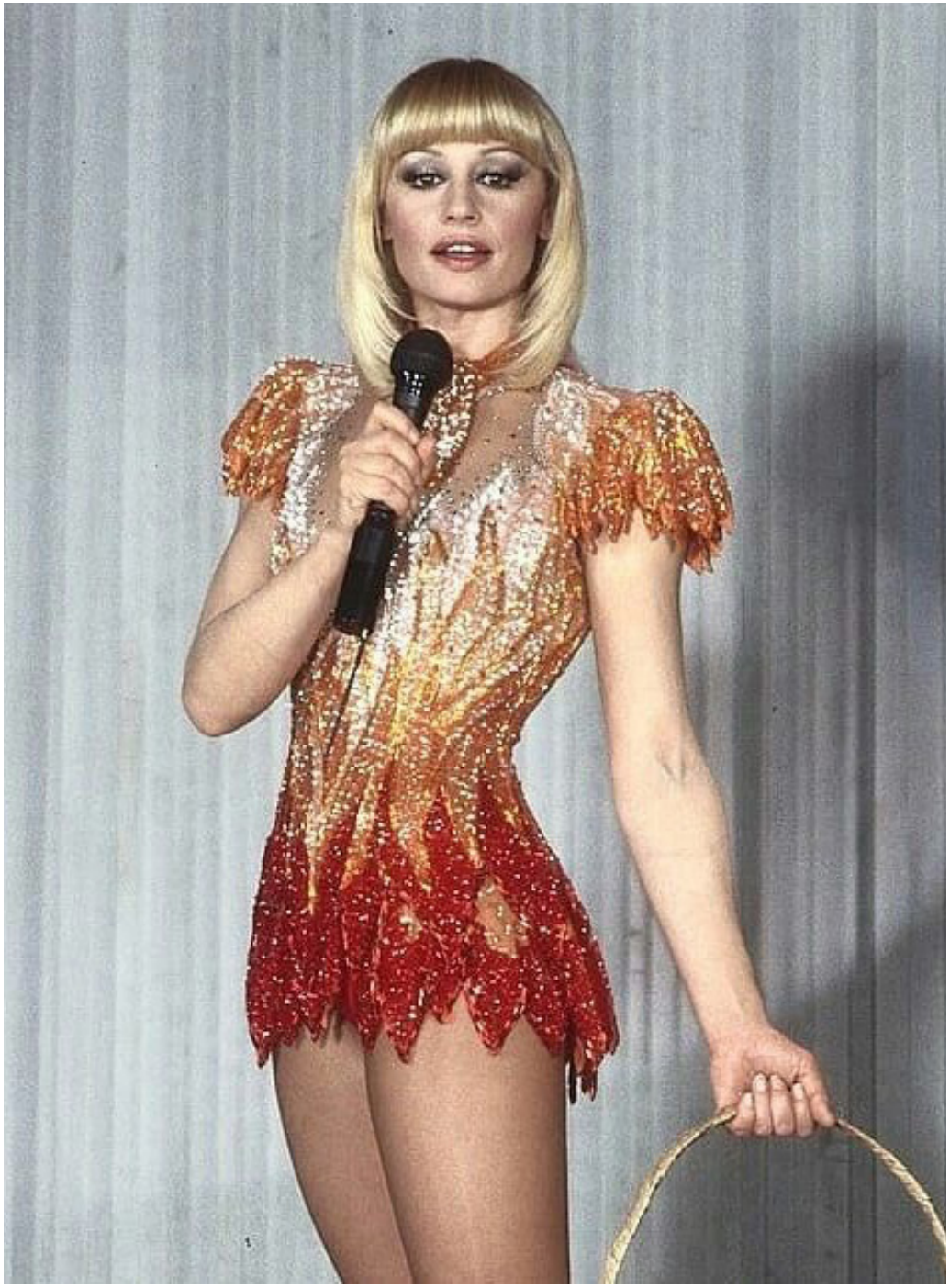
In undertaking this project, I made the deliberate choice to personally oversee both the set design and the styling in all of their dimensions.
This decision was not incidental, but rather integral to the conceptual and methodological framework of my work. I was able to confront questions that extend far beyond questions of surface or ornament. Set design and styling, as scholars of visual culture and performance studies have consistently argued (**Entwistle, 2000; Bruzzi, 1997**), operate as semiotic systems in their own right: they construct meaning, shape audience perception, and participate in the articulation of identity. The act of assuming responsibility for these tasks allowed me to experience first-hand the degree to which clothing, accessories, and scenographic elements function not simply as decorative supplements to the image but as constitutive features of its narrative grammar. Every choice—the texture of a fabric, the cut of a garment, the positioning of a prop, the color of a backdrop contributes to the creation of atmosphere, the construction of character, and the evocation of cultural references.

In this sense, styling and set design are not ancillary but structural: they are the conditions under which meaning materializes within both photography and cinema.
Moreover, inhabiting these roles gave me a privileged perspective on the collaborative ecology of image-making. In professional practice, stylists, set designers, and photographers work together in a constant negotiation of vision, authorship, and functionality.
My experience as an assistant to **Miles Aldridge** was particularly formative in this regard.**Miles's** practice emphasizes the performative potential of objects and garments, demonstrating how styling can act as a narrative device as potent as the positioning of a subject or the framing of a shot.
Ultimately, it served as a professional training ground, sharpening my capacity to recognize and appreciate the critical importance of these practices within the fields of fashion photography, cinema, and visual culture more broadly.

As I revisited the references that had accompanied my earlier research, I found myself returning to **Dolly Parton**, a figure I had already mentioned as significant in shaping my conceptual framework.
However, my ideas had become more defined. I realized that the project needed to be more explicitly rooted in my own identity and cultural affinities. Styling, in particular, became an opportunity to anchor the narrative not in borrowed fantasy but in an imagery that resonated with my personal history. Music, therefore, emerged as a crucial source of inspiration.
Rather than relying exclusively on fashion brands, I decided to draw from the visual worlds of two performers who have deeply influenced my sensibility:
Dolly Parton and **Raffaella Carrà.**
While **Dolly Parton** initially served as an anchor in thinking the styling of my project, her influence also prompted me to reflect more deeply on my own cultural roots. This line of thought led me to **Raffaella Carrà**, a performer whose work has profoundly shaped Italian popular culture and whose visual legacy offered me a new lens through which to conceptualize my project.

09. EXT. RAFFAELLA

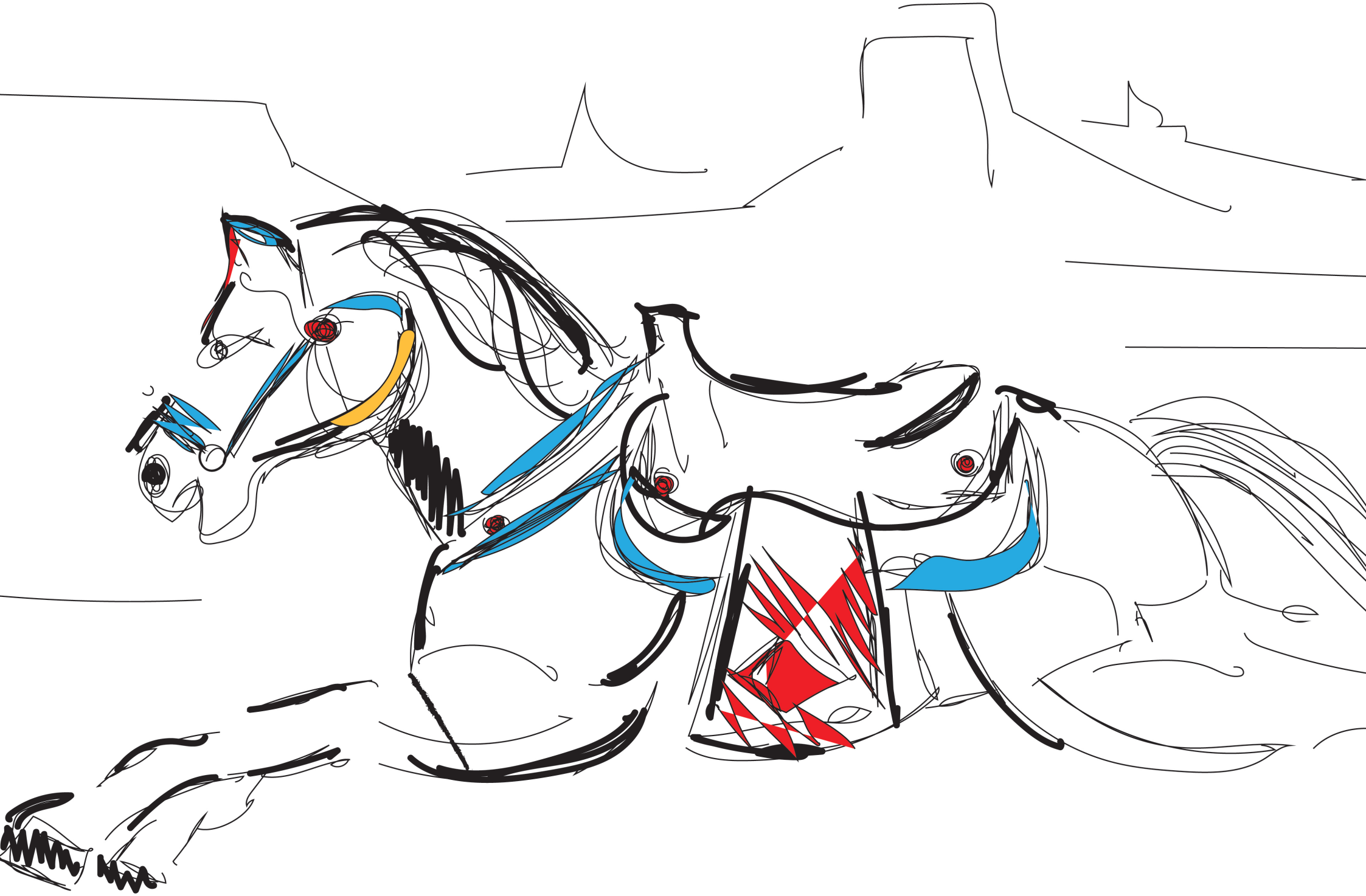
Raffaella Carrà occupies a singular position in Italian and international popular culture, embodying what cultural historians have termed a “total entertainer”, a figure whose significance extends far beyond the confines of television and music into the realms of fashion, politics, and social change. Her career spanned television, cinema, and music, and she became a household name not only in Italy but also across Spain and Latin America, where she cultivated a transnational following that anticipated the globalization of popular icons in the late twentieth century.
Carrà’s enduring success lay in her ability to merge glamour and accessibility, staging performances that were at once spectacular and intimate, and which consistently challenged dominant norms of femininity and sexuality in Italian mass media.
A crucial aspect of **Carrà’s** artistry was the centrality of costume and styling in the construction of her persona.
The dazzling jumpsuits, sequined bodysuits, fringed ensembles, and tailored crop tops that defined her stage appearances were not simply decorative but functioned as tools



of self-expression and cultural disruption. Her costumes allowed for dynamic choreography while simultaneously reinforcing her status as a fashion icon. Each look was meticulously calibrated to sustain the visual coherence of her brand: bold, playful, and immediately recognizable. Her signature platinum blonde bob, maintained with geometric precision, complemented these stylistic choices, producing an instantly legible iconography that was both modern and timeless.
The symbolic power of Carrà's styling emerged most vividly in moments of controversy that became cultural turning points. Scholars have argued that **Carrà's** persona enacted what could be described as a "performative feminism," offering women new models of autonomy and self-expression within a patriarchal cultural context **(Scarpellini, 2018).**
Her costumes were active participants in the construction of meaning, shaping the audience's perception of her performance and persona. Thanks to her, I've found a way to integrate a theatrical dimension into my own narrative framework, while also anchoring it in a personal and cultural memory.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Set Design



10. EXT. SET DESIGN

The set design played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and the identity of **Butterfly Eagle.** For the location, I deliberately chose a villa in Italy that featured vintage architectural and decorative elements, as well as spacious interiors that could be adapted to create a sense of scale and theatricality. **The villa's** retro aesthetic was not merely a matter of style, but an essential part of the project's temporal ambiguity: its interiors suggested both familiarity and estrangement. These qualities were instrumental in constructing the surreal effect I was seeking, where adolescence is staged as a suspended space, oscillating between the everyday and the extraordinary.

In addition to the location itself, the props and backdrops became decisive tools in articulating the interplay between reality and fiction, a conceptual thread that runs throughout the project. The backdrops in particular were central: two real surface backdrop, and a specifically constructed "party backdrop" designed to evoke the artificiality of staged celebrations. These elements functioned as visual cues, reminding the viewer that the scene exists simultaneously within and outside of reality.

The artifice of the backdrop highlights the constructed nature of the images, making the viewer conscious of the photographic set as a liminal zone between truth and fiction.The inspiration for this device draws from multiple sources. On the one hand, **Sergio Leone's** *spaghetti westerns* shot on Italian soil with fabricated desert landscapes provided a historical precedent for the power of constructed environments to convincingly simulate alternate realities, even when resources are limited. **Leone's** sets often foregrounded the thin line between authenticity and invention, a principle that resonates strongly with my own project. On the other hand, contemporary influences such as **Nadia Lee Cohen's** stylized domestic spaces, where meticulously crafted interiors become arenas of performance, parody, and excess, further informed my decision to treat the backdrop not as neutral support, but as an active participant in the narrative.

From an academic standpoint, this use of set design aligns with what **Giuliana Bruno** (2002) describes as the *"architecture of the moving image"*: spaces that are not inert containers but active forces that shape narrative and emotion.
In **Butterfly Eagle**, the villa and the constructed backdrops do precisely this: they do not simply host the adolescent protagonist, but frame and condition her presence, producing a visual tension between naturalism and theatricality, intimacy and spectacle.
Thus, the set design serves a dual function: aesthetically, it reinforces the surreal and cinematic atmosphere; conceptually it materializes the central theme of adolescence as a space of doubleness caught between authenticity and artifice, belonging and alienation, reality and imagination.
Among the symbolic elements embedded in the mise-en-scène of **Butterfly Eagle**, the vodka bottle containing a flyemerges as one of the most charged and conceptually significant.

At first glance, the bottle evokes celebration and social ritual, a familiar marker of the party atmosphere in which the adolescent protagonist is staged. Yet this surface reading is immediately disrupted by the unexpected presence of the fly, an intrusion that destabilizes the symbolic order of the scene. The bottle ceases to be a transparent signifier of pleasure and sociability, becoming instead an uncanny object that hovers between attraction and repulsion.
This deliberate disturbance reflects what **Freud** (1919) defines as the *uncanny*: the unsettling experience that arises when the familiar becomes strange, when an everyday object is rendered alien through the insertion of a disruptive element.

In this sense, the fly contaminating the bottle exemplifies the uncanny by materializing the paradox at the heart of adolescence itself, a phase marked by the coexistence of vitality and decay, desire and danger, beauty and darkness.
I intended for the fly to operate as an aesthetic “fault line,” a visual fissure that undermines the harmony of the composition and prompts the viewer to question what lies beneath the polished surface.
From a broader perspective, the bottle with the fly also functions as a metaphor for adolescent experience as a contaminated pleasure. Alcohol, often associated with rites of passage and the premature adoption of adult behaviors, here becomes inseparable from an image of decay and danger.
The fly traditionally a symbol of mortality and corruption in Western iconography functions as a *memento mori* embedded in the glittering surface of celebration.
In doing so, it crystallizes the tension between vitality and destruction, a theme central to both adolescence and to the narrative of **Butterfly Eagle.**

Thus, the bottle with the fly is not a marginal detail but a structural device: it distills the psychological doubleness that permeates the project, embodying the contradiction of a world that is simultaneously seductive and threatening. Like the party itself, it stages liminality: a fragile threshold where innocence collides with danger, and where the beauty of youth is always shadowed by its vulnerability.

THE BACKDROPS.

An important element of the set design was the use of backdrops, which I conceived not simply as neutral backgrounds but as active components of the visual narrative.
The images used were found materials that I personally reworked through artificial intelligence, adapting them to the specific needs of the set.
This process of digital manipulation allowed me to intervene creatively in the source imagery, transforming them into hybrid spaces. The backdrops were printed on soft PVC panels, a material chosen for its flexibility and practicality, which made it possible to change the setting quickly during the shoot. One backdrop depicted a desert landscape, evoking ideas of vastness, isolation, and timelessness. The other represented a diner at night, a space already deeply embedded in the collective imagination of American visual culture, charged with cinematic associations of both intimacy and alienation.

A. THE DESERT BACKDROP

This tension was further emphasized in post-production, where I reworked the images once again to heighten their theatricality and to underline the fictionality at the heart of the project.
In this sense, the backdrops do not pretend to “be real,” but rather function as signs of artifice, recalling traditions of staged photography and studio portraiture where the background is as much a narrative device as the subject.
Just as cinema often relies on sets that are more evocative than authentic, here the desert and the diner serve as symbolic spaces: dreamlike, performative, and deliberately ambiguous.
They provide a context in which **Ginny’s** performance can oscillate between reality and fiction, between lived presence and staged fantasy, reinforcing the project’s central exploration of ambiguity and the unstable boundary between the true and the false.

B. THE DINER BACKDROP

THE CAROUSEL HORSE.

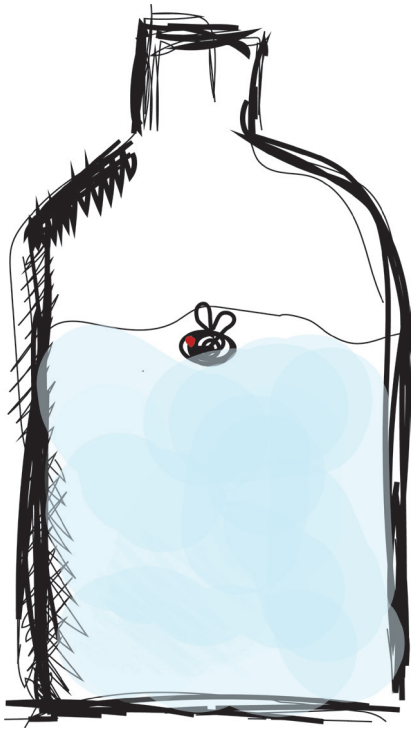
A particularly important and personally significant element of the set was the **carousel horse.** Its presence in the scene stems from my own childhood: it was a vintage, original piece that had been gifted to me by my grandfather when I was little. I felt strongly that it should be included in the shoot, and I personally undertook its restoration to ensure it could be safely used as a prop. The act of restoring the horse was, in itself, a way of reactivating memories linking my personal history to the visual narrative of the project.The carousel horse serves multiple functions within the work.
On a literal level, it replaces conventional modes of adolescent transportation, (cars, bicycles, scooters) with a playful and fantastical alternative. The girl in the scene rides to the party not on a normal vehicle but on this emblematic, slightly surreal object, immediately signaling that the world she inhabits is one where reality and imagination coexist.
In doing so, the horse accentuates the tension between lived experience and staged fiction that runs throughout the project.

Symbolically, it transforms the act of going to a party into a performance, a choreographed gesture between reality and fantasy. The horse becomes a visual anchor for the project’s broader investigation into liminality, play, and the oscillation between the real and the imaginary, reinforcing the idea that every element in the set is deliberately orchestrated to maintain a subtle ambiguity.

C. THE CAROUSEL HORSE

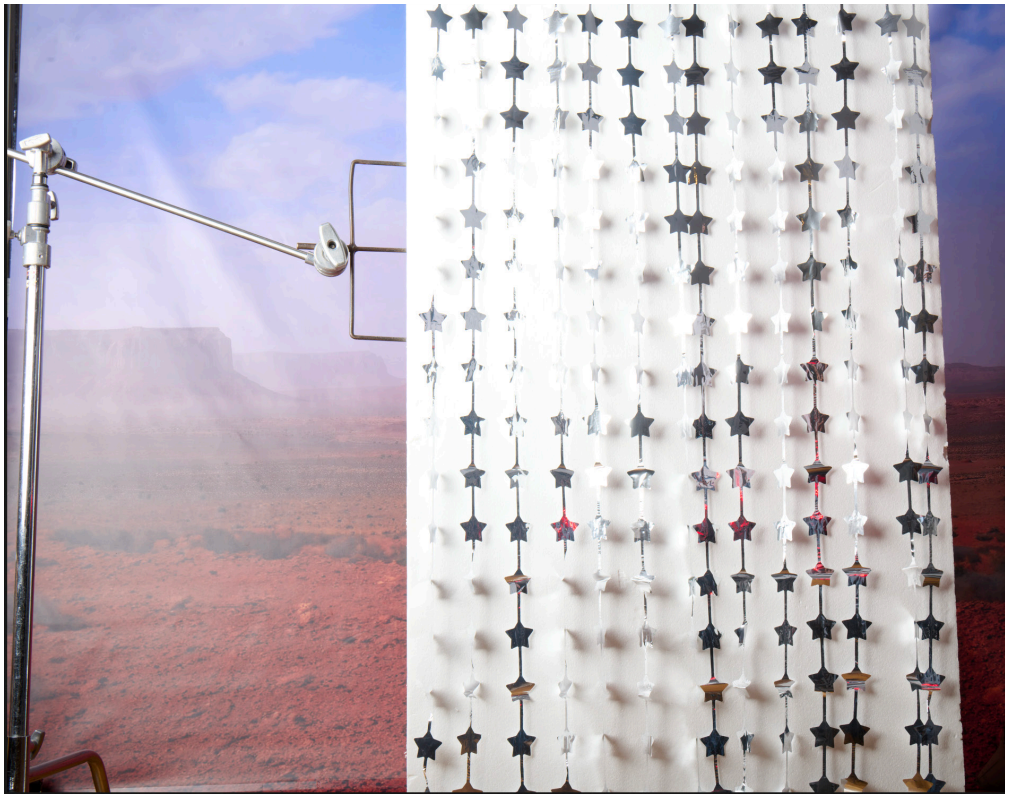
THE VODKA AND THE FLY.

Another significant element of the set was the vodka bottle containing a plastic fly, which I created personally for the project. The piece was constructed using a glass bottle, plastic flies, and water. The variation in color seen in different shots is a results from the interplay of studio lighting on the transparent liquid. I carefully selected the bottle and adapted it to the needs of the project.Initially, I experimented with suspending the fly in a gel to keep it afloat, but the effect appeared overly artificial. Ultimately, I opted for plain water, manipulating it on set to maintain the fly's position at the surface. This simple, hands-on solution allowed for a subtle tension between realism and artifice, echoing the overarching thematic concerns of the project. Conceptually, the bottle with the fly serves as a direct homage to the photograph that inspired the entire series. It functions both as a reference to the source image and as a tangible emblem of the project's preoccupation with small, uncanny interventions in otherwise familiar objects.Symbolically, the bottle embodies a subtle interplay between pleasure and risk fun and mortality. The fly represents death, the "game over" embedded within the act of drinking: if you consume the contents unwisely, you exit the game.
In this way, the bottle functions as a miniature allegory for life itself, highlighting how excess can transform enjoyment into danger, how indulgence carries the possibility of finality.
It operates simultaneously as a playful object and a *memento mori*, a visual reminder that every moment of pleasure is shadowed by the awareness of limits and consequences.



STAR WALL

Another key element of the set was the star wall, a fabricated backdrop constructed from polystyrene. The stars themselves were typical party decorations, identical to those found in the party that inspired the project. As with other elements, the shifting colors visible in the images result from the interaction of studio lighting, enhancing the playful and artificial quality of the scene. The choice to use polystyrene instead of a traditional wall was primarily practical. It allowed me to move freely around the set and to reposition the star backdrop behind the model without needing to shift the entire lighting rig. This flexibility was crucial, as I executed the project largely on my own, with only my father assisting, and managed five different sets without additional crew. Saving time and maintaining mobility on the set was therefore essential to the project's feasibility.
In this way, the backdrop exemplifies how practical decisions can intersect with conceptual goals, making the physical constraints of a solo production an active part of the project's visual and narrative language.



E. STAR WALL

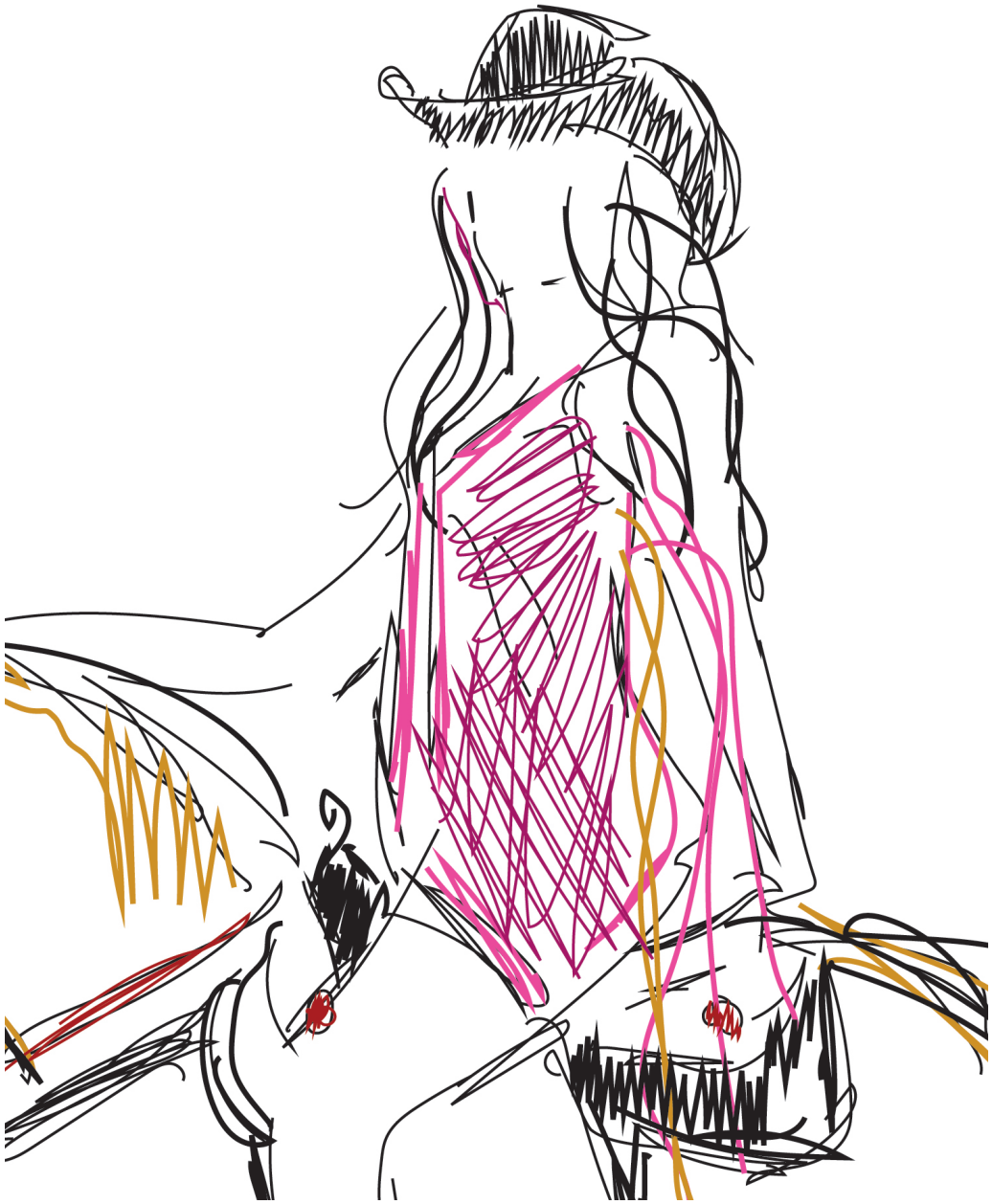
CEREALS AND CURLERS

The cereal box and hair accessories featured in the “getting ready” scene were inspired by everyday life. Thinking back to myself and my friends as we prepared for parties, makeup and hair accessories would be scattered across the bed, while we grabbed a quick snack in passing, the focus entirely on getting ready.
I wanted to pay homage to those moments in which preparation itself becomes almost more important than the party that follows. It is in these moments that personal memories are created, fleeting yet deeply resonant, moments that stay with you for a lifetime.
Every girl understands the significance of that ritual, and I wanted to celebrate it through these seemingly ordinary objects, turning them into symbols of care and intimacy.

F. CEREALS AND CURLERS

ELEMENTS OF THE HOUSE

Elements of the home were deliberately incorporated into the set design to enhance both the visual and symbolic dimensions of the project.
The entrance, with its black and white checkered floor, was used to evoke a sense of the surreal while simultaneously referencing a chessboard.
This choice reflects the adolescent experience as a subtle game, where every move carries weight and consequence, and where the subject is always partially aware of being a player within a larger system.
The bed's headboard, a vintage piece that I particularly cherished, also plays a significant role in the composition.
Its presence recalls the intimate act of preparation, framing the scene and highlighting the rituals and gestures of getting ready.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Makeup

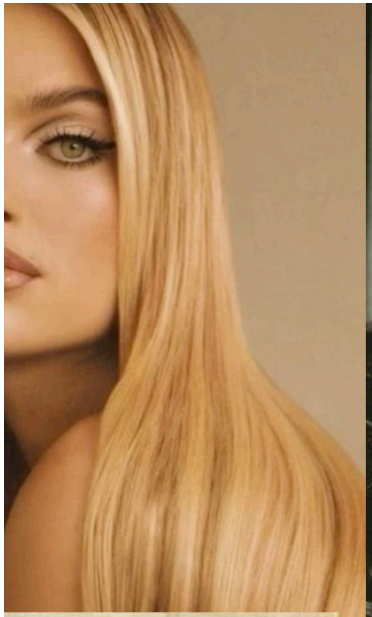
11. EXT. MAKE UP

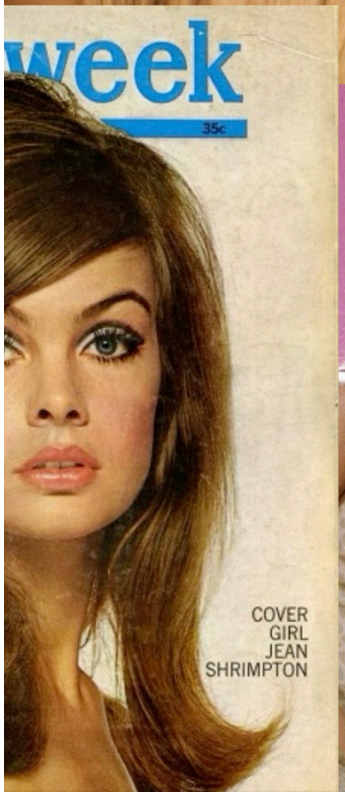
A central component in the development of the project was the construction of a coherent make-up language, one that could extend and reinforce the narrative framework already established through styling and set design. Make-up, much like costume, operates as a semiotic device, encoding cultural references, cinematic traditions, and aesthetic genealogies that resonate beyond the surface of the image.
The visual archive I assembled as a moodboard drew heavily on the iconography of the 1960s and 1970s, decades in which the face became a privileged site of experimentation in popular culture, fashion photography, and cinema. Figures such as **Brigitte Bardot**, **Sharon Tate**, **Jean Shrimpton**, and **Jane Birkin** provided crucial references, not only for their individual styles but also for the ways in which their images epitomized shifting ideals of femininity and glamour. The heavy use of eyeliner, accentuated lashes, pastel-toned or brightly saturated eyeshadows, and sculpted hairdos created a look that oscillated between childish innocence and adulthood, intimacy and spectacle.

In cinematic terms, this aesthetic resonates with the visual codes of films such as *"Valley of the Dolls"* (1967), in which make-up and hair were integral to the articulation of female identity and its negotiation between fragility and performance.
From a historical perspective, **Richard Corson's** *"Fashions in Makeup: From Ancient to Modern Times (1972)"* reminds us that cosmetic practices have always carried symbolic weight, shaping social hierarchies and gendered performances.
In the postwar decades, cosmetics became not only instruments of beauty but also vehicles of communication, tightly bound to the rise of advertising and celebrity culture.

Similarly, **Lisa Eldridge** in *“Face Paint: The Story of Makeup (2015)”* underlines how the 1960s marked a decisive rupture: make-up shifted from classical notions of elegance to experimental, graphic aesthetics that reflected the cultural upheavals of the time. These accounts reinforce the idea that the aesthetic strategies present in my moodboard are not superficial imitations but historically charged signifiers.
This genealogy proved particularly significant for my project because it aligned with my attempt to situate the photographic subject within a liminal space: caught between reality and fiction, adolescence and adulthood, intimacy and theatricality. The stylized make-up looks, particularly the use of bold eye definition and glossy lips, provided a visual vocabulary through which to negotiate these oppositions.

The face, carefully constructed through cosmetic artifice, became a stage in itself. In adopting and reinterpreting this archive, my make-up direction was not about nostalgic replication but about translation.
The references to **Bardot’s** tousled yet iconic look, the doll-like features of **Tate**, or the playful sensuality of **Birkin** were deployed as fragments within a broader narrative. They served to anchor the images in a recognizable visual tradition while simultaneously destabilizing it by situating it within my autobiographical framework.

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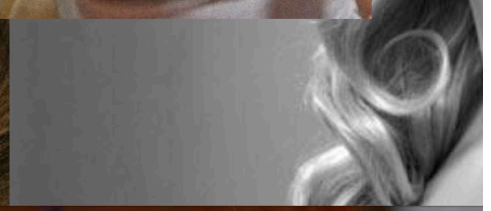

From a methodological perspective, directing make-up personally allowed me to understand its functional role within photographic production. Beyond its aesthetic contribution, make-up provided a crucial tool of dramaturgy, articulating the tone of each image and synchronizing with the set design and styling.
In this sense, make-up functioned as a connective tissue within the project, ensuring coherence across the visual field.
In conceptual and practical terms, make-up and styling in this project cannot be considered as isolated components but rather as mutually reinforcing elements of a single aesthetic and narrative system.
While styling provided the broader visual architecture through garments, textures, and silhouettes, make-up operated at the most intimate scale of representation the face ensuring that the expressive intensity of the subject remained in dialogue with the overall mise-en-scène.

This interrelation echoes **Stella Bruzzi's** (1997) assertion that costume in film and photography is not merely supplementary but an active participant in meaning-making. By extension, make-up, when conceived in conjunction with styling, becomes a complementary form of costuming: one that works at the threshold between corporeality and spectacle. The sequined, fringed, or playful references in the styling found their echo in the graphic eyeliner, glossy lips, or pastel shadows of the make-up, producing a unified aesthetic language that was simultaneously glamorous, surreal, and culturally referential. Through this synergy, the project foregrounds the idea that identity construction within the image emerges not from isolated aesthetic choices but from the layering of visual codes across body, face, and environment.

Make-up and styling converge as dual instruments of narrative articulation, reinforcing the tension between authenticity and artifice, autobiography and cultural citation, intimacy and performance that lies at the heart of the work.

In order to curate the make-up for the project, I chose to collaborate with **Vanessa Ferrauto**, a cinematic make-up artist whose practice I deeply admire and whose expertise I believed could bring an additional layer of sophistication to my visual narrative.
The challenge was significant. One of the central tasks of the project was to transform a twelve-year-old girl into the semblance of an adult, without erasing the ambiguity and liminality that define adolescence.

This transformation required a highly nuanced approach: the make-up needed to mature the subject's appearance, while simultaneously preserving traces of her youth, so that the tension between childhood and adulthood remained visible. **Vanessa's** expertise in cinematic make-up was therefore invaluable, allowing her to navigate this delicate balance with technical precision and creative sensitivity.

CHAPTER NINE

Ginny

12. INT. GINNY

Ginny is the model I selected for this project. Having previously collaborated with her, I knew the process would unfold with a natural sense of ease and trust. Yet to describe **Ginny** simply as a “model” would be reductive. She operates simultaneously as a mirror and a double, an externalized projection of my own image through which questions of identity, selfhood, and representation can be explored.
At the same time, my intention was to work with a child who could embody not only the visible signs of youth but also a deeper sense of maturity and interiority. **Ginny** was particularly suited to this paradoxical role: her appearance retains the innocence and vulnerability associated with childhood, while her gaze conveys an awareness and gravity that suggest an emergent subjectivity beyond her years. Within this frame, the child is not only an image of innocence but also a site of projection for cultural fantasies, anxieties, and ideals. The use of non professional subjects resists the codified gestures, rehearsed poses, and stylized artifice that often accompany professional modeling.

My decision to collaborate with **Ginny**, who is not a professional model, was also a deliberate one. The use of non professional subjects resists the codified gestures, rehearsed poses, and stylized artifice that often accompany professional modeling.
Instead, it allows for an encounter marked by spontaneity, vulnerability, and authenticity, qualities that align with the project’s exploration of liminality and selfhood. In **Ginny’s** presence, there emerges a raw immediacy that professional mediation might have obscured. Her gestures, often unselfconscious, open a space where the body becomes less an instrument of performance and more a site of lived experience.
This approach resonates with broader artistic and cinematic practices where non professional actors or models are employed precisely to challenge conventional modes of representation. Italian Neorealist directors such as **Vittorio De Sica** and **Roberto Rossellini** famously cast non-professional actors,

believing their untrained presence brought an honesty and social truth to the screen that trained performers could rarely achieve. Similarly, artists like **Rineke Dijkstra** have photographed ordinary individuals (often adolescents) in ways that foreground the tension between vulnerability and strength, intimacy and distance. After my tutorial with **Rupert Waldron**, I had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on **Dijkstra's** practice and the ways in which she captures adolescents in unguarded, natural poses. Her portraits, whether of young people on beaches or adolescents emerging from social or physical rites of passage, resist the polished conventions of portraiture and instead emphasize a fragile moment of becoming. This aspect of her work became an important point of inspiration for my own project.
Equally illuminating is the perspective of **Stanley Kubrick**, who, though often working with professional actors, articulated a vision of performance that underscores the director's shaping hand.
Kubrick frequently noted that actors should not be viewed as autonomous interpreters of a role but as collaborators whose raw presence could be molded, repeated, and refined until it aligned with the conceptual and visual architecture of the film. His famously demanding approach to multiple takes was not simply an exercise in control, but a way of stripping away the actor's self-conscious techniques in order to access something more immediate, authentic, and unsettling. In this sense, **Kubrick's** philosophy converges with the rationale for employing non-professionals: the goal is not virtuosity or theatrical polish, but rather a kind of presence that destabilizes the boundary between artifice and reality.
At the same time, however, I was aware that a non-professional model requires a more active form of direction than a professional.
For this reason, I introduced references drawn from popular culture, most notably the film *"Little Miss Sunshine (2006)"* and, more broadly, the world of children's beauty pageants. These pageants fascinated me for the way they simultaneously elevate and stylize the child, inviting her to perform a version of femininity that is already mediated by cultural expectations.

The exaggerated poses, the rehearsed smiles, and the doll-like gestures do not erase the child's subjectivity but rather situate her within a space of play, where she experiments with roles that exceed her everyday identity. When directing **Ginny**, my intention was never to reduce her to an object, but to invite her into a process of role-playing, asking her to act as if she were on a stage or in a pageant, embodying a persona both glamorous and artificial.
The photographs therefore do not document her as she "is," but capture her in the act of becoming someone else, momentarily inhabiting a figure that is part child, part doll, part diva.

This tension—between empowerment and artificiality, playfulness and discomfort became central to the work. By oscillating between naturalness and theatricality, **Ginny's** presence unsettles the viewer's perception. Are we witnessing a child lost in a daydream, imagining herself as a star? Are we seeing a puppet-like figure, a mannequin animated for the camera?
This deliberate ambiguity opens up the photographs to multiple readings, situating them between fantasy and reality, innocence and performance.

CHAPTER TEN

Test Shoot

13. INT. TEST SHOOT

As part of the preparation for the final shoot, I carried out two separate test sessions, each with a specific purpose.
The first was a self-portrait session, which I used as an opportunity to experiment freely without external pressure. This step was particularly useful for refining the styling choices. It also allowed me to visualize more clearly the vibes and emotional tone I wanted to capture later with the model. By placing myself in front of the camera, I could directly experience the poses, and atmosphere I was aiming to create, this was particularly important since I knew I would be directing Ginny, who is not a professional model.
The second test shoot took place directly on location with the full set of props and the model. This session had a more technical focus: it gave me the chance to see how the environment interacted with my creative direction and, most importantly, to evaluate whether the lighting setup I had planned actually worked in practice. Testing it in real conditions helped me with the light placement and intensity, ensuring that the visual outcome matched my initial vision.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Postproduction

The post-production phase represented one of the most time-consuming and intellectually demanding parts of my process. Once the shooting was completed, I moved into the stage of selection with a very precise goal in mind: to carry out a sharp and rigorous edit.
From the outset, I knew that my intention was to arrive at a highly reduced, almost essential body of images. This meant that the act of selection itself became a critical component of the work, rather than a secondary or merely technical step.
Especially after my tutorial with **Turkina Faso**, I realized how crucial it was for me to invert my usual approach.
In the past, I tended to accumulate and expand, but this time my challenge was to distill, to strip away, to let the essence of the project emerge through elimination.
The editing process, therefore, was not only about choosing the “best” images but about shaping the narrative and rhythm of the work through absence as much as presence. With this in mind, I began the process with a clear aim: to select no more than one or two images for each set, forcing myself to concentrate meaning and intention into a minimal sequence.

This emphasis on editing as a central creative act recalls long-standing artistic and cinematic debates. The power of editing lies not only in what is shown but also in what is excluded, a principle articulated by **John Szarkowski** in *“The Photographer’s Eye”*, where he describes selection as the very core of photographic authorship.
Similarly, in cinema, theorists and practitioners from **Sergei Eisenstein** to **Jean-Luc Godard** have underscored how montage functions as the “writing” of film, constructing meaning not only through what appears on screen but through the gaps, juxtapositions, and absences that structure the narrative.

My process of refining and narrowing the body of work was deeply informed by this logic: the edit became my own form of montage, where the sequencing of images, and the silences in between, shaped the oscillation between fiction and reality that I wanted the project to embody.
The second stage of the process was the actual photographic editing. On the one hand, I wanted to achieve a distinctly vintage atmosphere; on the other, I sought to render **Ginny** with a quality that would make her appear almost doll-like, as if she were a mannequin caught between animation and stillness. This tension between vitality and artificiality was central to the project's conceptual core.
As a starting point, I turned to the work of **Nadia Lee Cohen**, whose photographic language is deeply rooted in retro aesthetics and saturated colors, yet always infused with an uncanny sensibility. Her images often depict figures that seem hyper-stylized, frozen in poses that oscillate between glamour and artificiality, and it was precisely this sensibility that I wanted to echo. Using her photographs as a visual reference, I began experimenting freely, adjusting tones, contrasts, and textures by hand, seeking to "match" my images to the atmosphere of her work. This process was less about imitation and more about translation, absorbing the mood of **Cohen's** images and reworking it within the specific narrative of my own project.

On a practical level, I organized my photographs into different layers, which allowed me to refine the images with precision.
After carrying out a basic global edit, I moved on to working on specific details such as makeup, hair, and skin, in order to maintain greater control over the construction of the "artificial" effect. This meticulous approach was crucial to reinforcing the doll-like quality.
I also paid particular attention to the texture of the images, especially by working on the grain. Introducing and manipulating grain became a way to evoke the material qualities of analog film, contributing to the vintage aesthetic that framed the entire project.
Of course, particular attention was also given to lighting.

In some scenes, I followed a direct approach, relying on setups I had already tested during the pre-shoot, which I felt captured the mood I was looking for. In other cases, however, I sensed the need to change direction during the shooting itself, as the results did not fully convince me. This adaptive process was essential, allowing me to respond intuitively to the dynamics of the set and to refine the atmosphere in real time.

The final body of work therefore reflects not only careful planning but also a willingness to embrace flexibility and to let the images evolve through experimentation, as can be seen in several examples.


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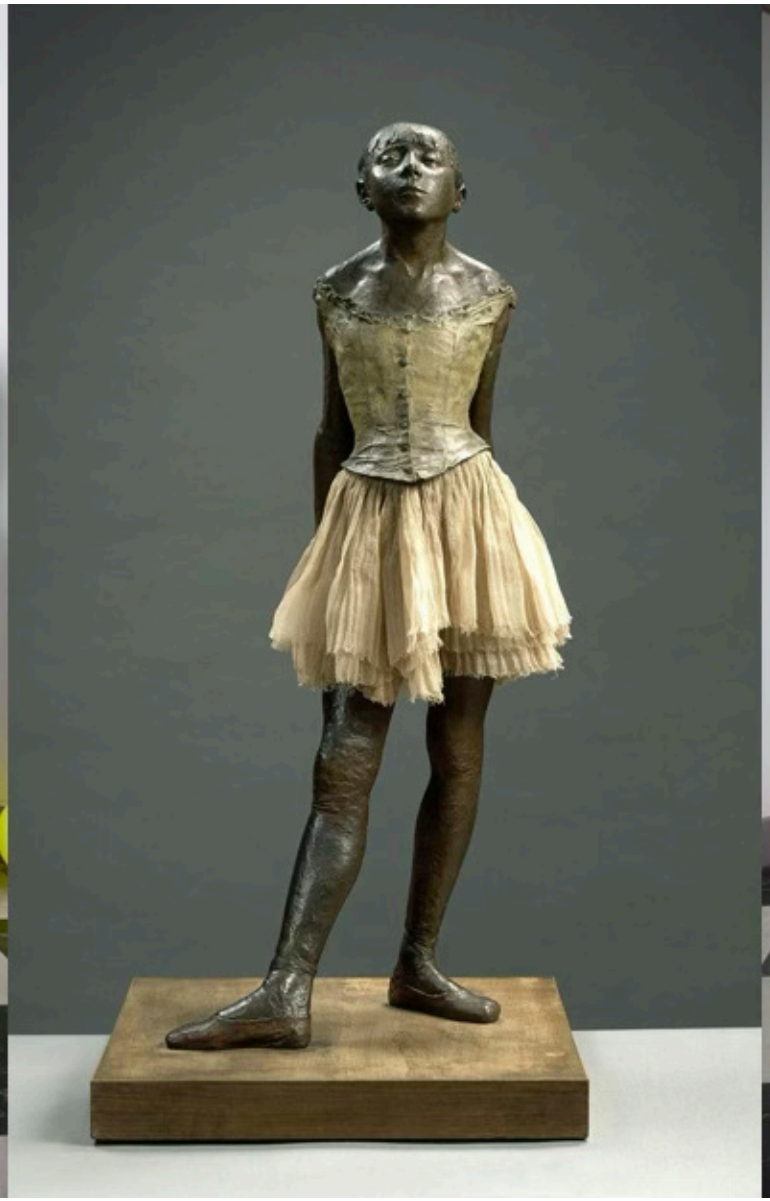
Another crucial aspect of the editing process, beyond color grading and framing, was the careful attention I gave to **Ginny's** poses. I aimed to control and emphasize those moments in which her gestures and expressions conveyed a more "doll-like" or plastic quality. Throughout the shooting day, not only the lighting but also the set design went through a process of transformation. What began as a precise reference and source of inspiration gradually evolved, adapting to the dynamics of the team and the energy on set.

The images highlight how the initial concept led to an entirely different outcome, one that embraced spontaneity and experimentation. This freedom of expression allowed the shoot to move beyond predefined boundaries and achieve results that felt authentic, fresh, and unexpected.
One clear example can be seen in this shot, where the ballerina pose inspired by **Degas** and the playful touch of balloons, once central to the idea, vanished in the final edit.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Butterfly Eagle