



## Hiber-nation: The Green Ray from Under the Screen

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'Hiber-nation' plays with gonzo-film-philosophy methods to render visible a weird tryst emerging between a middling Scottish football club, Hibernian F.C., and a surprising number of trans/national screen productions—stretching from Alfred Hitchcock's 1955 *To Catch a Thief* through to Neil Forsyth's 2023 *Guilt*—via weird aliens and countless debonair, if not debonoir, 'Hibeers'.

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### Supporting Statement

Twenty years before the Lumière Brothers wowed the world with their cinematographic attractions, Hibernian Football Club was founded by Edinburgh’s Catholic community to enable the (reviled) Irish diaspora to playfully interact with Scotland’s largely Protestant population. Today, on the cusp of this sleeping (if not hibernating) giant of Scottish football’s sesquicentennial celebrations, ‘Hiber-nation’ collates an alternative history of ‘Hibs’ and ‘Hibbys’/‘Hibeets’ (Hibs players and supporters) that has emerged, warped and refracted, through the multifaceted prism of trans/national screen productions. This hitherto unexplored tryst remains somewhat surprising. For example, *Trainspotting*’s (1996) Mark Renton (Ewan MacGregor) aptly nails Hibs as ‘some shitey football team that never fuckin wins’. More ironically perhaps, regarding their disproportionate trans/national screen proliferations, the club’s name derives from the Roman word for a neighbouring island country: *Hibernia*, meaning the ‘land of winter’. The club’s name is thus a result of it being forged in Edinburgh’s ‘Little Ireland’ slums, before becoming re-grounded in the old port city of Leith, which only reluctantly merged with Scotland’s capital in 1920. Today, the playfully nicknamed ‘Republic of Leith’ remains a bohemian outlander space/place that—like its football team—apprizes associations with cultural minorities and Scotland’s geopolitical outsides, including a form of ‘Catholic Nationalism’ from over the water.

‘Catholic’ etymologically combines the Greek *kata* (in respect of) and *holos* (whole), which carries forth meanings and associations with ‘inclusive’, ‘world-wide’, ‘universal’, and ‘all-embracing’. The lowercase ‘catholic’ implies a broad and eclectic taste, which ‘Hiber-nation’’s curatorial style reifies—as a widespread means of disclosing how a comprehensive assemblage of images share in interlinking patterns and associations, with the club’s screen semiosis emerging conversant with weird notions of ‘aliens within’ and spooky ‘action at a distance’, among numerous other things. Methodologically, I deploy gonzo-film-philosophy to unconceal these

enigmatic signs, which would otherwise remain cloaked in the limelight. The term gonzo—when not articulated with the pejorative terracing heckle of ‘... you muppet!’—is most commonly associated with the outlandish, the weird, and the unusual. But also, of being too close to something to be properly objective about it, as with a reporter who becomes an entangled participant in events. On film-philosophy turf, the materialist position of Gilles Deleuze resounds here too, by taking the screen as an external brain-machine that, through schizoanalytic encounters with embodied viewers, innervates thought whilst using the brain as a screen (Deleuze 2020, 2005a, 2005b). This enmeshed framework reveals how our perceptions and thoughts about distant screen-images are always-already a form of alien-imagination spookily operating within us.

The majority of Hibs characters and images woven into ‘Hiber-nation’ were contingently encountered over the past 40-odd years. Others arrived via conversations with fellow travellers and supporters along the way, typically when discussing my team-screen hoard. For, I’d become something of a screen Hibby stalker of sorts. As is Scarlett Johansson’s transdimensional alien in the transnational Scottish film *Under the Skin* (2013): a Neo-Weird syzygy-text that in-forms the style and content of ‘Hiber-nation’, a debt echoically conjured by my subtitle: *The Green Ray from Under the Screen*. My detoured notion of the ‘Green Ray’ meanwhile *spectrally* gestures to a weird natural-cum-mythical phenomenon made internationally famous by Jules Verne in his 1882 novel *Le Rayon Vert*, which recirculated an ancient Scottish legend associated with the setting sun sending ‘forth its last ray’ over the sealine—which under specific atmospheric conditions flashes the ‘most wonderful green, ... the true green of Hope!’ (1883, 32–3). In the ancient Celtic mythos, beholding this rare spectacle granted seers insight into others’ hearts and minds or to perceive beneath the surface of things. Hence, in April 1882 an ecstatic Scottish sports journalist riffed on Verne’s repopularised myth whilst reporting on a ‘magical persevering comeback’ mounted by Hibs against Hearts—their Protestant city rivals—while playing under new-fangled forms of modernist stadium lighting. ‘Hiber-nation’'s gonzo prologue weaves these vectors together as a form of ‘warm up’ while poetically evoking the setting of the sun—the foundational heliotropic metaphor for rational enlightenment thinking and philosophising (Derrida 1982)<sup>1</sup>—to better contextualise the opaque illuminations and (otherwise) overshadowed Hibs stars it thereafter darkly navigates by.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because the sun rises and sets, appears and disappears, is present and absent, for Derrida it comes to structure ‘the metaphorical space of philosophy’, coming to represent ‘what is natural in philosophical language’ (1982, 251). However, sunlight’s promise of clarity and objectivity introduce a problem, with blind spots being naturally introduced into Enlightenment metaphysics. The setting of the sun reveals star fields too, which were always ‘there,’ but occluded by daylight perception.

<sup>2</sup> Hibernian’s adopted anthem is famously The Proclaimers’ ‘Sunshine on Leith’ (1989), but it is darkly by Hibs stars, Granton Star players, and far-off alien galaxies that this gonzo film navigates.

Consider: in her 2001 *The Green Ray* video-essay, Tacita Dean felicitously recounts globally stalking the 'extravagant green splash' with her celluloid camera. She defines the natural phenomenon there as an effect of refracting sunlight bending around the oceanic horizon before becoming diffracted through a prism of cloudless meteorological moisture. However, after she finally witnessed the rare sight, filmmakers accompanying Dean disputed her vision, using their digital footage to *prove* that she'd only imagined it. When developing her film a year later though, Dean sensed she had captured a cinematic trace of the dying green sunlight, which she phenomenologically remediates. We must be on guard however, for Dean makes clear that the porous line between image-imagination and conception-perception is not unlike the permeable sealine, which allows illusions to twist around it. Being green is also to be naïve and gullible, after all, with 'green' retaining associations with youth and freshness. Yet the *The Green Ray* explicitly evokes the day's end and the dying of the light. Looming darkness becoming the condition for new (in)sights and visions. Why mention all this? Because the singular green flash almost eluded Dean. Even after witnessing it, she accordingly described a needling 'philosophical paradox' motivating her film: 'I believed but was never sure I saw it'. And in many respects, so too is the case with 'Hiber-nation', albeit the green phenomena I believed that I had borne witness to did not occur in one lancing moment. Rather, it had accrued as a punctuated perforation over a lifetime of viewing and filtering.

'Hiber-nation' is resultantly a kind of rippling memory-history of cine-punctum and tele-splinters that shot out from the frame or box, jangled my nerves, got under my skin, and lodged themselves in the folds of my brain.<sup>3</sup> Of course, I imaginatively worked on them too, over the years, building on and turning them as I slowly *worked them out* into the baroque green pearl presented here: a software product that surfaces as a polluted poacher's piece exploring and exploiting the aporetic logic of relational optics, of hope and faith in the act of looking, and of the capacity of film thinking/perceiving to move beneath or beyond the surface of things.

Anticipating that many viewers will be unfamiliar with Scottish lore and old Hibernian myths, I take pains to communicate key facts about this 'bonnie wee fitba team' from the audiovisual side-lines, a formal decision that has led some to liken the 'spirit' of the film to the docu-media-lectures of Mark Cousins and Adam Curtis. As with these filmmakers, I too believe in allowing images to tell and communicate their

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<sup>3</sup> I here evoke Roland Barthes's notion of the photographic *punctum* from *Camera Lucida* (1981), which accounts for that intense subjective experience when a viewer's attention is pricked or aggravated by a detail or feature of an image. For Barthes, this is an accident that pushes us to grope towards meaning making: 'that something unexpected, unplanned, ... that shoots out like an arrow and pierces me' (25-6).

own stories, and likewise I take materials to be active collaborators in a strategically authored/coached vision. For like football players, images clearly have minds of their own, and play their own games within games. Nevertheless, managing the collective sees the style and tempo fashioned to channel the ebbs and flows, collective gestures, kinetic techniques, and distributed arrangements of bodies playing and watching a football game. Or again, the video-essay expressively evokes and stimulates/simulates the thick moods and shifting atmospheric phases that players and fans experientially navigate during a game. In this instance, a match played in the bohemian ‘avantgarde’ style of a celebrated 1950s Hibs team that boasted the ‘Famous Five’ attack line: an ever shifting and restlessly rotating strike force that included the venerated ‘Prince of wingers’ Gordon Smith. Incidentally, Smith was the first Hibeer to appear on Hollywood screens after cameoing in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1955 French cat burglar film *To Catch a Thief* (Smith 2012, 2020), an auteur piece that finds the notoriously exacting director weirdly block his *mise-en-scène* in Hibs’s green and white colours, while suspending his nocturnal misadventures within a tangible/textural *Le Rayon Vert* aesthetic.

As it happens, William Brown and I elsewhere fuse the French word for green, *vert*, with an old English verb associated with dizzying and restless mental movement that has by now sunk beneath the horizon of common usage. This sunsetted word is nonetheless bent and refracted back into perception-imagination via its diffracted atmospheric afterlife within words such as: convert, divert, pervert, subvert, and vertigo (Brown and Fleming 2020, 26cf). Accordingly, an innocuous back page headline like ‘Hibs avert relegation disaster’ poetically indexes *le Rayon Vert* of the occulted ‘vert’. If we fashioned philosophical ‘verting’ to help innervate defamilairised movements and gestures of thought/thinking though—to move off the straight paths and familiar lines—‘Hibernation’ exercises verting as poetic screen-thinking. Why? For one thing, the Famous Five were often described as ‘poetry in motion’ by those lucky enough to see them, with Smith being acclaimed as a world-class advert for everting defences through relentless phases of giddy interplay. Or, as sport historian Ian Colquhoun puts it, Smith’s team were at ‘the forefront of a stylistic footballing revolution, with the Famous Five’s tactic of constantly swapping positions during a game ... befuddling and confusing opposing teams’ (2020). This stupefying style not only saw Hibs become the first Scottish club to qualify for European competitions, but historically led them to inspire the ‘footballing philosophy’ of Brazil’s world-beating Canary Squad after a 1953 tour of South America (Leslie 1997). It thus felt fitting to channel a free-flowing and fluid (‘Continental’), open, and everting (‘counter-philosophical’) style for tackling Hibs’ story.

Advancing by such means, ‘Hiber-nation’ runs rings around a bustling set of films that include *Restless Natives* (1986), *The Acid House* (1998), *Doors Open* (2012), *Sunshine on*

*Leith* (2013), *Trainspotting 2* (2017), and *Venom* (2018), with these linking up and passing through a line of television series that include *Rebus* (2000–2007), *Guilt* (2019–2023), *Succession* (2019–2023), and *Crime* (2021–2023), as well as a dribble of non-fiction shows and commercials featuring E.T., actor Dougray Scott, and the Malaprop Sisters. Weirdly enough, the ethico-aesthetic trends making many of these screen slivers cohere appeared in germinal form within the football-loving Hitchcock's jewel thieves' film. 'Hiber-nation' hauntologically frames Hitchcock's text as something like *The Green Ray* in reverse for screening Hibeas: a lustrous Janus-faced Ur-text that uncannily sunrises seventy years of Hibs-inflected trans/national screen media. Properly starting with Hitchcock's film also allows 'Hiber-nation' to kick-off in the middle, as such, like a football match. Correspondingly, the length is also temporally fashioned to parallel the first half of a Scottish Premier League football match: 45 regulation minutes plus a minute or so of added time.<sup>4</sup> And as with any carnivalesque visits to Easter Road, viewers should expect pugnacity, salty language, drinking, singing, chanting, spitting, violence, and occasional theft. 'At the end of the day', as the old post-match cliché often starts, the sun sets. Fittingly, Hibs adopted an old Leith Fisherman's prayer as the club's shibboleth: 'So with the darkest days behind, our ship of hope will steer, and when in doubt just keep in mind our motto: persevere'. Glory, Glory, to the Hibeas.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Hiber-nation' here coheres with the growing popularity of 'long-form' video-essaying (e.g. Mittell 2024; Deschanel 2022; Tohline 2021).



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## Biography

David H. Fleming is Senior Lecturer in the Communication, Media and Culture division at the University of Stirling, Scotland. His research gravitates around the intersectionalities of screens, thought, and worlds. He is author of *The Squid Cinema From Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Chthulumediality* (with William Brown 2020), *Chinese Urban Shi-nema: Cinematicity, Society and Millennial China* (with Simon Harrison, 2020) and *Unbecoming Cinema: Unsettling Encounters with Ethical Event Films* (2017). Forthcoming he has another co-authored book with Brown entitled *Infinite Ontology* and two sole-authored monographs: *Rendering Confucius Cinematically: Chinese Film Philosophy and*

*the Efficacious Screen-Play* and *Global Philosophers on Film: Conceptualising Aesthetics*. David increasingly researches and teaches using video-essay forms and has presented film-philosophy work at several conferences and festivals. He is a member of the *Film-Philosophy* editorial board and in the colder parts of the year can generally be found at Easter Road every other Saturday.

### **Review by Evelyn Kreutzer, Università della Svizzera Italiana**

The video essay showcases an impressive collection of material, switching between different historical and canonical micro- and macroanalyses. Like a football game, it seems to come out of a mix of strategic planning and intuitive improvisation. Like a football coach, the video essayist at times uses authorial direction and at times lets the material (or the players) speak and do for themselves. Continuing this video-essay-as-football-game metaphor, the maker might also be understood as a curator of a fan choreography in a football stadium, for he takes us through a journey of historical and trans-media appearances of a single football club that is (presumably) born out of both fannish and scholarly observations.

While I am impressed by the video's vast amount of audiovisual and theoretical sources, which range from *To Catch a Thief* to *Under the Skin*, from Badiou to Deleuze, and which are—as the maker writes in his statement—given substantial room to 'tell their own stories', I find it difficult at times to follow the overall argumentation and layering of sources and narration, and I sense that a shorter and more condensed version of the video might bring the maker's ideas to the forefront more successfully. I suggested this in response to an earlier version of the video, but the maker wanted to stick to the length of half of a football game—a parameter that seems a bit forced to me.

I wonder if this speaks to a larger issue in videographic criticism's potential and shortcomings. The video essay can be porous when used as a medium for a vast amount of references. While it offers a particular openness towards unconventional, in this case 'gonzo', expressions of scholarly thinking, it also bears the risk of informational overload and a fragility to sustain a multitude of threads. In this case, I found myself quite immersed in the moments when the maker develops close readings of individual clips (such as in *The Granton Star Cause* or *Filth*), whereas in other moments, the narration seemed to be focused on a theoretical trajectory that didn't seem intuitively related to the images on screen or didn't fully address noteworthy actions on screen (e.g. the power dynamics displayed between men and women in *Guilt* and *Filth* remain somewhat underexplored). This made me wonder: do we really need Deleuze, Badiou, and DeLanda to understand the connections between the many audiovisual examples?



Or rather: what exactly is the relationship between the film-philosophical and the ‘gonzo’ archival approach? Which element is the primary motivation behind the assembly of clips: the football club? the alien motif? the football player cameos? the philosophical-mystical framing at the beginning? Perhaps it is all the above, and that is both the strength and the weakness of such a “rhizomatic” approach.

### **Review by Jonny Murray, University of Edinburgh**

It feels right that the duration of David Fleming’s ‘Hiber-nation: The Green Ray from Under the Screen’ is similar to that of one entire half of an eleven-a-side football match (added-on stoppage time not allowing). After all, his work exemplifies the idea, particular to British sporting cultural idioms, of ‘a game of two halves’. In other words: what ‘Hiber-nation’ starts the essay’s viewer can then finish in numerous ways. This essay possesses significance as a working tool through which to further explore and apply the theories of those seminal film-philosophical practitioners who Fleming wittily includes in his starting eleven of key cultural and conceptual players. Yet, ‘Hiber-nation’ is also of equal potential interest to students of Scottish and British screen and wider popular cultural histories. Fleming’s bravura, whole-length-of-the-pitch weaving of Hibernian FC’s memorialisation-cum-mythologisation within global film and television is of intrinsic interest in itself. But it is also significant because it illustrates the extent to which Scottish and British histories often defined and discussed in crudely undifferentiated and singular national terms in fact often assume myriad transnational and micro-local forms. Moreover, these and many other of Fleming’s central insights and arguments are created, then communicated with a vividness and effectiveness that feels particular to the video essay form. He shoots, he scores, and scores precisely because of his original creative and conceptual decision to shoot in the first place.

