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## Letting Go of the Merry-Go-Round: The Subversion of Recovery Narratives in Addition Films

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# Letting Go of the Merry-Go-Round: The Subversion of Recovery Narratives in Addiction Films

*Alexander Motter*

**A**s my brother was being questioned by the police, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Nick was describing a verse from Ecclesiastes, which he had been studying in one of his seminars at the University of Houston. He inherited my father's infuriating habit of referencing some recently acquired knowledge at every possible opportunity, be it Mike Rowe's talk about how dirty jobs will soon become some of America's most lucrative or the infamous Erik Larson Galveston hurricane book I read vicariously through his incessant references. Were it not for the handcuffs tightly constricting his wrists or drops of blood oozing down his knuckles from the shattered glass door, Nick's lecture on biblical philosophy could have been the same one presented to a crowd of relatives just hours before at Christmas Eve lunch.

Yet here we were, in the fallout of another one of my brother's breakdowns. Drinking has been a consistent facet of my brother's life since eighth grade, when he first began modeling my father's alcoholism. The experience of catching Nick alone in the dark on a Friday night nursing a whiskey before my parents came back from PTA meetings jarred me, particularly given that I had yet to experiment with drinking myself. I constantly covered for Nick, convinced his drinking was merely another attempt at rebelling against my parents for pitting us in constant competition with one another. When he started smoking weed in high school I assumed the same—my concerns were just that of an uptight first child raised by authoritarian parents. Not when I

found a whole jug of Tito's in the toilet paper cabinet, not when Nick vomited for two hours after the World Cup, not when hordes of kids came by the house to light up did I voice concern to my parents over the disturbing trend which, I can say in retrospect, I saw emerging. With each progressively more volatile act my parents became similarly more creative in their efforts to cover for Nick's behavior, weaving elaborate explanations and attempting to convince my skeptical relatives that nothing was wrong.

It came as a surprise, then, when I went to the movies and saw our family's dirtiest secrets broadcast for all the world to see. I will never forget the day I saw *Beautiful Boy* for the first time, not least because it was on my brother's nineteenth birthday. Nic Sheff, whose addiction to meth serves as the focus of the two memoirs—his own *Tiveak* and his father David Sheff's *Beautiful Boy*—on which the film is based, bore an eerie resemblance to my brother Nick.<sup>1</sup> Nick had just completed his freshman year of high school, mastered manipulating each member of our family to get what he wanted, stole from us whenever he needed extra cash to buy drugs, and even picked up drawing the same manic style of drawings on every available surface. Each scene matched the story of my brother's addiction beat-for-beat, and the scenes of overdosing and hitting rock bottom seemed to be part of a realistic future if Nick continued on this path.

*Beautiful Boy* presented an interpretation of addiction so realistic it appeared indistinguishable from my family's experience. While of course certain elements of Nic's story diverged from my brother's, the film almost reduced me to tears. It could have been my brother's hand feeling the breeze rush by as he blares discordant indie music from his car stereo, and it could have been my brother lying in the hospital after another attempted overdose. However much it felt like *Beautiful Boy* was written for me, leaving the theater I soon understood I was far from the only one who felt a raw authenticity emanating from the film, which received significant acclaim from both film critics and those affected by substance abuse. Every year sees the release of new films that tackle the subject of addiction, most either exploiting victim trauma for dramatic effect or utilizing a contrived narrative structure unsurprising even to those without personal experience. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or gender, around fifty percent of American adults have a family member or close friend who has at one point been an addict.<sup>2</sup> In a market oversaturated with films on the subject, narratives with which so many of us can identify, what allowed this film to succeed where its predecessors failed?

The development of drug use in American society coincided with the development of filmmaking in the early twentieth century, and the ways in which directors have chosen to portray addiction has therefore long influenced cultural attitudes towards these substances. As drugs and alcohol have

increasingly become a fixture of American culture, it becomes more difficult to identify what specifically constitutes a film about addiction. Useful in this regard is Maurizio Viviano's discussion of what he calls "intoxicated films," defined by their focus on the abuse of illegal or legal substances broadly classified as "drugs and alcohol," as well as (at least potentially) recovery from these addictions.<sup>3</sup> Instead of fighting for representation on screen, Viviano argues that the continued presence of addiction narratives in film since the medium's inception creates a "hypervisibility" which can prompt apathy from viewers, who feel they have seen all that needs to be said about substance abuse. Each new example of the genre of "intoxicated films" makes the conscious decision either to alter or to reinforce public opinion on drug rhetoric, and in the process the film works to create its unique significance.

Works written about addiction use taglines like "not just another addiction memoir" to establish credibility among the myriad of such narratives. These efforts to distance memoirs from existing works reject the commonalities which connect them with their predecessors—a mentality which proves problematic in recovery, where an addict is taught that their story is useful solely in its similarity to the experiences of others.<sup>4</sup> Leslie Jamison, for example, writes that she experienced this tension throughout her own recovery: the emphasis on individuality and a writer's unique perspective, on the one hand, and, on the other, AA's mantras, e.g., "I happen to be at the center of this story, but anyone could be." For Jamison, however, it is the structure of these narratives, rather than the potential for repeating experiences common to others, that poses the most significant obstacles. The proliferation of addiction narratives has led to a triptych structure which serves as the basis for almost every piece of writing on the subject of substance addiction.<sup>5</sup> It hinges on three critical steps in the addict's life: their descent into addiction, reaching "rock bottom" through a dramatic series of catastrophes, and, finally, recovery into sobriety. Almost every "intoxicated film" deals with its subject matter in this way: from classic films *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) or *The Basketball Diaries* (1995), which match the structure precisely, *Less Than Zero* (1987) and *Clean and Sober* (1988), where affluent characters struggle to maintain sobriety throughout devastating losses, or reinterpretations of classic rom-coms like *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1994) or dark comedies like *28 Days* (2000), which attempt innovative approaches at this well-trodden storytelling method, or critically acclaimed works like *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and *Flight* (2012), whose theatrical performances and overreliance on trauma to incite sympathy were ultimately unsuccessful in convincing audiences of their conclusions. Regardless of genre, demographic, or educational level, directors and writers draw upon the same formula in the same ways to ultimately reach the same conclusions.

The triptych structure of addiction narratives has become so distilled that, at one point, the Central Headquarters of AA released a “pattern script” that provides a vehicle for recovering addicts to communicate their experiences. The script refers to the addict as “John,” pushing all addicts toward a standard image that is, perhaps, morbidly reminiscent of the “John Doe” of unidentified corpses. Intended to allow addicts to identify “more closely with other alcoholics who may still be seeking a way to sobriety,” this script ultimately emphasizes all of the problems with the standard recovery narrative structure.<sup>6</sup> One section, for example, encourages the addict to improvise:

(Suggested that at this point “John” speak extemporaneously about two minutes, qualifying himself as an alcoholic, as he might do at an A. A. open meeting. Further suggested that, to minimize “rambling,” comments hew closely to theme of how alcoholics hurt others while drinking.)<sup>7</sup>

By reducing the perspectives and nuances of addicts to merely “rambling,” the value of unique experiences is minimized in favor of regurgitated platitudes. Sober addicts like Leslie Jamison recount the continual repetition of phrases (“Could be anyone; could have been anyone’s story”) in meetings, language which enforced a paradoxical logic according which “you were supposed to relinquish your ego by authoring a story in which you also starred.”<sup>8</sup> While “John” from the pattern script says that “in A. A. no one speaks for the movement,” then, his words come fed directly from the movement itself. Despite the consistent emphasis on addiction narrative’s unique qualities, then, many works nonetheless strive to fit within this uniform triptych structure.

The “hypervisibility” of addiction narratives has led audiences to crave original interpretations which subvert genre conventions. Initially, twentieth-century viewers found this insight in Billy Wilder’s Best-Picture-winning feature *The Lost Weekend*, adapted from Charles Jackson’s wildly successful semi-autobiographical novel. The film takes place over a single weekend, in which the main character, Don Birnam, resists the efforts of family and friends to help him, manipulates the love of others to gain access to booze, and must eventually bottom out to realize recovery presents the only future in which he can survive. The film’s release was met with overwhelming praise, primarily as it resisted the notion that addiction stems from familial conflict or a traumatic backstory. Addiction indiscriminately affects every age, racial background, and socioeconomic class, often without a clear reason—as in the case of Don. He goes to lengths to hide his drinking, buying apples to cover bottles of freshly purchased whiskey only for one of his elderly neighbors to refer to him in passing as “the nice young man who drinks.” As Don relapses at a nearby bar and becomes more inebriated, his drinks leave progressively more rings of perspiration on the bar, rings Don refers to as signs of his “little vicious circle

... with no end and no beginning.” Substance abuse has defined Don’s life thus far, and even his first encounter with his love, Helen, occurs in a flashback caused coincidentally by his insatiable thirst for alcohol. Don seeks redemption, a future in which the two parts of him—the drinker and the writer—are merged into a high-functioning adult capable of finishing the *magnum opus* he has always dreamed of writing. By giving up drinking, Don is indeed able to write, and the film concludes with him writing about “how many others there are like me, poor bedeviled guys on fire with thirst, such comical figures to the rest of the world as they stumble towards another binge, another bender, another street”—composing, that is, the story we have just witnessed.

Despite the widespread critical acclaim for this film and its groundbreaking approach to addiction, *The Lost Weekend* ultimately takes the same triptych structure and disperses it over the weekend: Friday we see Don’s addiction and the backstory on how his drinking started, Saturday he spirals and eventually hits rock bottom, and Sunday he unwillingly enters rehab, gives up drinking and is able to satisfy his dream of become an author. Don’s spiral unfolds in a histrionic and overdramatized manner, hallucinating bats that swirl around the ceiling and devouring a demonic rat while the chaotic orchestral soundtrack swells. Such scenes stem more from the cinematic tradition of crazed delusions than the tangible experiences of addicts. Sprinkled throughout the dialogue are the hallmark phrases of AA, with Don’s lover describing him as a sick person—with the claim that, if “it was something wrong with his heart or his lungs, you wouldn’t walk out on him if he had an attack”—or her insistence at the third act’s close that “The only way to start is to stop. There is no other way other than stopping.” These additions came from director Billy Wilder and longtime collaborating screenwriter Charles Brackett, who extensively revised the novel’s original ending, in which the character remains squarely within the throes of addiction.<sup>9</sup> The changes disgusted Jackson, who wrote to the duo saying, “It’s *false and untrue* at that, for the implication is that I overcame my drink-problem by writing a book about it and thus getting it out of my system.”<sup>10</sup> The narrative that testimony and following the predetermined path of AA offer the only means to escape addiction proves problematic, insofar as the variety in addiction experiences leads many addicts to traverse several of Don’s “circles” before reaching sobriety.

Successful addiction narratives must establish the difficulty and repeated failures required for lifelong sobriety, an intuition Jackson himself identified long before this format became an “intoxicated film” standard. While readers craved a sequel to *The Lost Weekend*, Jackson struggled to craft a meaningful story about how the literary character Don “got out of it,” primarily because he was unable to do so himself.<sup>11</sup> Wilder’s interpretation of *The Lost Weekend* eventually eclipsed its source material, with Jackson remarking that people

so often complimented him on the film without remembering his original contribution, that he began thanking them rather than correcting their mistake.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jackson became so depressed at the critical reception of the watered-down version of his groundbreaking masterpiece that he took his life, unable to handle the constant public pressure to provide the voice of addiction nationwide.

*Beautiful Boy* draws its strength from the inability of addicts to permanently stave off the intensive traumas of addiction. Director Felix van Groeningen painfully recreates this toxic cycle, with Timothée Chalamet's Nic Sheff constantly relapsing and failing to maintain the sobriety he so desperately seeks. Nic describes his addiction as a disease of amnesia in his memoir, saying "It's not hard to stay sober at first. ... Once the drugs are out of my system it isn't too difficult to genuinely feel like I never want to go through that shit again."<sup>13</sup> *Beautiful Boy* agonizingly visualizes this amnesiac behavior, spending hours between relapses highlighting the happy times the Sheffs share: scenes of the family surfing together or Nick entertaining his two younger siblings Jasper and Daisy, from whom he stole money only months before. His second relapse near the end of the third act presents a grueling look at the extremes necessary to push addicts towards sobriety, as Nick shoots meth from the grimy floor of a bathroom stall, his veins bruised and visibly shot from continuous abuse. Van Groeningen puts viewers through hours of torment in an attempt to make Nic's sobriety become believable, saying in an interview that "The challenge was to make a story of an addiction cycle. It has to be repetitive, but how do the characters learn about addiction, how do they learn about themselves and what changes the dynamic?"<sup>14</sup> *Beautiful Boy's* innovation comes not only in visualizing the realities of relapse but also demonstrating how addicts adapt from continued returns to addiction.

Before the film's credits, a block of text informs viewers that "Through an incredible amount of support and hard work, Nic has been sober for eight years—one day at a time." Epilogues identifying the current status of the addict's sobriety are commonplace in works of addiction, but, unlike the account in *Beautiful Boy*, these disclaimers often inform readers that the triumphant recovery trumpeted by the concluding chapters is no longer true, since the author has relapsed. Indeed, David Sheff's memoir addresses Nic's subsequent relapse in its epilogue: "I wanted [this chapter] to be the happy ending of our family's story about meth. I wanted to move on from it. I wanted this now to be the post-Nic's addiction phase of our lives. But no."<sup>15</sup> This concession to the amount of work required to attain lifelong sobriety leads many intoxicated narratives to feel like unearned successes, with the promise of recovery through devotion to the principles of AA thwarted by the difficulty of doing so in practice. By forcing viewers to watch the exuberant highs of Nic's sobriety

contrasted with his devastating relapses, this attainment of success is seen to be contingent upon several brushes with death. As Jamison puts it, the author thereby provides “an honest hope that doesn’t depend on something impossible,” a way to escape addiction that does not glamorize the path to reach it.<sup>16</sup> Throughout *Beautiful Boy* the chances of Nic’s recovery seem to grow ever more remote, suggesting that the conclusion will fit with the stereotypes of films like *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), which warns against substance abuse through upsetting climaxes. David Sheff emphasizes the importance of not reassuring audiences with hope for a happy ending: “I resisted the temptation to foreshadow, because it would be disingenuous—and a disservice to anyone going through this—to suggest that one can anticipate how things will unfold.”<sup>17</sup> The emotional labor required to reach the film’s resolution creates a more thoughtful result, subverting expectations that the cycle will culminate in Nic’s death yet doing so without romanticizing the exertion required.

Filmmakers’ approaches to telling the stories of addiction remain of paramount importance, since their films exercise considerable influence over public opinion. One study by the Global Commission on Drug Policy determined public perceptions on addiction “are largely shaped by the content and magnitude of media coverage on the issue” rather than personal experience or empirical research.<sup>18</sup> As Viano notes, many people’s primary experience with addicts comes from film, and these films are predominantly produced by teams with no firsthand knowledge to complicate common one-dimensional depictions:

I know of people who changed their image of drugs considerably after witnessing some users’ ritual administration of dangerous drugs such as heroin. They were astonished by the extent to which the users’ behavior was a far cry from the image they previously held—an image that had largely, if not solely, been formed on the basis of movies.<sup>19</sup>

The film industry favors writers on the basis of perceived artistic merit rather than firsthand experience, a byproduct of a phenomenon described by Jacques Derrida, who writes, “The concept of drugs is not a scientific concept, but is rather instituted on the basis of moral or political evaluations.”<sup>20</sup> The stigmatization of addicts can be traced largely through negative media perception and harsh political rhetoric more so than empirical evidence from scientific studies.<sup>21</sup> Continuing to highlight directors with no firsthand experience with addiction therefore risks perpetuating portrayals of addiction inconsistent with the lived experiences of addicts.

To take just one example of a film that epitomizes the problems with stereotyping addicts, *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), based on a novel by Jacqueline Susann, stars Barbara Parkins, Patty Duke, and Sharon Tate as three women whose lives are ruined by addiction to barbiturates colloquially referred



to as “dolls.” The film presents a triptych narrative structure, exploiting the preference of viewers for traumatic and hitting rock bottom over authentic recovery, and continually placing Duke’s Neely in situations where her addiction manifests in dramatized monologues and extreme behavior. Many of the addicts’ behaviors throughout the film are inconsistent with reality, with characters pushing quantities of their precious supply in an attempt to hook friends and screaming at the sky in a stupor. The behavior of the trio stems from Hollywood tropes of junkies, an unsurprising fact given that neither the novel author (Susann), director (Mark Ronson), nor screenplay author (Helen Deutsch) have direct experience with addiction. Owing to its extremity, *Valley of the Dolls* has been branded a camp classic, the film’s legacy cemented as a cautionary tale of overacting and abusing orchestral score rather than a meaningful depiction of the consequences of addiction.

Through this lack of experience with the real behaviors of drug addicts, the collective imagination of the directing and writing team of *Valley* birthed a film lacking realistic depictions or a discernable message. The conflation of several contrived genres—including the addict spiraling out of control, the impact of Hollywood on young breakout actresses, and the challenges of getting a big break in show business—reads as unfocused and suggests an inability to handle the film’s major themes with any sophistication. The girls’ lives are ruined by their experiences in Hollywood, with Neely entering a treatment facility reminiscent of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, while Tate’s Jennifer commits suicide via “doll” overdose. Neely expresses a genuine desire to recover and leave the facility, where patients are placed in straightjackets: she screams, “I am not nutty, I am just hooked on dolls! I’m scared. . . I’ve forgotten how to sleep without dolls, I can’t get through a day without dolls.” Only Parkins, who returns to the East Coast and swears off drugs, is able to survive. Audiences in the 1960s could not get enough of *Valley*: the film grossed \$50 million worldwide in ticket sales, and it sparked interest in the book such that, at one point, 100,000 copies were being sold every twenty-four hours.<sup>22</sup> Critically decried as “a dirty soap opera . . . capable of the most offensive and appalling vulgarity ever thrown up by any civilization,” audiences nonetheless devoured the narrative, evidence of film’s significant sway upon public opinion.<sup>23</sup> If this enthusiasm had been captured in a narrative grounded in realism, millions of Americans may not have been waylaid into believing antiquated stereotypical portrayals of addicts. In order for recovery to be portrayed convincingly, a firsthand understanding of the hard work required to escape the cycle of addiction must be present.

The commitment to authenticity by the creative team of *Beautiful Boy* elevates the film beyond the genre of traditional “intoxicated films.” Not only did Nic and David Sheff’s memoirs serve as the basis for the screenplay, but

the producers each brought personal experience to the table: Luke Davies is a recovering heroin addict who had previously written screenplays about addiction, and co-writer/director Felix van Groeningen was the child of an alcoholic father. The dynamic between Davies and van Groeningen mimics that of David and Nic, the perspective of a user struggling to maintain sobriety and a family member incapable of providing help merging to produce a singular screenplay which draws strength from both voices. Turning to lived experience to craft a more thoughtful script is essential to Davies' writing process: as he says in one interview, "Drawing on real life is what novelists do. ... It's not the same as reconstructing real life, which is what historians do."<sup>24</sup> Such a perspective is invaluable throughout the film, and without it the characterization of Nic and the family's reactions to his disease may not have achieved the same realistic results. Van Groeningen recently became a father, and he shared in a magazine interview, "Now that I have a kid, I can relate more to [the memoirs]. ... It's a hard film. Maybe I couldn't have made it if I hadn't been a parent."<sup>25</sup> This commitment was not limited merely to the script: the film exudes authenticity throughout each aspect of production. After Nic returns from home college, his father David begins to suspect he is using drugs again, suspicions which are confirmed once he reads Nic's sketchbook. The horrible black and white sketches, depicting a mind descending into madness on the use of heroin and meth, were drawn by Nic's younger brother Jasper, portrayed as a child in the film but now an adult visual artist. Likewise, the paintings Nic's stepmother Karen crafts throughout the film were done by the real Karen Barbour.<sup>26</sup> Actors who did not have personal experience with addiction (like Chalamet) were asked to better understand these experiences by meeting with real addicts and discussing their testimonies and thoughts on the current drug epidemic.<sup>27</sup>

The thoughtful effort invested in *Beautiful Boy* yielded both critical acclaim and praise from audiences, regardless of firsthand experience. Critics noted the use of a non-chronological timeline throughout the film, an approach which departs other addiction films, "inject[ing] some structural trickery to evoke the challenges David faces in reckoning [*sic.*] his warm relationship to his son during his childhood to the troubled creature now grappling to survive."<sup>28</sup> Many viewers were drawn in based on personal experience, leaving reviews about family members, loved ones, or even their own experiences of grappling with substance addiction. Indeed, the surreal sense of my family's deepest secrets being shared with the world seems also to have been felt by many of other viewers. Van Groeningen noted, "At every screening I have people with experiences telling me the film is giving their addiction a place in their life. ... I've also had feedback from the families of people suffering from addiction."<sup>29</sup> Painting a realistic portrait for not only addicts but also those who undergo

significant trauma coaxing loved ones through the cycle of addiction, comes as a result of the source material, “the dual perspective giv[ing] the film its devastating impact.”<sup>30</sup> This “devastating impact” contains within it a power to heal and contextualize suffering, meaning that one of 2018’s darkest films has a potentially positive and constructive influence.

In contrast, those who felt *Beautiful Boy* failed to provide a novel approach to addiction point to its reception by the larger community of addicts and its realistic depiction of their self-destructive behavior as trauma-baiting or over-generalizing. David Sims, for example, appreciated the manipulation of time, conceding that the narrative structure succeeds where many triptych films failed, but he found himself compelled only by the film’s masochistic elements, commenting that “van Groeningen’s film works best at its most heartless.”<sup>31</sup> For Sims, these changes in structure were ultimately unsuccessful, and while a concerted effort was made to innovate in form, “it’s still one that many viewers will have seen before.”<sup>32</sup> Sims seems unwilling to concede that lighter moments might be necessary in establishing a compelling recovery at the film’s resolution. Such scenes could be considered crucial in, for instance, establishing David’s love for his son, and his willingness, therefore, to put himself through the “heartless” turmoil to help Nic seek recovery. The shared or repetitive quality of addiction narratives, the commonalities so many authors efface when publicizing their work as “not another addiction memoir,” gives them strength and an enhanced impact for those who need to hear these messages. And David and Nic Sheff endorsed this ultimately positive message, reporting that they left the film “really hopeful about it, and they [felt] there’s a lot of redemption in this story.”<sup>33</sup> Only by balancing profound sorrow with strength through familial bonds can a path to recovery manifest itself in “intoxicated films,” and the strategic series of decisions made by van Groeningen throughout *Beautiful Boy* result in a way that viewers have indeed never seen before.

After breaking into our home and being taken into police custody, my brother Nick went in and out of clinical observation several times before heeding our advice and entering into in-patient rehab. He spent forty-five days in an intensive facility before moving into a sober living home. For the first time in his life, after being financially severed from my parents, Nick found a job and began supporting himself. During the spirituality components of AA treatment, he reconnected with religion, even discerning a potential call to the priesthood. My mother, eager for an end to this continued trauma, accepted these signs that the fallout of the previous months had ended. In fact, my entire extended family now seems to believe that Nick’s treatment worked and his addiction is now gone. Addiction—ever the disease of amnesia—has allowed my relatives to forget the many times his relapses occurred months after treatment, enabling them to believe their loved one is “cured.”

I find myself less affected by this amnesia, expecting instead his likely impending relapse. Hadn't I heard these same words in Nic Sheff's memoir: "My work history is solid and my jobs always start off great, but soon degenerate and end badly"?<sup>34</sup> Hadn't I heard about the famous relapses of paragons of sobriety, like Charles Jackson or Bill Wilson (founder of AA)? Still, despite knowing the statistical chances of Nick relapsing are high (40 to 60 percent within the first year), "intoxicated films" like *Beautiful Boy* have left me with a sense of hope in my brother's long-term recovery.<sup>35</sup> While he may relapse, a key component to harm reduction includes "acknowledging that sobriety might not come immediately, or even eventually, for everyone—that it might not be the triumphant concluding chapter at the end of every addiction story."<sup>36</sup> I don't have to believe rehab has changed who my brother fundamentally is, and I don't have to suspend disbelief in order to wish him the best. All I can do is remain present in his life, provide brotherly advice, and help him through his process just like AA asks: one day at a time.

*Alexander Motter is a senior majoring in Business Analytics and Technology. He prepared this essay as part of Professor Victoria Aaron's seminar on Advanced Exposition and Argument (ENGL 3414) in Spring 2019.*

#### NOTES

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