LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE AS APPLIED TO ADAM SANDLER

BY CASEY WEI

To love Adam Sandler is to hate Adam Sandler. To appreciate Adam Sandler is to squirm at the soupskin layer of dignity upon which he aims to stay afloat. I had not heard about the Safdie brothers' new film until suddenly I was at Regal Union Square, scrolling through the ticket menu to discover multiple theatres screening Uncut Gems (2019). Bombarded with the repeating image of Sandler's imploringly bespectacled face, I assumed it was some kind of adultish, raunchy standup routine: "Adam Sandler Returns to The Cellar" or something. "No, thank you," I thought to myself, then walking to the Angelika to catch Pain and Glory (2019). Little did I know that a few days later, very hungover on New Year's Day, I would wind up crawling up into Adam Sandler's ass, and exploring many constellations in a volatile, unpredictable, and completely immersive universe. Reminiscent of the opening credits to Fight Club (1999) [1] – cells inside Edward Norton's body eventually exiting as a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead onto the gun sitting cocked in his mouth, all to the pounding industrial glitch of "Stealing Fat" by the Dust Brothers – the opening credits to the Safdie brothers' sixth feature starts by entering the eponymously uncut black opal, every particle refracting the most profoundly colourful cluster, set to an enchanted and nostalgic warbly synth score, eventually tunneling out of Adam Sandler's colon as he starts his day with his pants down at the doctor's.

The film actually begins with a pre-credit scene introduced by an aerial shot of what the classy Serif intertitle names as "Ethiopia, 2010" and quickly zooms in to a group of miners carrying one of their fellow workers, with a severe injury, out of the site. African miners in work-torn t-shirts and shorts heatedly argue with Chinese foremen in collared shirts and hard hats as bottles of water are poured onto exposed bone. Offside this pandemonium, one worker walks back into the dark quiet of the mine to find the opal. His gaze is swallowed into the gem, and the credits thusly roll in an abstract reprieve, meandering through many folds of time-space only to come back out of our protagonist Howie's backside.

This opal is soon delivered to Howie inside the belly of a big fish, amidst the utter chaos of his life: every few minutes he pivots from one balls-in-vice situation, be it financial, familial, or romantic, to another. We are able to discern very quickly that any and every decision this man makes is just not going to go his way! Sandler's Howie is a big man who is always a bit hunched over, with a soft meek voice (unless he has completely lost control), always deferring and always pleading. Howie works in the exchange of precious stones in Manhattan's Diamond District. He is a diamond hustler, a 'diamantaire,' and "since diamonds are so expensive...diamantaires rarely have sufficient liquid assets to pay for stones in cash" [2] meaning he survives on large amounts of credit without much collateral. The same applies for the black opal, which Howie has planned to auction, until *the* Kevin Garnett arrives at his store to look at some bling, prompting Howie to flex his hubris and try to bond with the all-star by showing him his fresh-from-the-fish, big, black, uncut opal. Garnett is immediately transfixed, captive under the opal's spell, and convinces Howie to loan it to him pre the night's game. About 20 minutes into the film, this is the catalyst event, and for the next 115 minutes, there is hardly any room to breathe as we chase after Howie racing against all odds to recover his 'precious' so he can pay off his life threatening debts, get his girl back, regain his dignity, win the big take.

Uncut Gems does not provide us much time-space to think. We barely have time to understand the laws

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of Howie's universe, one in which he can: date someone like Julia, who chooses Howie over The Weekend; be muscled by loan sharks at his daughter's Christmas recital and end up near naked but somehow unscathed still clutching his cell phone in the trunk of his own car; believe that he can con Kevin Garnett, with a lawyer present, into overbidding for the opal. For anyone watching, there is little range to work with between relief and distress. The Safdies work us hard between these extremes, and Sandler plays a great M to their S. He is a putz, a schmuck, a gambling addict very quickly spiraling out of control as he believes he is getting closer and closer to the truth which no one else seems to believe. But beyond this mayhem, as in the introductory scene at the opal mine, there is something else ever present, all the while calmly, quietly, driving the action. It is the opal itself. The mysteries of nature lie within it, in its identical lattice of pure order, milky, incandescent, glistening, beckoning. Uncut Gems spins many unjust absurdities of modern life around this symbolic constant, as our flawed underdog scurries frantically around it with blind faith that everything will work out for him. The surface of the water upon which Sandler somehow is able to traverse, his clumsy agility that defies all gravitas of the plot, is undeniably mesmerizing. As specific as the storyline is to New York, it reminds me of what William Friedkin once said about his classic To Live and Die in L.A.(1985), that the film is largely "about the mysteries of fate." [3] These mysteries – fate, faith, luck – are all dancing gleefully inside this hunk of rock from the earth, from which Howie goes all in. ■

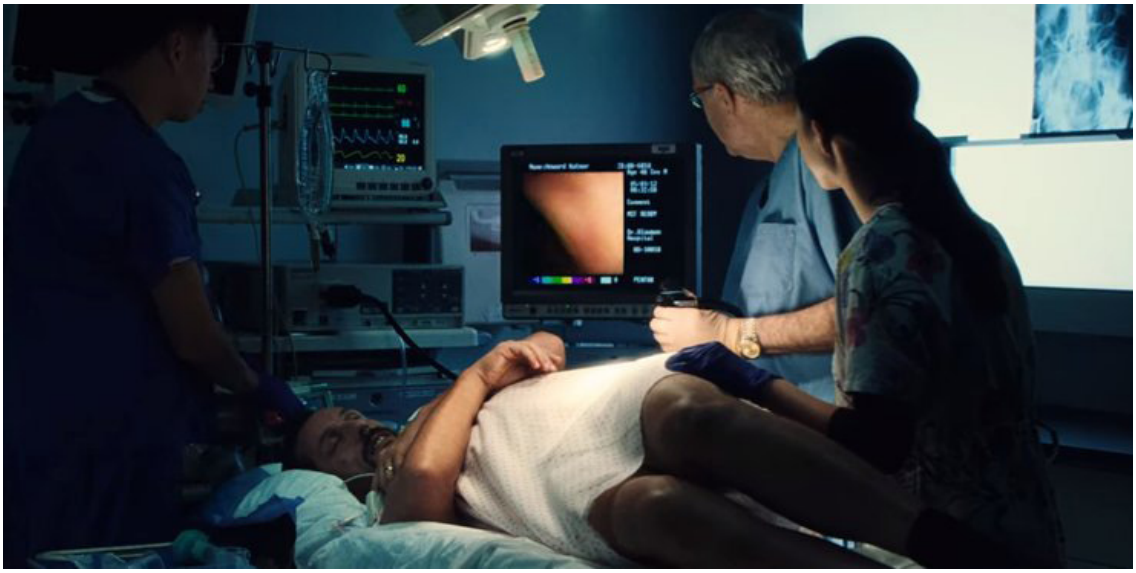
CASEY WEI is an editor of STILLS.

[1] Fincher, David. Fight Club. 20th Century Fox, 1999.

[2] Richman, Barak. " 'Uncut Gems' celebrates Manhattan's Diamond District, a neighborhood that's a window into the past." *Salon*. January 18, 2020. Accessed March 8, 2020. https://www.salon.com/2020/01/18/uncut-gems-celebrates-manhattans-diamond-district-a-neighborhood-thats-a-window-into-the-past_partner/

[3] Due to the Mandela effect, I can no longer find the YouTube interview I remember hearing him say this quote, but Friedkin has been quoted often on the driving themes of all his films: faith, and fate.
Simon, Alex. "Why Sorcerer's Spell Refuses to Die," 106, in *William Friedkin Interviews*. Ed. Christopher Lane. (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2020).

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Adam Sandler as Howie, starting his day off with a colonoscopy, in Uncut Gems (2019) Dir. Josh and Benny Safdie.

A MOVING IMAGE TRACT

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