Liquid Sky (1982)

“You wanna know where I'm from? I'm from Connecticut. Mayflower Stock. I was told my prince would come, and he would be a lawyer and I would have his children. And on the weekends we would barbecue, and all of the other princes and their princesses would come, and they would say delicious, delicious... oh, how boring. So I was taught that I should come to New York and become an independent model, and my prince would come, and he would be an agent, and he would get me a role. And I would make my living waiting on tables. I would wait... til thirty... til forty... til fifty... and I was taught that to be an actress, one should be fashionable. And to be fashionable is to be androgynous. And I am androgynous not less than David Bowie himself. And they call me beautiful. And I kill with my cunt. Isn't it fashionable? Come on, who's next? I'll take lessons. How to get into show business. Be nice to your professor. Be nice to your agent. Be nice to your audience. Be nice. How to be a woman- want them when they want you. How to be free and equal- fuck women instead of men, and you'll discover a whole kingdom of freedom. Men won't step on you anymore, women will. So come on, who's next? Who wants to teach me? Come on, teach me. Are you afraid? You're right. Because they're all dead. All my teachers.”

Though most of the acting and intonation from the main characters can be described as stiff, the Liquid Sky’s script is clever. The title itself is a euphemism for heroin, but also alludes to the psychedelic aliens that are central to the plot. Some lines foreshadow future events, such as when Jimmy tells his mother “no, I’m going down” as a response to her offering to take him uptown, or when Margaret tells Owen, her professor: “I’m telling you this for your own good. I think you should go home,” before he pressures her, rapes her, and dies post-coitally through the alien method. Similarly, towards the end, Margaret tells the club boy that “this is going to be the fuck of [his] lifetime” before she indirectly but deliberately murders him with her alien power, which creates a humorous effect. Margaret’s declaration early in the movie that “it's only fair that [she] warn[s] them [her] pussy has teeth” is also fairly blatant foreshadowing. The scenes where Jimmy’s mother Sylvia and the scientist interact play her unsuccessful attempts at flirting with him for laughs. There is a running gag about Sylvia’s hunger for an appreciation of shrimp, which can be interpreted as a sexual metaphor. Indeed, Sylvia and the scientist’s dynamic in their scenes together can be seen as a struggle between pleasure and work respectively- before leaving to warn Adrian, the scientist declares: “I'm sorry, but duty is more important than shrimps.” The entire movie carries a dark humorous tone as characters dryly joke about death.

The frequently clunky acting and bizarre, always jarring soundtrack give the film an strange feel. The polluted neon backdrop of early 80s New York City coupled with strange, colorful sets and costumes help to highlight the theme of alienation. The club setting is especially surreal, combining strange music and dancing with warped New Romantic clothes and makeup. Adrian and Margaret’s lunch scene is very wispy and dreamlike in its soft colors and in its characters' intonation. Alien appearances/ point of view/ interference in the form of absorbing the desired molecule from the brain of someone climaxing are made clear by the associated piercing musical theme and colorful, abstract, circular explosions of color. These appearances are very striking, as they look and sound different from the rest of the movie. Representing the aliens in
such a distinctive and abstract way not only highlights them as a key element, but also adds to the bizarre, otherworldly tone that the movie is going for.

Adrian’s delusional escapist fantasy ("We'll go to Berlin, I'll be a star, I'll buy you cocaine, a silver fox for your beautiful neck” etc) ties well into the film’s broad Baudelairean theme of pleasure and destruction as mixed parts of the same whole rather than two opposite sides. Heroin is a perfect poster boy for this concept. Middle class junkie Paul romanticizes his addiction by citing historical use and criticizing those who oppose it as finding euphoria morally wrong. For all his talk, however, while he is forcing sex onto Margaret, she tells him, while laying still underneath him: "I'm falling asleep, I'm tired, I'm falling asleep, you're boring me to death..." and he replies with: "please don't die, I know you love it". During orgasm, Paul is killed through the alien method and disappears. The progression of this scene might remind the viewer of an opiate overdose: at once euphoric and destructive. By linking the effects of orgasms to those of opiates via the similar structure of the molecules that bind to the brain in order to create these effects, and then via the aliens’ confusion of or acceptance of both varieties, Liquid Sky makes a point about their shared destructive potential.

Sex is weaponized by Margaret, who uses her alien power to kill those who hurt and took advantage of her. When she changes her approach towards Jimmy during their photoshoot from hateful to submissive, she succeeds in both taunting him and pressuring him (distorted chorus of “do it” from eager photographers). Here she is the one forcing the encounter, which puts her in control in such a situation for the first time in the movie. Since both characters are played by the same actor, this might be interpreted as Margaret reconciling her parts, or killing off her “evil half”. It is interesting to note that after this, when she goes to kill the club boy, she refuses his cocaine in favor of speedier revenge. This shows character growth, but might also suggest that the blasé fiending addict aspect of her personality has died with Jimmy, who personified this. Becoming an alien host helps put Margaret in a position of power. I am unsure about the overall metaphor, but the shift Margaret is then able to make to using sex as an attack is a clear one.

There are recurring points made about theater, façades, artifice. The mask decoration in Adrian’s apartment is featured prominently at multiple points in the movie: Adrian uses it as a prop during her post-death spoken word ritual for Owen. Margaret later breaks it on the floor when she gives her monologue and turns off all the neon lights in the house. Several scenes of characters peacocking at the club also add to this theme, especially during the fashion show, during which Margaret looks like an exotic bird crossed with a Patrick Nagel figure. Her authenticity is called into question by her professor, who describes her clothes as a “phony theater” and to which she responds “are you trying to say that your blue jeans aren't theater?... you thought your jeans stood for love, freedom, and sexual equality...” There is a lot to unpack in terms of performance, signaling, gender and sexual expression. Paul questions Margaret’s sexuality, and, when she rejects his advances, he calls her a dyke. The interviewer at the photoshoot also questions Margaret's identity, her choice of clothes, her strangeness. She
responds by saying that the interviewer is "wearing what they want her to wear," still a costume, like she said to her prof.

Though Margaret is taken advantage of throughout the movie, she proves to not be so naive, and experiences some character development. Even while others are disrespecting her, she talks back, and seems perfectly aware of when and how exactly she is being taken advantage of. Protected by the fact that she has not reached orgasm, she is able to use her alien parasite “power” as a weapon. It empowers her, and allows her to take revenge. It is no surprise, then, that she is grateful to the aliens, feels attached to them, and finds a way to be abducted by them, to leave earth.