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LIMELIGHT & INDIGESTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University

by
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MFA, Photography and Film
Virginia Commonwealth University
Spring 2015

Director: Paul Thulin
Graduate Director, Photography and Film

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I. ABSTRACT

LIMELIGHT & INDIGESTION
Joshua Thorud, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Director: Paul Thulin
Graduate Director, Photography and Film

This thesis chronicles the progression toward and creation of my thesis show, *Limelight & Indigestion*, as well as the cultural, technological and artistic influences and discussions that underpin the works therein. The show is an exploration of celebrity, mass media, and the nature of the desire for fame. I hope to situate my work through an investigation of topics such as Hollywood and the use of green screens and associated technology, our physical and ideological connection to cinema, the absurd in cinema history, and the complex nature of media digestion.

INTRODUCTION

“These days even reality has to look artificial.” –J.G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*¹

The completion of a thesis show is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the process, progression and associated meanings behind the work. Over the last two years, my work has grown and changed immensely, and simply seeing the show does not tell the whole story. This thesis paper chronicles the progression toward and creation of my thesis show, *Limelight & Indigestion*, as well as the cultural, technological and artistic influences and discussions that underpin the works therein. The show is an exploration of celebrity, mass media, and the nature of the desire for fame. I hope to situate my work within a cultural and technological framework through an investigation of topics such as Hollywood and the use of green screens and associated technology, our physical and ideological connection to cinema, the absurd in cinema history, and the complex nature of media digestion.

PREVIOUS WORK: THE ROAD TO THESIS

My work over the last four semesters has followed a winding path, culminating in my thesis show, *Limelight & Indigestion*. Primarily a video installation, with a massive projection and a sideways television screen, the thesis show brings together some of the ideas and techniques I developed in my time in graduate school.

Before coming to this program, my work focused on the threshold between fiction and nonfiction cinema. I made fiction films using documentary or other nonfiction

¹ J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (New York: Liveright Pub., 2012).

modes. This meant that I was critiquing a very particular form and aesthetic, and using these in the service of narrative. For example, one of the films I submitted in my portfolio, entitled *The Kessler Plot* (2012), was a fake documentary about a performance artist whose final artistic act was an attempted suicide bombing in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Few, if any of these early works, could be considered narrative films, as their primary structure was nonfiction. In fact, my thesis includes the first real attempt at a narrative fiction short film since before undergraduate film school.

As I came into the program, I started making projects using appropriated footage. One of the first was the hybrid project *Eyes/Desires* (2014), comprised of appropriated footage, stylized animation and live action (fig. 1). It is a depiction of myself as the filmmaker entering the viewer's eye, crossing through the threshold of the screen like an astronaut between two celestial spheres. Once inside, I ask directly what the viewer's expectations and desires are, and replace his/her consciousness with an invented one. The desires I am communicating are the desires in the viewer for what they expect to experience when watching a film. Since I, the artist, am in control, I can show you what you want to see or not, as literalized by climbing into the eye. In this way, I become the ego. In my video *Eyes/Desires*, I am the creator of the new, invented consciousness you temporarily experience by climbing into your eye. Once inside, I am both in a position to experience as you experience and also invent your experience. I replace your ego with mine.

In retrospect, I think of the experimentation with appropriated footage as a way of subverting the narrative again, and thus attempting to use it as a lens to view a story

and concept. For the candidacy show, I continued to work in appropriation but moved into the contemporary context of amateur YouTube videos, and by layering them, found a voice to both speak about an issue and transform the footage. *How to: Become Invisible* (2014) was a five channel installation at SedimentArts gallery as a part of the group show “Possible Futures” (fig. 2 and 3). I began to use broken screens in my work for this project, smashing LCD monitors to get the desired distortion to the image. As with *Eyes/Desires*, I was also performing in the videos, which never fully left my work. This project included sculptural performances with green screens (figure 4).

In the fall of my second year, I stopped using appropriated video. I finally felt ready to return to content that I generated myself. In continuation of the trend from the candidacy show, my work became increasingly sculptural. I made a series of videos called *Body/Object* (2014), in which I improvisationally interacted with objects relating to our contemporary viewing experience through digital screens (fig. 5). I would then project the videos onto free-leaning sculptures. These videos were influenced by a project earlier in the semester called *Kiosks* (2014), a collaboration with Anthony Smith, in which we stacked commercially available materials into sculptures onto which we projected videos (fig. 6). The projected videos would be the documentation videos from the previous incarnation, which led to a cycle of destruction for the images deeper into abstraction. I also began to work with the broken television that eventually ended up in my thesis show, in a series of incarnations called *Monoliths* (2014-2015) (fig. 7). In this incarnation, the video left my work completely, leaving only moving color fields and the sculptural aspects of the installation.

Following the conclusion of the fall semester, I felt that I had drifted away from my strongest skillset and also from my original intent in coming to graduate school. I had essentially given up video completely, outside its use in a sculptural sense as performance documentation or for its light and color producing qualities. I do not feel this was a misstep; in fact, I think I had to push myself to this ledge in order to fully re-embrace the video work I always wanted to make. Significant pieces of these projects, or the lessons I learned from them, have influenced the production of my thesis show, and I would not have made a show like this without this meandering journey through graduate school.



Figure 1: Joshua Thorud, still from *Eyes/Desires* (2014)



Figure 2: Joshua Thorud, installation shot from *How to: Become Invisible* (2014)



Figure 3: Joshua Thorud, installation shot from *How to: Become Invisible* (2014)

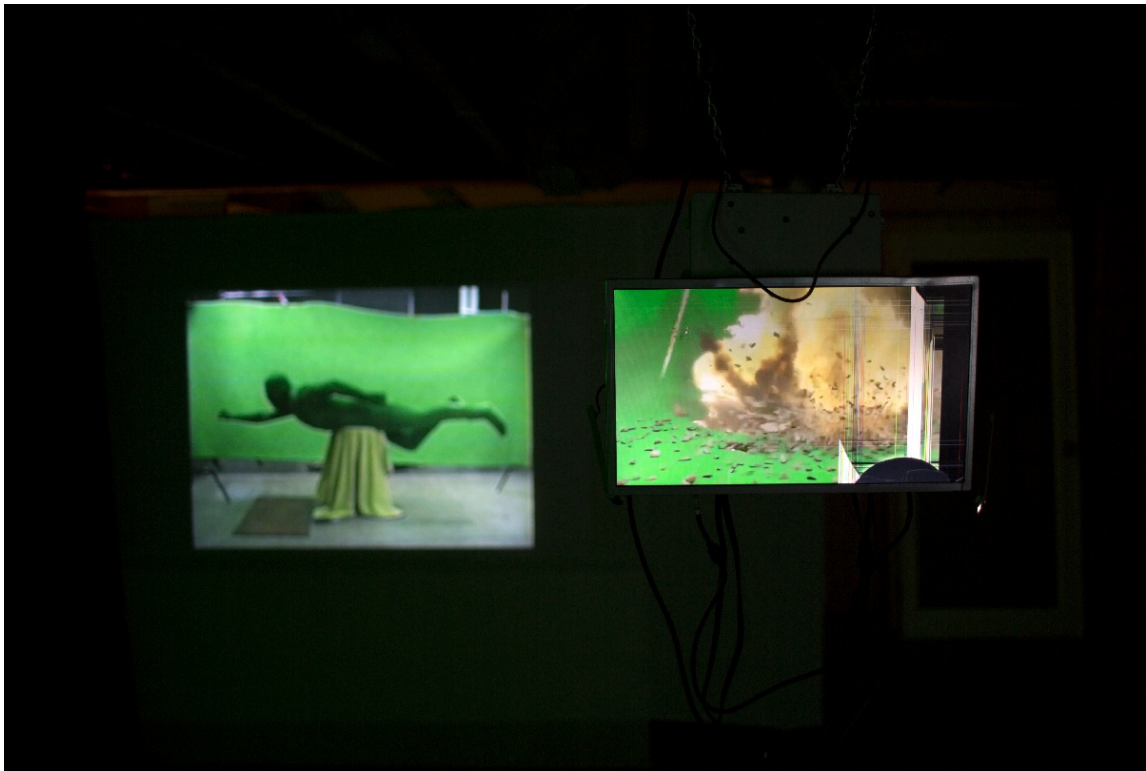


Figure 4: Joshua Thorud, installation shot from *How to: Become Invisible* (2014)



Figure 5: Joshua Thorud, still from *Body/Object* (2014)



Figure 6: Joshua Thorud & Anthony Smith, documentation of *Kiosk #2* (2014)

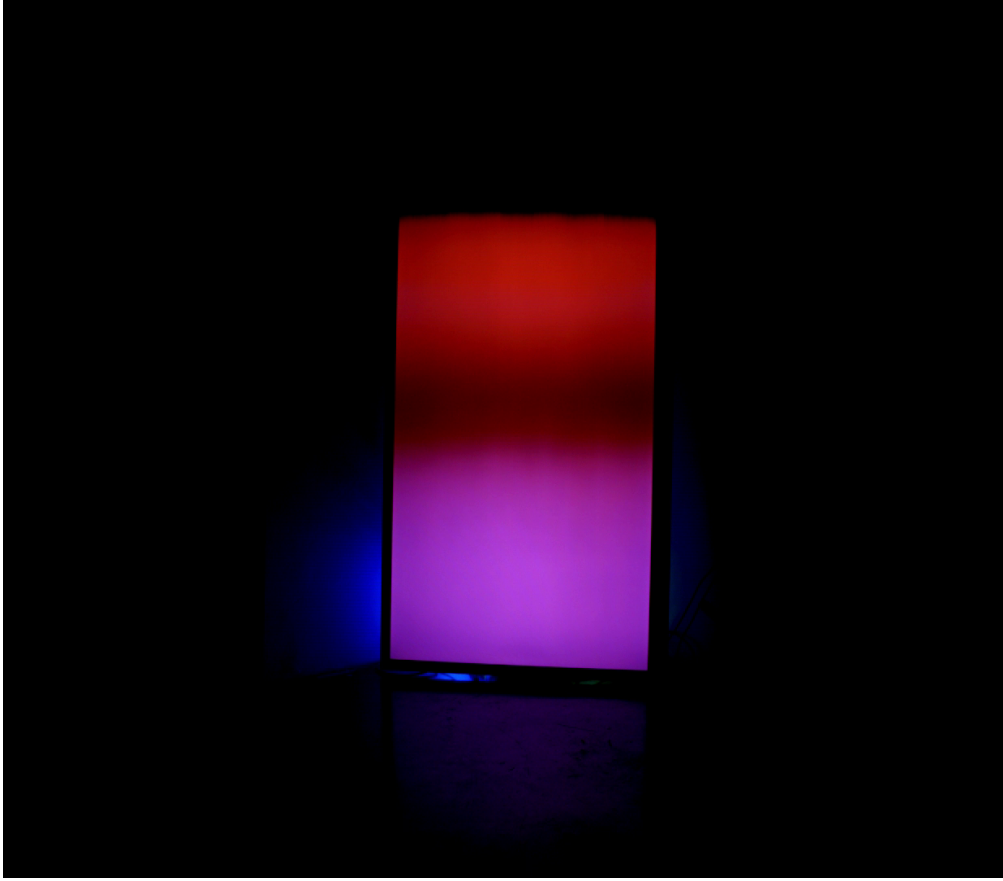


Figure 7: Joshua Thorud, documentation from *Monolith #1* (2014)

THESIS: LIMELIGHT & INDIGESTION

My thesis show, *Limelight & Indigestion*, is an exploration of celebrity, mass media, and the nature of the desire for fame. This is achieved through an installation with two pieces, a large video projection and a sculptural work with a broken television. The large projection piece, *Indigestion* (2015), is a narrative fiction video focusing on the protagonist, Gil, who desires fame and self-worth. The film opens traveling through an esophagus, as the audience is beginning its journey through digestion (fig. 8). Scientific slides of esophagus cells are peppered through the narrative as disruptions, exposing what is real behind the slick narrative surface. Gil stands before a mirror, examining himself as a potential celebrity and finding his constitution lacking, like an audition of self-worth (fig. 9). He imagines himself with a laugh track, smiling to the crowd with everything he has until he realizes the crowd is laughing at him. Soon after, Gil meets up with an old friend who is working in Hollywood, back home on business. Although Eric is meeting Gil out of kindness, Gil pitches an absurd magic realist project to him. To humor him, Eric asks further questions, suggesting he call it Surrealist instead, and ultimately agrees to show it to his agent. For Gil, this is the launching point further into his own head. Upon seeing a news report, Gil becomes fascinated with Joan, an alternative celebrity. Joan is a lunch lady who has run off with the lottery winnings she was contractually obligated to share. Gil creates a fantasy vision of Joan, heroically driving across the country to Mexico in a daring escape (fig. 10). The climax occurs when, after watching another news report on Joan, Gil spills milk. This is his break from reality. He painstakingly sucks the milk off the floor with a straw, spitting it back into the empty jug (fig. 11). He imagines Joan coming to save him. When he gives up on

sucking all of the milk from the floor, he pours himself another bowl of cereal using the milk from the floor. After eating this bowl of cereal, Joan calls to him. Gil then takes Joan's place in his fantasy, in which he drives to a river made of Pepto-Bismol. When he arrives, he steps out and walks on it like a commodity-borne Christ (fig. 12). When the illusion finally breaks, Gil finds himself on a green screen, which was used to produce the illusion (fig. 13).

The second piece, *Limelight* (2015), is a broken television producing melting and flowing color effects to a video of Gil on a green screen in a green screen suit (fig. 14). Its color is in constant flux producing the moving equivalent to a color-field painting plus the shadows and wrinkles of the screen and suit. When Gil pulls off the mask, the television takes time to fully register it (fig. 15). The television is distorting the image in real time, like a live performance. As the television marches forward to its inevitable demise, as evidenced by its brokenness, it freezes and desperately holds on to images of the past. In some ways, the television is Gil's cage, the reality of his normality and artificially infused desire for fame. The sound is similarly structured, with the brokenness of the contact microphone contributing as much to the sound as the television's inner workings to which the microphone is connected.

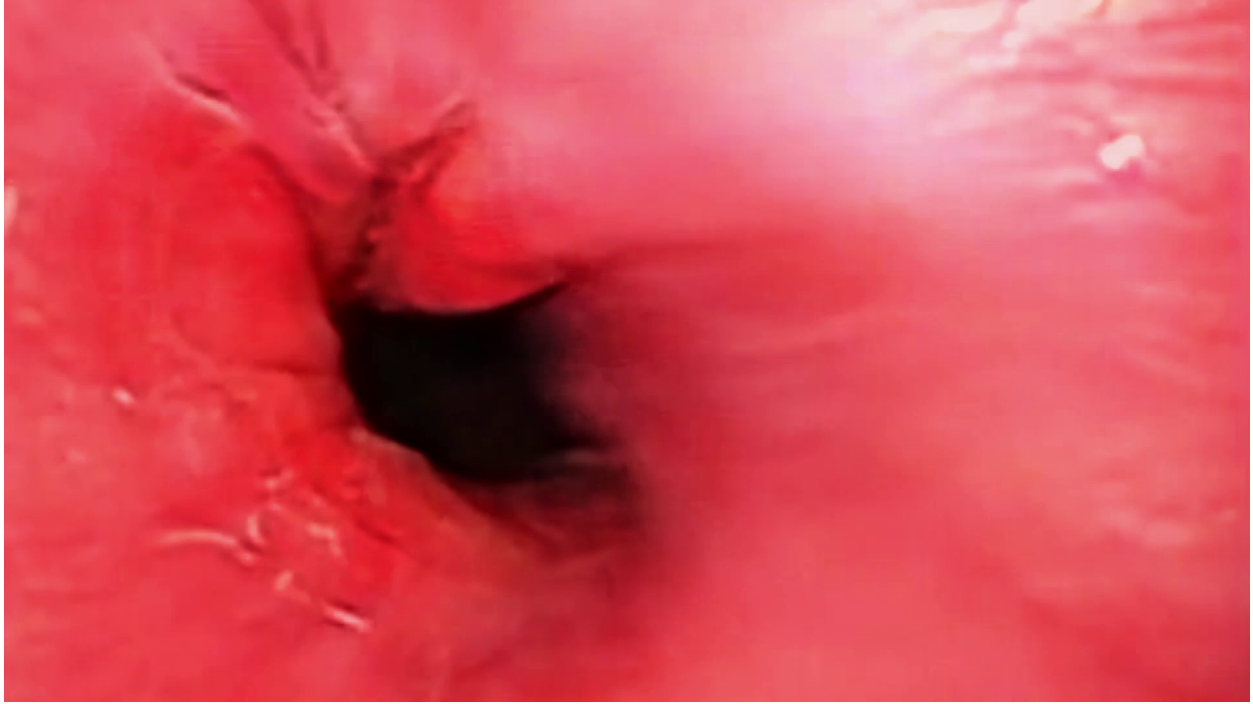


Figure 8: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 9: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)

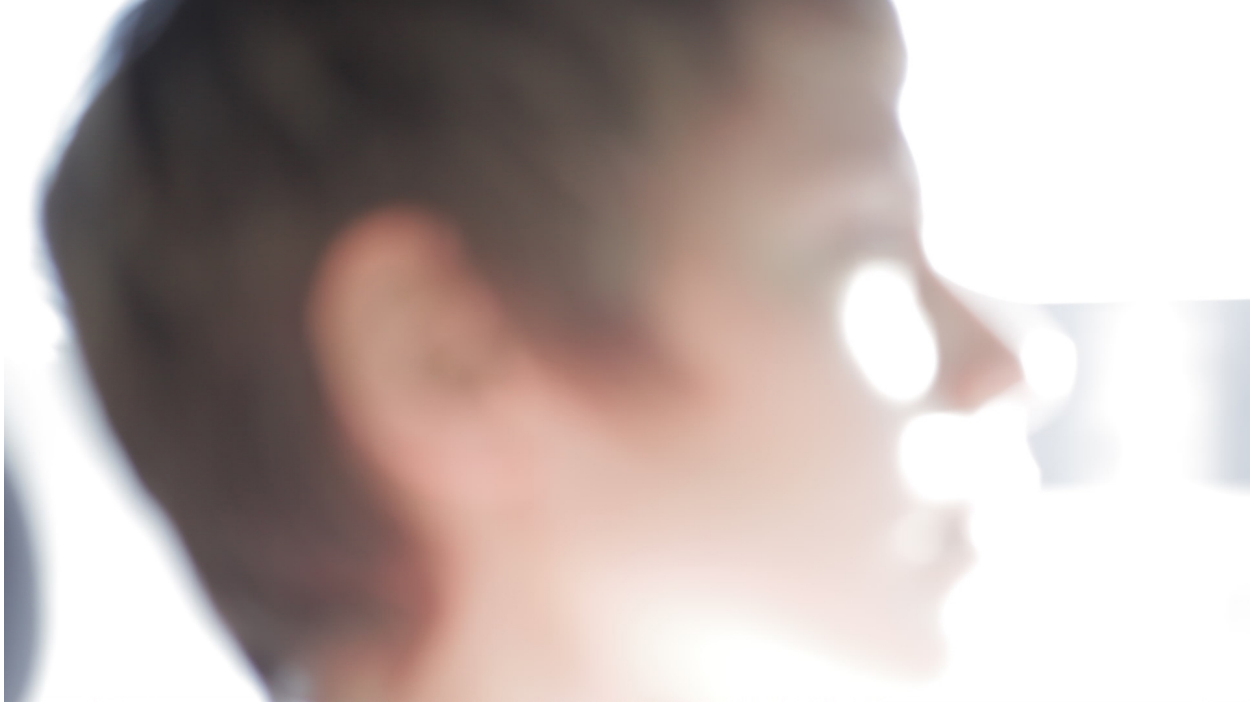


Figure 10: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 11: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 12: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 13: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 14: Joshua Thorud, still from *Limelight* (2015)



Figure 15: Joshua Thorud, still from *Limelight* (2015)

GREEN SCREEN AND HOLLYWOOD

The green screen, in an artificial lime color, is a paradigm shifter in Hollywood film. While all film is a fabrication in some sense, the green screen has allowed filmmakers to eschew even physical space. It is not the screen, or even the color, that is revolutionary. Keying or matte replacement is as old as cinema, being employed by Georges Méliès in the 1890s. It is the digital tools that have changed the screen. Upon completion of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in 2003, it was reported that over 75% of the films were created at least partly on computers.² This includes over 200,000 anonymous digital soldiers.³ Ten years later, *Gravity*, which won both Best Director and Best Cinematography at the Academy Awards, caused a discussion about what constitutes a live-action film rather than an animated film. In an interview, director Alfonso Cuarón puts it this way:

We had to do the whole film as an animation first. We edited that animation, even with sound, just to make sure the timing worked with the sound effects and music. And once we were happy with it, we had to do the lighting in the animation as well. Then all that animation translated to actual camera moves and positions for the lighting and actors... Someone suggested we just call *Gravity* animation, but I don't think we can because there's a fair amount of live action.⁴

While he still considers the film live action, the relatively small live action components seem to be additions. In *The Language of New Media*, new media theorist Lev

² Edward Jay Epstein, "The Schizoid Split in Movies: Will Digital Effects Ruin Hollywood," *Slate*, December 12, 2005. Accessed April 1, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_hollywood_economist/2005/12/the_schizoid_split_in_movies.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Caitlin Roper, "Why Gravity Director Alfonso Cuarón Will Never Make a Space Movie Again," *WIRED* (October 1, 2013). Accessed March 28, 2015. http://www.wired.com/2013/10/center_of_gravity/.

Manovich discusses the relationship of live action and animation in digital cinema:

“Digital cinema is a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements. Manual construction and animation of images gave birth to cinema and slipped into the margins...only to re-appear as the foundation of digital cinema.”⁵

More importantly, however, all the live action parts were filmed on green screens.

In some scenes in the film, the only thing on the screen that's a 'real' camera shot rather than something computer-generated is Sandra Bullock's face... Even a third astronaut who appears briefly is computer generated, with an actor providing only his voice...There's also a scene where Ms. Bullock's character glides as if swimming through the narrow shaft of the space station... For those scenes, she was supported by 12 wires connected to a carbon-fiber harness molded to her body.⁶

The green screen allows Sandra Bullock to fly. Green is the perfect color, as it is also the color associated with envy. This envy is for the new digital celebrity. The new celebrity does not deign to walk in physical space, but rather on pre-determined or post-determined pixels, like floating bricks in an 8-bit video game. The desire to fly is analogous to the desire for fame, in that it can be freedom from our physical limitations. Gil, in *Limelight & Indigestion*, is placing himself on a new set of images through green screen technology. As he walks on a river of Pepto-Bismol in the end, he is attempting to overcome reality and do something impossible. Walking on pixels is really just flying.

Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media*, discusses how digital filmmaking techniques have affected our notion of realism in film. With the ability to create scenes entirely in the computer, live action can be constructed more like animation. Once this

⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 255.

⁶ Don Steinberg, “Inside the Law of 'Gravity',” *Wall Street Journal* (September 2, 2015). Accessed March 21, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303796404579097272816689690>.

has been digitized, its indexical relationship with reality has been severed. Even live action filmed with a digital camera is made of pixels.

[Digital live action and animation] are [all] made from the same material — pixels. And pixels, regardless of their origin, can be easily altered, substituted one for another, and so on. Live action footage is reduced to be just another graphic, no different than images which were created manually... As a result, while retaining visual realism unique to the photographic process, film obtains the plasticity which was previously only possible in painting or animation. To use the suggestive title of a popular morphing software, digital filmmakers work with 'elastic reality'... a new kind of realism, which can be described as "something which is intended to look exactly as if it could have happened, although it really could not."⁷

In the process of learning how to replace the green in my footage, I watched countless online tutorials on chromakey replacement in Adobe AfterEffects. Much of what I found was either in imitation of a mainstream Hollywood technique or, more commonly, of a specific popular movie. These tutorial videos do not seem to be sincere efforts to get special effects jobs. They are more statements about their own self-proclaimed authority to an online community of people genuinely thirsty to learn. However, the makers of these videos position themselves as expert advisors, when the product of their labor is transparent in multiple ways. The fluctuating, pixelated aberrations that surround the subjects only help to highlight the enthusiasm on their faces. Some of the complexity and humor originates in the incongruence of technical skill and blind ambition, and in the proud broadcasting of something so flawed in comparison to accepted standards.

America and much of the world is obsessed with technology, and in developing and consuming ever-newer gadgets. This culture produces consumers who crave the

⁷ Manovich, 253-55.

newest thing, and are desperate to show that they have it and that they know how to use it. YouTube users generate content in order to find people to watch them. One of the most direct ways to find viewers is to find a niche of people in need of “how to” videos. The popularity and abundance of YouTube tutorials about green screening raises the question: what about either making yourself disappear or transporting yourself to a different/fantasy space or granting yourself supernatural power has such a strong appeal? It is not simply the desire to involve oneself in movie-magic. Rather, this desire is a symptom of the continuing alienation of the self from society as well as the growing alienation of ourselves from reality due to endless digital mediation and the loss of images with a physical, indexical relationship – and even from being able to tell if an image is manipulated.

The use of the green screen itself is a direct response to Hollywood trends, as green screens are increasingly ubiquitous in mainstream film production. This ubiquity, in combination with the prominence of other digital production techniques, push filmmaking further and further away from its original indexicality with reality, further into complete fabrication and alienation from the world. Not only are we alienated from a physical relationship with the image, we are fragmented from it. The digital image is composed from hundreds of images, code, graphics generators, special effects firms, etc. The visual world is no longer a continuous experience from a single perspective; it is shattered like so many shards of a mirror. These fantasies of physical impossibilities, such as flying on a green screen, only function to underscore the limitations of possibility. The more we dream of flying, the more we realize that we cannot fly. One

may ask how this has infiltrated the vernacular culture in which these green screen tutorials were created. It resonates and feeds into that societal ambition for greatness.

The news media also redact colors behind celebrities, much like Hollywood does. In this case, blue is more common than green, though the chromakey process is identical. News anchors introduce criminals over the same blue screens as celebrity gossip. In some ways, criminal activity is an alternate route to stardom; another path to become a household name. The mug shot of a criminal can be seen over a replaced background, just as Sandra Bullock is placed into space in *Gravity*. The news seeks information from stars and criminals in very similar ways, scrutinizing backgrounds and searching for unseemly details in order to humanize or dehumanize. Photographs are sought after, and updates are constant. The news, after all, is entertainment. The television system is design to find an audience in order to sell that audience's attention to advertisers. If the news were not entertaining, then the networks would not sell enough advertising, and it would be taken off the air. Only programs that sell are worthwhile. This makes criminals into entertainers.

Limelight is an old phrase referring to the type of lights used on stage. Being "in the limelight" is being in the spotlight. In contemporary media, spotlights are no longer an adequate signifier on their own. A lime green screen seems more appropriate. While limelight was never actually green, the term could be used to incorporate both the old spotlight model and the new green screen model.

TECHNOLOGY AND SCREENS

The modern experience of consciousness is most often mediated by its interaction with digital technologies, much like a prescription in a pair of eyeglasses. By viewing the world through this filter, technology and the Internet determine our experience, pushing beyond a consciousness-focused, phenomenological model into a new paradigm that externalizes the self from consciousness. Increasingly, our perceptions are dictatorially overdetermined by the representations of ourselves in our digital existence.

The world of visual media is categorized by markers of contemporaneity and authenticity. How true, or how authentic to truth, is this painting? When was this film made, and thus what context should I put it in? We search for the answers to these questions within the visual information we are given. Like watermarks or genre cues in film, these markers provide information on the attributes of the visual information, such as whether to judge a video as true or false. For example a video may seem authentic because it was filmed on a low quality consumer camera, is informally composed and uses naturalistic, non-stylized gesture and language. These markers are increasingly readable due to the collapse of geographic space made possible by global connectivity and layered, constructed images. Many viewers have become so adept at reading digitized visual information that it has essentially replaced analog consciousness even when not looking at a screen. These factors amount to a flattening of visual space onto screens, lacking depth in space or essentially anything beyond visual cues. They have

simultaneously created the fragmentation of visual space onto multiple devices, windows, or screens, and destroyed the idea of consciousness as a singular viewer.

Digital imagery is just data composed of ones and zeros. Artist and writer David Company, when discussing Thomas Ruff's pixelated images, discusses the pixel as a rational entity in comparison to film grain.

They are grid-like, machinic and repetitive. They do not have the scattered chaos of [film] grain. When we glimpse pixels we do not think of authenticity (although we may do one day). The pixel represents a cold technological limit, a confrontation with the virtual and bureaucratic order than secretly unites all images in a homogenous electronic continuum, whether they are holiday snapshots or military surveillance.⁸

Any person placed onto this data or any fame created by it, is built on a lie. While this data is organized and rational, the world is not. For artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, the visible pixel is a marker of the history of the image itself, as a transferable file.⁹ This idea elevates the degraded image, as if its history is a rite of passage. Much like the properties of documentary camerawork are markers of authenticity, the low-resolution poor image is a marker of the history of that image, itself – and thus a marker of the conditions the image has been through to get to your computer.¹⁰ This is its new aura, which is in opposition to the loss of aura that Walter Benjamin posits.¹¹ These conditions are often an indicator of the image's place in culture, outside of commercial value. It has been deemed important enough to circulate in the online "alternative economy of

⁸ Company, David. "Thomas Ruff: Aesthetic of the Pixel," *IANN MAGAZINE*, (NO. 2, 2008). Accessed 12-01-2014. <http://davidcompany.com/thomas-ruff-the-aesthetics-of-the-pixel/>.

⁹ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-flux* (Journal #10, Nov. 2009).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Film Theory & Criticism*, 7th Edition, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 668.

images,” which functions without money. This low fidelity can really be a marker of quality, which is the inverse of their traditional relationship.

Much of my earlier work during graduate school was very influenced by the elevation of the degraded image or in the words of Julio García Espinosa, an “imperfect cinema,” as a tool of differentiation and perhaps even subjective quality.¹² For my thesis, I chose to adopt a much more polished look for *Indigestion*, in order to put the film in conversation with Hollywood cinema. *Limelight*, however, is a degraded image through the use of a broken television – which is its own form of technological differentiation from polished media display.

The use of broken technology, as in my use of a large broken television, is a move in art that seems to celebrate the disruption of technological progress. It seems apt that this particular television freezes images that appear in certain spots, and only slowly, painfully releases its grip, as if the TV does not want to allow time to progress normally. It is as if the TV is itself wanting to preserve the moment as it moves closer to its own continued deterioration and inevitable demise. The TV’s image is Gil, the main character in both pieces, who is presented as a life-size digital prisoner within the deteriorating multicolored space. Gil is in a green screen space, his aspiration, but to his dismay, he still cannot be seen since he is green as well. As the colors of the screen melt into each other and the screen melts Gil’s face, he is locked down, green on green like nothing on nothing. The green screen, again representing the hollowness of the digital celebrity, is literally a nothing-maker. Instead of making stars, it hides populations inside itself.

¹² Julio García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. MacKenzie, Scott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

When the screen is white, silver or clear, images are projected onto it beyond its control. It can only receive and reflect. The white movie screen, like the green screen, is not the aggressor. It is another victim like Gil, like the audience. The silver screen cannot pick what it reflects, just as the green screen cannot pick what images are to replace it. The multitude of screens we use, clear screens like televisions, tablets, smartphones, etc., are also receivers in this way. Gil, like the television, is at the mercy of the image production machine, which is the engine of ideology and greenbacks.

The eye is our primary connecting point to culture (superstructure, ideology, etc.) in combination with the ear. A film is a similar experience to consciousness: individual “images” presented to a viewer (or to itself). The illusion of motion is a constructed, mediated representation of reality through a camera and projector. This illusion is recreated mechanically, through the use of the projector for inert still images. The very nature of the mechanism demands it to be concealed, mimicking consciousness through the hidden artificiality of the projection and the seamlessness of continuity editing.¹³ The screen, like a mirror, is a reflection of the self. According to Jacques Lacan, the “mirror stage” is a stage in a child’s development in which the child separates himself or herself from the external world.¹⁴ Recognizing oneself in the mirror creates a point of separation: the self from the other. This also establishes an unattainable ideal self. The image in the mirror can never be perfect, and the individual

¹³ Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” trans. Alan Williams. *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (1974): 39-47.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

will forever attempt to attain perfection. The cinematic mirror-screen is a *reflected* image, constructing a new self, controlled by the images on the screen.

The development of perspective in painting positioned a subject in front of a painting, where the sightlines would best replicate human vision. The orthagonals, or lines of perspective, directly mirror the sightlines from the eye to the painting.¹⁵ This constructs a subjectivity, an interiority, an idealized spatial relation that transcends the reality of the eye. With the introduction of the motion picture, the projection is coming from behind the subject, but in terms of ideology, the desires and interpretations of the spectator are metaphorically projected onto the screen as well. Like consciousness, cinema must always be an image of something, even if unrecognizable. In this way, it constructs a new conscious self, with a new eye. The viewer watching a film is simultaneously engrossed within the film, but also aware of the watching itself. This new “consciousness” is simply replacing his/her own for a short time.

Marshall McLuhan describes media as extensions of the human body.¹⁶ For McLuhan, a medium is a technological advance.¹⁷ In this scenario, cinema, or more precisely, the technology that makes cinema possible, would be an extension of the legs, developed out of the desire to capture human movement by inventor Eadweard Muybridge.¹⁸ The mechanisms that make the first cameras and projectors work were adapted from wheel technologies – themselves extensions feet – and were processes of forward propulsion, moving the film in small increments much like steps. With

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, First MIT Press Edition. (Cambridge, Mass, and London, The MIT Press, 1964, 1994), 7.

¹⁷ McLuhan, 7-9.

¹⁸ McLuhan, 182.

Internet technology becoming increasingly the vehicle for cinema, through distributors like Netflix, this is even truer. The Internet is essentially an extension of feet as well, allowing text and visual information to travel so fast that it is almost instantaneous. Instead of a trade route with carts, we have cables that channel our exchanges. However, another argument can be made about these technologies, especially as they fuse with television, as an extension of the eye. The eye argument, however, has as much to do with the content as with the technology, and McLuhan's definition of medium focuses on this technology. That said, cinematic technology is capturing *visual* information by design, no matter what the content of that information is.

THE NEW EYE

In David Cronenberg's postmodern body horror film *Videodrome* (1983), Professor Brian O'Blivion, calls the television the "retina of the mind's eye". He states:

The television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television... After all, there is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there?¹⁹

When a politically motivated video signal causes a tumor in his brain, O'Blivion suggests:

I believe that the growth in my head—this head, this one right here—I think that it is not really a tumor. Not an uncontrolled, undirected little bubbling pot of flesh, but that it is in fact a new organ. A new part of the brain... I had a brain tumor and I had visions. I believe the visions cause the tumor and not the reverse. I can feel the visions coalesce and become flesh. Uncontrollable flesh.²⁰

¹⁹ *Videodrome*, directed by David Cronenberg (1983), DVD.

²⁰ Ibid.

Cronenberg is tapping into a moment when videotape was new, and television was beginning to lose its innocent façade. Soon after the development of cinema, Dziga Vertov or other thinkers of his era began to see the cinematic apparatus as an augmentation or extension of human abilities – like a new organ, a distinctly *modern* organ.²¹ Vertov described the camera as a new eye that is able to see things we cannot normally see, calling it a “kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye. The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye.”²²

However, as with Vertov’s contemporaries, such as Sergei Eisenstein, his work has been made to seem naïve in reference to the rest of the twentieth century. Ideology and influence are the dark unintended consequence of the new organ. Ideology and war have not only changed how these images are read; they have changed how all images are read. The twentieth century introduced skepticism into these naively optimistic readings of cinema. The use of propaganda in media, for example, exposed how it could be used to indoctrinate, marginalize, reinforce and so on. In *Videodrome*, Cronenberg is using the metaphor of the mechanization of the human body more like Filippo Marinetti meant it than how Vertov meant it.²³ In fact, Cronenberg is most likely

²¹ At the start of the cinema, these technological advances were viewed favorably by many other theorists too, including Sergei Eisenstein, Bela Balasz and Rudolf Arnheim, discussing techniques such as slow motion that allow us to experience reality in a new way, and editing which allows linguistic thought-processes to play out in purely visual and later audiovisual form.

²² Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1985), 15.

²³ F. T. Marinetti and R. W. Flint, *Marinetti, Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

channeling Marinetti through J.G. Ballard, who wrote *Crash*. Cronenberg made a film adaptation of *Crash* thirteen years after *Videodrome*.

In his vision of a car-crash with the actress, Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts-by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films, by the identical wounds inflicted on their bodies, by the image of windshield glass frosting around her face as she broke its tinted surface like a death-born Aphrodite, by the compound fractures of their thighs impacted against their handbrake mountings, and above all by the wounds to their genitalia, her uterus pierced by the heraldic beak of the manufacturer's medallion, his semen emptying across the luminescent dials that registered for ever the last temperature and fuel levels of the engine.²⁴

In this excerpt, the slow motion ability of film is used to illustrate how technology can be an extension of human body. Cronenberg took this idea and applied it to the mind and contemporary media. If television and its associated contemporary media constitute a new organ, could it be construed to be a collective stomach rather than an eye? Consuming media is not simply a process of absorption but rather one of digestion.

HOLLYWOOD, MEDIA, AND DIGESTION

In *Indigestion*, the river Styx is filled with a commoditized pink fluid. This underworld environment is the reality behind the illusion of the digital image composite, which is made possible by the use of a green screen. This lime green is the most common color for chromakey replacement. Because of the media's role in an ever-engrossing commodity culture, it thereby becomes our primary life replacement. With it, consumers can dream of this limelight and the transition from a person to a commodity

²⁴ J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (New York: Picador, 2001), 9.

– the ultimate achievement in celebrity.²⁵ “Consumer” is a term for a digesting member of society. Notice that consumption and digestion connotes the depletion of resources and excretion of unusable waste. It is a process of reducing resources until these resources are merely yesterday’s excrement. “Reality” is thus a term for a genre of fictional, scripted television programs featuring tomorrow’s celebrity excrement. As this process gains traction, reality loses its meaning. Celebrity status can now be conceded to commodity-obsessed hoarders, teenagers making poor life choices, and even criminals running from the law. In fact, these momentary celebrities play musical chairs daily on twenty-four hour news cycles. Reporters, in front of blue screens, are hollow placeholders, giving and stripping away momentary fame. The new stars are then digested by viewers. CGI culture allows us to cut ourselves out and place ourselves into impossible situations, allowing us to act out our ultimate fantasies, including the fantasy of fame. Who does not want to be one of the lucky few?

Why do so many of us have a latent or blatant desire for fame? Why has renown grown so tightly woven into ideas of success? The issues I am addressing in this video are the widespread desire for fame, especially fifteen minutes of fame²⁶ through crime, etc. that is openly encouraged in American and Americanized cultures.²⁷ Pepto-Bismol becomes the elixir of fame, given by Gil’s friend, Eric, during a meeting concerning Gil’s script. Eric promises to show Gil’s script to his Hollywood agent. The process of

²⁵ Andy Warhol refers to watching a star in a movie as “eat[ing] him up.” See: Benjamin Buchloh, “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966.” *October Files 2*. Ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 28.

²⁶ The term was coined by Andy Warhol, who wrote: “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes” for an exhibition in 1968. See: Jeff Guin and Douglas Perry, *The Sixteenth Minute: Life in the Aftermath of Fame* (Penguin, 2005), 4.

²⁷ Also, see: Buchloh, 28.

digestion is completed as the film concludes when he walks on the Pepto-Bismol river. This action is instantaneously revealed as fake and a fantasy.

THE ABSURD AND THE SURREAL

In the café scene, Gil tells his friend Eric that his screenplay is not incoherent; it is “magic realism.” According to Oxford English Dictionary, “magic realism” is defined as a literary genre in which “realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with... elements of dream or fantasy.”²⁸ Eric suggests that Gil should make it more dream-like and call it Surrealism, which Oxford defines as “a twentieth-century avant-garde movement in art and literature that sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.”²⁹ This distinction is slight at best, and difficult to place in the work. The primary difference here is the association with the unconscious mind, particularly viewed through Freudian theory, and a specific group of writers and artists. This association gives it artistic validity. Magic realism is often lumped into the fantasy genre while Surrealism is not. Another difference in definitions is the importance of narrative in magic realism. This is the other significance of Eric’s comment. Saying to make it more “dream-like and call it Surrealism,” is not just associating it with an established artistic canon, it is suggesting less causal relationships and thus an instruction to weaken the narrative. While the same elements could exist in either, magic realism is viewed as just narrative with fantasy, but Surrealism is creative and artistically acceptable irrationality.

²⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “magic realism.”

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Surrealism.”

Albert Camus describes our relationship with irrationality in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. “Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”³⁰ The absurd is a necessary part of the surreal and a strong thematic element in *Indigestion*. Almost every image has an irrational twist to the mundane environment in which the characters exist. For example, Gil bathes in hot chocolate rather than water and drinks Pepto-Bismol recreationally (fig. 16, 17). Absurdity and the surreal are the calling card for several filmmakers that have inspired my work. From the surreal landscape and soundscape in *Eraserhead* (1977), to the drifting identity of *Lost Highway* (1997), to the creation of fantasy ‘realities’ in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), David Lynch’s unique vision has shaped the way I think about and make movies.

While the absurd is a potent existential concept, it is also the basis for certain types of humor. Roy Andersson, Jacques Tati and Luis Bunuel are auteurs who have been able to collapse the two uses into a single moment of film. Roy Andersson’s films are solemn and existentialist – but the same moments that embody this are also the funniest. With Andersson and Tati, the immense existential cliff is visually present, overwhelming the characters with emptiness. Bunuel’s *Phantom of Liberty* (1974) uses surrealist absurdity to make us laugh, but also question the fabric that holds rationality in place. With all three filmmakers, actions do not have distinct consequences, only the cold arbitrariness of the universe bearing down on them. Each uses this space for performance in physical comedy, which I posit is different but equivalent to performance art. Buster Keaton is clearly an influence on these filmmakers.

³⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

My own work is intended to be in conversation with these filmmakers. Physical and surreal comedy has been part of my work since the first film I made as an undergraduate in 2009. A good example of this is the final sequence in *Indigestion*, where Gil turns to look at the camera, and after a pause, the man in the green screen suit turns to look too. The timing and weirdness of this moment consistently cause laughter in the viewer (fig. 13).



Figure 16: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)



Figure 17: Joshua Thorud, still from *Indigestion* (2015)

PERFORMANCE AND FLUX

I imagine some of my film as documentation of performances. When sucking milk off the floor with a straw, I actually fulfilled this task and proceeded to eat cereal with the actual half-and-half and milk mixture from the floor. The idea is still revolting to me, and the footage is difficult to watch. I actually drank too much Pepto-Bismol in the café scene and felt sick from it. Because I wrote the script, however, I thought it would be disingenuous to fake it. In this way, I am inverting the structure of method acting. The method actor puts himself into a mind and conditions of the character. Instead, I am fitting the character into the reality of my own situation, into my performance. Many previous works have dealt directly with performance. In *Body-Object* (2014), I directly interacted with various objects in unusual ways, eventually destroying them through play. In *How to: Become Invisible* (2014), I performed as amateur enthusiast, attempting to fly in my green screen suit in front of a green screen. In each, I was channeling Bruce Nauman and Charles Ray as well as Buster Keaton.

The climax, sucking milk from the floor through a straw, is the breaking point for the character. His desire and failure culminate in the unusual task of putting spilled milk back into the jug, which is painstaking and ultimately futile. For Gil, the intertwining fantasies of finding success in order to escape what he sees as a meaningless life of anonymous normalcy, as exemplified in his vision of Joan, finally meets up with his reality as Joan rings the doorbell and inspires Gil to attempt the impossible. This delusion of celebrity and purpose, though, is itself only an illusion. It is a false digital mimicry.

This illusion, the river, is a potent metaphor. Rivers are seen as both thresholds and viaducts, borders and channels. Styx is the mythical boundary to the underworld, but also embodies the transformation from life to death. One river can be a contested national border and also a necessary trade route. In this case, it is both a personal wall to climb and also an esophagus swallowing Gil whole. And ultimately, the passage is interrupted by the real truth. This video and this life are a fabrication, behind layers and layers of fakery.

HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND GHOSTLY PRESENCE

John Smith, a filmmaker whose work has influenced mine, once wrote about his experience of memory:

The earliest event I can remember occurred when I was about six months old. It was a sunny afternoon and I was lying in my pram in the garden. The man who lived in the flat upstairs was relaxing a few feet away in his deckchair. I dropped my teddy bear from the pram and the man reluctantly got up and gave it back to me. After he returned to his seat I deliberately dropped it again and he, irritated, got up and handed it back to me for a second time. I continued the game, dropping my teddy again and again, which became more and more amusing as the man became increasingly disgruntled. This is obviously an unreliable or possibly constructed memory but what fascinates me about it is that I remember it shot-by-shot. First, a wide establishing shot: pram and man in garden. Then, a medium close-up: baby drops teddy from pram. A medium shot (baby's point of view) follows: man gets up from deckchair and approaches baby/camera. Unless I was born with an innate knowledge of filmic conventions, my memory, if accurate, has been reconfigured within a filmic structure. Dreams, of course, are often remembered in the same way. It is a testament to the terrifying power of illusionistic cinema that it can reshape memory into a filmic form.³¹

In this quote, Smith is getting to the heart of the connection between cinema, memory and identity. Does cinema structure memory and, by extension, identity? Or is cinema

³¹ John Smith. "Life in Film: John Smith." *Frieze Magazine* (Oct. 2010).

structured to resemble the way our memory and identity operate? Either way, these three are very closely connected.

History is a word often associated with obsolescence. However, I would argue that more often than obsolescence, history means narrative, identity, and explanation, terms that connote the opposite: now-ness, creation, and discovery. In this way, history is more than just a chronology. It is instead a structure. In terms of my work (and other works of art), I am interested in the application of history, particularly with relation to the narrativization of seemingly disparate events, images, etc., into a cohesive identity or understanding. This structure is true in relation to our concepts of personal identity, but also in terms of the way a story is told. A film functions in much the same way as a life, and we re-contextualize our past into a history that resembles a film almost exactly, in order for us to perceive ourselves as a cohesive whole, as a singular identity ('I'). Gil takes Joan's place in the car, assuming her identity as a metaphor for a change in his character. Joan is really more of a fantasy, and the scenes with her in it are in Gil's imagination, the ghost of his ambition.

Our interaction with a spirit or ghost is primarily described visually, as evidenced by using the word "apparition." In other words, it is nearly always an appearance or "sighting" of a ghost. The history of spirit photography, the capturing of supernatural phenomena in photographs, and the surprising prevalence of cable television programs dedicated to searching out ghosts emphasizes not just the sight, but also the image-making process; not just a ghost but a ghost-like image.

The escape of death is manifested in image making. We do not discuss phantoms in terms of meeting them or experiencing them, but on seeing them since our

visual sense is considered our most trustworthy way of reporting a skeptical phenomenon. Even before the advent of photography, death masks were cast in wax to physically capture the deceased's face, which is similarly escaping death by capturing the image of one's visual appearance. It would seem that one of the primary indexes of our identity, at least a post-death identity, is mediated visually.

Andre Bazin posits this in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in which he discusses the birth of cinema. He argues that cinema was born the moment that humans began to make reproductions of themselves as little statues to include in tombs.³² That is, cinema was born with the invention of self-representation as a form of self-preservation. Representation is a kind of afterlife, a celluloid clone. Especially in the modern world, it leads one to wonder if we are constantly subject to representations of ourselves endlessly perpetuated into the global network, do we ever die? Will we pray for our own obsolescence in the face of a hellish immortality? Is the goal of fame immortality? If so, why would anyone want it?

CONCLUSION

My practice and conceptual development has significantly shifted in my time in graduate school. This thesis paper is meant to document those changes, as well as explain the social, artistic and cultural precedents for my thesis show, *Limelight & Indigestion*. My time at Virginia Commonwealth University has been fruitful, and I feel that I have considerably grown as an artist and as a person. Perhaps this growth is reflected in the main thrust of the thesis show, namely an investigation into the societal

³² Andre Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Trans. Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960), 4-5.

desire for fame. I have finally come to terms with my own part in this desire, and the show is centered on moving past any final vestiges of this desire in me. George Packer, in an opinion article in the *New York Times*, aptly describes celebrity culture and commodity, and how the situation specifically applies to now:

What are celebrities, after all? They dominate the landscape, like giant monuments to aspiration, fulfillment and overreach. They are as intimate as they are grand, and they offer themselves for worship by ordinary people searching for a suitable object of devotion... They loom larger in times like now, when inequality is soaring and trust in institutions — governments, corporations, schools, the press — is falling... The celebrity monuments of our age have grown so huge that they dwarf the aspirations of ordinary people, who are asked to yield their dreams to the gods: to flash their favorite singer's corporate logo at concerts, to pour open their lives (and data) on Facebook, to adopt Apple as a lifestyle.³³

Celebrities are not going away. While there is a chance to be one, it is miniscule in comparison to the desire to be one. Unfortunately, their presence is merely as figureheads for corporations and as mascots for rugged individualism and capitalism, in general. Packer is really asking: What are celebrities beyond signposts for socioeconomic inequality?

³³ George Packer, "Celebrating Inequality," *The New York Times* (May 19, 2013).

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