(and i can't stress this enough) in my mouth: Extradiegetic Affect as Material

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(and i can’t stress this enough) in my mouth: Extradiegetic Affect as Material

by C. Klockner

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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(and i can’t stress this enough) in my mouth: Extradiegetic Affect as Material
by C. Klockner, Master of Fine Arts

(and i can’t stress this enough) in my mouth: Extradiegetic Affect as Material is a non-linear exploration into the structures of feeling that exist in relation to cinema in its role as a technology for generating subjectivity. In the development of this research, a proposal of cinema’s likeness to the ecological circulation of microplastics is drawn in order to illustrate cinema’s materiality and nearly invisible ubiquity. The notion of extradiegetic affect is outlined as a post-cinematic condition in which lived experience becomes secondary to cinematic representation and which, simultaneously, becomes directly shaped by engaging with these representations.
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The wishing well watches TV in the basement of its parents’ house in suburban Ohio. It’s 2004; the well is 13. It stays up until it can’t see straight. The glow from the television is a soft blue flicker and illuminates the acne on its face. It flips channels between Newlyweds: Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson on MTV and the other 70 or so channels. It sees that the film What Women Want starring Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt is playing on TBS, and it chooses to keep watching while flipping back to MTV during commercials to catch Nick and Jessica because they are sexy plastic dolls. Both programs give it an erection, which it cultivates. The well watches the whole movie. It doesn’t know how it feels about the movie. It keeps the lights off because one night, it kept them on and stayed up late talking to friends on AOL instant messenger and looking at pornography when its Dad came down and yelled at it, waking its sister up to tell her that it was still awake “at this hour.”

The basement was an office for the well’s mom before the well moved down from the second floor. At the time, the basement was unfinished with raw concrete floors. When her office moved upstairs, they painted the floors a deep evergreen color so it felt like a finished room. When the well’s bare feet touched the floor, it could feel its body’s warmth being pulled down into the concrete through the heel of its foot. The sounds of rats scratching away between the walls and the foundation was audible only when the TV shut off and television muttering was replaced by the crisp whistle of the CRT cooling off.

It was in the basement where the well started to feel the weight of having all edges exposed, some sort of early, non-languaged sense of phallo-exhaustion. In a series of attempts to be penetrated, it discreetly searched for various accessible items that allowed its body to receive rather than exert, feeling like every inch of external skin was chafed raw from contact with the world. One encounter: an uninstructed introduction to “sounding.” For the unfamiliar, sounding is the insertion of a narrow metal object up the urethra performed as sexual play. The household object that the well had access to was a handheld, portable air pump for inflating sports balls – a 2-3 inch chrome needle that could be slipped inside of an erect penis.

There was a deep sense of shame and excitement as it learned how to penetrate its penis. And also a physical sensation that was strange and uncomfortable, something it only repeated a few times. The last time the well performed this penetration on itself, it discovered that squeezing the inflation pump created a brief pocket of pressure that released back out the urethra. Unsealed against the sides of the
metal needle, there was a gap for the stream of air to release easily. Like a dog chasing its tail, it created a seal around the tip by making a circle with its thumb and index finger. Squeezing the pump with its right hand, there was a muted transmission of gas that seemed to travel into its body with an unfamiliar speed and pressure. It tensed up and could immediately feel the familiar adrenaline of having done something stupid. Blood rushed to its face and to its cock.

Alone, sweating with shame, the well slowly removed the pump until the tip emerged from the urethra. It set the pump aside. It was certain it would have to tell someone what it had done, imagining a scene of the perverted shame compounded by the distinct, but equally immersive, shame of stupidity. Not sure if it had hurt itself, the well examined itself and became aware of a pressure inside its pelvis that caused its stomach to drop in fear. It opened the toilet lid and started to urinate. It watched as a frothy mixture of air and piss foamed around the head of its penis, building up until gravity took a mass of froth with it, tumbling down through the air and landing with an unsatisfying *fuh* in the pool of water below. Slowly, the well’s bladder exhausted its contents and it cleaned the head. It washed the ball pump. It returned the pump to its location in a wicker basket with the other sports items. It went back to its bedroom and turned on the television.

0.

The bodies we call “Tom Hanks” and “Meg Ryan” can be seen falling in love in four major motion pictures between the years 1990 and 2016. This realization can trigger a series of mad questions. The first dots to connect elicit casual amusement: *You’ve Got Mail* (1998, dir. Nora Ephron) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993, dir. Nora Ephron) as equally iconic snapshots of the general stability experienced by white professionals in the US between global economic depressions, or perhaps between AIDS and 9/11. That each work falls within Nora Ephron’s RomCom canon certainly connects the two as well, but the discovery of *Joe versus the Volcano* (1990, dir. John Shanley) is more surreal, bringing these instances of avatar resonance towards a dazed equilibrium. The latest introduction of *Ithaca* (2016, dir. Meg Ryan) ties a knot in this rhythmically repeating, iconic relationship.

The questions snowball into increasingly absurd versions of themselves: which of these depicted worlds is meant to be our own? Do the timelines take place in parallel universes, or do these characters, falling in love repeatedly, time and time again, populate a cycle of reincarnation that continues to spin within a single linear timeline? Perhaps within that linear timeline, so many thousands of years pass from one of these narratives to the next that entire civilizations have risen and subsequently collapsed so that the reincarnation of the immortal beings that we call “Meg Ryan” and “Tom Hanks” never see the

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1 A framing proposed by artist Christopher Ho.

2 As these characters contend with (and get overwhelmed, as referents, by) images of themselves in the world, a blur occurs between “Meg Ryan as Meg Ryan,” “Meg Ryan as Annie Reed,” “Meg Ryan as Annie Reed as Kathleen Kelly”, and so on. A sensibility of “dry camp” becomes a useful way for understanding these named bodies as perfect caricatures of themselves, that is,
material culture of their past civilizations, let alone the ephemera of previous iterations of their relationships. Undisturbed, these bodies find each other again and again, always destined to fall in love, forever. Or do they simply become disembodied, archetypal surrogates for the ideal cis-hetero, white, well-off romance?


I can speculate on these movies or research the relevant industry relationships within Hollywood at the time of production for each of these films. Some reasonable conclusions we might come to: a working relationship was successful; there was “chemistry”; the market was ripe. As likely as any of these answers might be, none explains what to do with the resulting manufactured landscape: one in which the subjectivity of cinematic narrative replaces any single lived experience. How much “Meg Ryan” is in the glass of water I drank this morning? How much “Tom Hanks” is in an ant? In this, I’m less interested in causes than I am in effects. These images, these stories, and their methods for constructing affect bleed into the world. They become embedded in the shower I take in the morning, in the cereal I eat in the kitchen, in the way I giggle at a joke that a coworker makes.

An audience doesn’t only see the *You’ve Got Mail* versions of “Tom Hanks” and “Meg Ryan” repeatedly fall in love in replay after replay, we see the “Hanks” and “Ryan” avatars through the filter of spectacle, seeing their first kiss from the vantage point of multiple cameras in multiple universes and rearticulations of their nearly immortal bodies.

The ways in which these images penetrate contemporary subjectivity are familiar in other, more readily observable fields. One example: the ecological study of plastics that reveals the ways in which this material cycles through an environment, breaks down, and becomes inseparable from the natural world. The classical model might center the production of large, cheap plastic products that get produced using injection molding processes, that then travel to a consumer before later continuing on to a landfill before fragmenting into smaller and smaller shards that go on to circulate through an environment as they disintegrate. The contemporary model of plastic circulation points towards something more ouroboric: the

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a version of camp that gets dialed in for everyday performance against an archetype (which gets concretized by its failure). In Sontag’s notes on camp: “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.” “Dry camp” sheds some of camp’s inherent connections with a sort of “extravagance that fails” (most immediately associated with 20th century cis-gay culture) by reevaluating what feels over-the-top. The daily drag performance that occurs at a workplace might be dry camp, and it is not as fun as pure “camp.”
manufacturing of microbeads, which, before their US outlawing in 2015, were produced as microscopic plastic particles (less than one millimeter in their largest dimension) for suspension in high-viscosity skincare treatments and functioned as a mild abrasive/exfoliant that rubbed away at built up oils while scrubbing facial pores. Produced at a scale similar to that of the microplastics that circulate as pollution after the classical manufacturing process, a blur between waste and commodity occurs here.

Much of this process goes unobserved, but it is possible to point to some sort of anonymous start point and end point—poly-products are manufactured and then end up everywhere, permeating all natural and manufactured material at a microscopic level. More recent microbead models of production insert new material on a scale most familiar as pollution. These products more immediately transition between market shelf and ecosystem. But consumers operate within this ecosystem: two recent New York Times pieces cite studies that show that microplastics have recently been observed both in the human gut (in a pilot study with a small sample size) as well as in the air. Brief headlines about a trash island in the Pacific used to elicit feelings of guilt, but now they bring about feelings of empathy since I am partially composed of microplastics, as well. I continue to consume them; I shit them out, too.

The presence of microplastics in both the broader environment as well as in the subjects that consume them indicates a dynamic of simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility familiar to that in a landscape of cinema and its byproducts. As subjects become constructed by this material, they secrete it as waste, through the methods in which they frame experience, through the cinematic canons that anchor their lived experience, in the shared references through which they identify cultural kin. These microplastics exist in the gut as accidental consumptions of the same material that might be used for certain prosthetics such as glasses and prosthetic legs (which later become waste and breakdown into microplastics which may be consumed later by a different subject). This breakdown process in which objects steadily increase in entropy is recognizable on a celestial level, but the feedback loop in which that process takes places becomes more specific to culture and microplastics.

At an international summit held in Singapore between North Korea and the US in June 2018, President Donald Trump presented to Chairman Kim Jong Un an untitled film. The four minute video was a simulation of a movie trailer; it employed the refined aesthetic language of an overly earnest action-drama movie. In this recognizable visual language and structure, a montage cuts between scenes of industry, people, performances, cultural events, and workplaces in a method that recalls the 1982 experimental and

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3 The label microbead is distinct from the term “microplastics,” which categorizes plastic bits less than 5mm in their longest dimension.
eco-minded film *Koyaanisqatsi*, but with the overlay of a dramatic voice actor on top of its universalized imagery contrasted with the insertion of various military images as warning. The film itself, reflecting on the peace talks between the two countries, ends on a cliffhanger, “One moment; one choice; what if...the future remains to be written?”

Though the film is credited to a production company titled “Destiny Pictures,” Garrett Marquis, a representative from the US National Security Council, explained after the press event that, “The video was created by the National Security Council to help the president demonstrate the benefits of complete denuclearization, and a vision of a peaceful and prosperous Korean peninsula.”

2.

In his text *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro outlines a theory towards the development of “structures of feeling” in time-based media since the turn of the 21st century.  

In this theory, “cinema” becomes the titular anchor point, but it does so only in order to play the role of the outmoded media context. He asks, “Why ‘post-cinematic’? Film gave way to television as a ‘cultural dominant’ a long time ago, in the mid-twentieth century; and television in turn has given way in recent years to computer-and network-based, and digitally generated, ‘new media.’ Film itself has not disappeared, of course; but filmmaking has been transformed, over the past two decades, from an analog process to a heavily digitized one.”

The broader gesture, he explains, is to develop an account of “what it feels like to live in the early 21st century.”

Shaviro’s project of mapping affect in new media holds weight at a time in which moving image as a whole has become the broader “cultural dominant,” leaving the material world as connective fiber that links various virtual platforms, communities, and media types. In this, the post-cinematic media he references often depicts a relationship with the very technology that is being employed to produce that media and functions as a technology which not only affects but actually generates the interiority of depicted subjects (while simultaneously generating/affecting its audience subjects). This notion interfaces with a related technological determinism that theorizes that a society’s technology determines (or broadly shapes) that society’s social and cultural values. Shaviro explains: “Films and music videos, like other media works, are *machines for generating affect*, and for capitalizing upon or extracting value from, this affect... They generate subjectivity, and they play a crucial valorization of capital.”

Referencing the work of Jonathan Beller, Shaviro points towards the way that an older Marxist framework of the superstructure (ideology)/base (production) relationship shifts to position the cinematic as a productive entity, if it is considered as the extraction of surplus labor power in an attention economy.

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6 A term he pulls from Raymond Williams.
8 Ibid, 2.
9 Ibid, 2-3.
10 Ibid, 2-3.
Shaviro goes forward to introduce an affectual dimension to this notion, while also arguing that the differences between a post-cinematic production model and a cinematic model are significant.

Shaviro’s outlined field of the post-cinematic “cultural dominant” remains limited, however, as it frames itself primarily within the question of the digital tools of new media production (still, an undoubtedly useful framework of technological affect determinism) without interrogating the ways in which subjects still very much live inside of the cinematic. An expanded materialism of cinema includes all of its physical media, every impression it has made, every movie reference exchanged in a social setting, every fashion choice inspired by a movie scene, and so on. Beyond the distribution effects of a cinematic hegemony, cinema’s formal methods for constructing narrative, emotional connection, and subsequent subjectivity become so deeply entrenched in a public sphere, it becomes difficult to point towards entities that the cinematic has not shaped. This notion becomes symbiotic with the ways in which ideology coalesces with affect in order to script subject performance.

In contrast to Shaviro’s argument, which approaches structures of feeling primarily as they relate to those recent depictions of screen-oriented and virtual space using produced using digital tools, I’m interested in the diffusion of cinema (as sensibility, as physical media, as ecology) as if it were a microplastic, as a hyperobject that continuously affects the bodies in which it resides. This material enters into the world and diffuses until there are few corners that don’t carry fairly high part-per-million levels of some sort of cinematic saturation. In this, the most culturally dominant form of media that affects structures of feeling lies not in those contemporary production tools and the increasingly casual accessibility of screen-based moving image, but rather in the cinema that has been culturally and individually internalized by a Euro-Western population (as well as imperialistically deployed outside of a euro-western population). This cinema, separated from its box office weekend and examined as it remains in bargain bins, as it populates the corners of webstreaming platforms, as it replays in a subject’s mind, as it replays on cable television, as it circulates in momentary social references, has both unconsciously shaped subjectivity and come to overshadow personal experience as something that is “secondary” in the conscious mind. Distinct from Shaviro’s post-cinematic affect, this development is best described as extradiegetic affect, that is, the structures of feeling that get constructed by cinema’s formal tactics when they work in tandem with the adoption of cinematic representation as primary experience.

As a result of these conditions, primary experience gets framed within the terms of the screen, and its quality is evaluated in terms of cinema’s tactics for assigning emotion upon that experience. Cinematic conventions are deployed in real life in order to dramatize the excruciating dryness of the real

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11 Beller identifies cinema as a sort of machine that extracts surplus labor-power from an audience in the form of paid attention in his text The Cinematic Mode of Production. This works in part towards the notion that “the circulation and consumption of commodities is effected largely through the circulation and consumption of moving images, provided by film and its successor media” (Shaviro, 152) but resonates towards a more contemporary media model, in which audience members are commodities that advertisers pay platforms for access to.

12 The term hyperobject is one laid out by Timothy Morton in reference to the total accumulation of any one material in the universe.
world. In that, the “movie” is no longer the only place where subjects experience the cinematic as they shift towards media such as “bingeworthy” television, video games, and social media. These new platforms are constructed within a cinematic hegemony, however, and can be difficult to separate from the logics that they are immersed in. Media theorist Henry Jenkins describes media made obsolete: “History teaches us that old media never die—and they don’t even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content—the 8-track, the Beta tape. These are what media scholars call delivery technologies.”

The sublime moment of absorbing media for “the first time” gets overwhelmed by that media’s internalization along with its circulation throughout the world, so a question regarding specific delivery technologies begins to lose some significance. In this, cinema and its logics remains the demarcation of “quality” within the whole field of moving image. While transitions in delivery technology move towards video streaming and as social media opens up new possibilities in identifying the complexities of affect, still, cinematic logics persist. Even simple formal decisions reveal clear threads: new television such as Aziz Ansari’s Master of None receives praise for its decision to emulate film through its 16x9 frame ratio. Similarly: while a platform like social media amplifies a newly accessible phenomenon of personal branding, the cinematic logic of extracting and capitalizing upon affect, character construction, and aesthetics functions as the foundation that social media is built upon. In moments like this, reexamining the normalization of these non-neutral methods for constructing affect becomes incredibly important.

2.5

Shaviro’s categorization of the post-cinematic relies on the introduction of digital production and of the depiction of screen-oriented space. There’s an implication that the unrepresentable quality of the early 21st century is, in part, based on the virtual component of the spaces that do get depicted, but the qualities of the virtual are distinct from the qualities of the digital, and have a much broader history than that of the digital despite the ways in which digital platforms amplify the tangibility of virtual realities. This blurs the distinction between the cinematic and the post-cinematic, along with the pre-cinematic.

In this conversation, geographic virtualities (i.e. accessing both people, crises, and resources that exist elsewhere in the world, accessing spatial virtualities that exist nowhere) become distinct from temporal virtualities (history, memory, etc), affectual virtualities (the world filtered through feeling), and quantitative virtualities (value, waged labor). In geographic virtualities (which Shaviro might be most readily pointing towards in reflecting on what it feels like to exist in the 21st century), access to participatory

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13 Amongst many cinematic tactics, the conventions and stylistic developments of applying soundtrack to scenery as extra-diegetic framing is the most explicit and recognizable form this takes.
14 Described in an earlier text of mine titled “Hooked On Phonics: affect and erotics while struggling to write”, the refinement of meme logics and aesthetics is most distilled in its ability to use poor imagery, perverse empathy, and performed immediacy in order to navigate new combinations of comedy and affect and, in turn, generate a new shared sensibility of emotion.
media has granted identity to an array of different communities that have otherwise been atomized and isolated from subjects of a similar kind (both constructing new shared identities as well as new shared emotions). This increasingly decentralized notion of community has all but defined the way that an individual locates identity today, and this technology works both ways, politically: increased access to subjects of a similar kind emboldens both the vulnerable and the hegemonic. M. Ambedkar’s text *The Aesthetics of the Alt-Right* analyzes the way that a familiar tool of fascism, the aestheticization of politics, gets deployed by post-internet neo-fascists; on the other hand, Dossie Easton’s text *The New Topping Book* analyzes the way that the internet’s increased accessibility in the the 90s connected and empowered previously isolated sexual minorities, such as queer communities and BDSM advocates.1516

Social media technology enables these updated methods of generating identity, but the development of new kinds of networks (along with new interfaces for interacting with those networks) is not new, nor are the ways that these virtual connections affect perceived locale/community. Cinema, along with many non-digital entities, also functions as a virtuality in its capacity as depicted space and subject matter that is filtered through feeling.

One pre-digital virtuality can be observed in the introduction of the railroad train. In his text “Rail Road Space and Rail Road Time,” Wolfgang Schivelbusch explains the spatial effect collectively experienced in response to the introduction of the railroad in the 19th century. Trains, at the time of their unveiling, could reach speeds of 20-30 miles per hour—roughly three times the speed achieved by the alternative transportation option, stagecoach. While the most direct effect of this industrial development results in an updated sense of feasible destinations, the increased speed of transit doesn’t merely translate to increased convenience in transit. Instead, the decreased temporal gap between locations translated into a perceived shrinking of physical space. In an 1839 article in the *Quarterly Review*, the author explains that, “As distances were thus annihilated, the surface of our country would, as it were, shrivel in size until it became not much bigger than one immense city.” In reality, we understand that the world has stayed the same size, but increased access reshapes a mental cartography that communities build of their surroundings.17

What becomes foregrounded in these accounts, in which physical space gets mentally manipulated, is a *pre-digital virtuality*. Elizabeth Grosz builds on this concept in her 2001 text *Architecture From The Outside*: “The invention of electronically generated media does not introduce us for the first time to virtuality but rather renders virtuality more graphic.”18 She expands the notion of the virtual as she points not towards that 19th century locomotive as an instance of industrialization, but towards even older

technologies: letter writing, reading, and painting become points of references as items of constructed, imaginary, and mutable spaces. These become key sites of pre-digital virtuality.

With Grosz’s proposal in mind, the definition of virtuality can be further fleshed out. Proust describes the virtuality of memory as “Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.” Manuel Delanda references the introduction of paper currency, not e-currency or cryptocurrency, as the virtualization of money. The development of the term “cyberspace” in William Gibson’s 1984 *Neuromancer* describes this particular graphic virtuality as it was first imagined: “Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.” Abstracting this description through association, one might point towards the Cyclorama: introduced in 1787, the cyclorama was a cylindrical panorama that approached painting as something that surrounded a viewer, rather than as a window for a viewer to peer into. These instances reveal the ways in which a public has a fairly well established relationship with the virtual.

This expanded notion of virtuality relies on a sensibility of romanticism, and becomes a foundation of the cinematic which, later, becomes more graphically depicted in the post-cinematic. Moments like the introduction of speed (through the development of the railroad) become dramatic instances of a shared illusion that the world actually shrinks in size in comparison to what one can reach without that technology. In that, virtuality is a key component of a lineage that, from pre- to post-cinematic, generates subjectivity. The introduction of cinema brings with its virtuality a distribution network that displaces primary experience for a secondary one, while more efficiently generating subjectivity through the development of its methods of affect manipulation.

2.7 tactics of cinema

Beyond the ubiquity of its distribution, the development of cinema becomes marked by a series of formal and technological refinements that coalesce to generate the interiority of cinematic-subjects. In this, a possible framework for recognizing cinematic development can be described in three distinct stages in terms of a camera/viewer relationship: first, *camera as machine*; second, *camera as theatre audience*; third, *camera as ghost*. The distinguishing elements between these stages are sometimes concrete shifts marked by technological development, but other elements are categorized more by formal ones.

2.8 camera as machine

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In the earliest films of the Lumiere brothers, the camera embodies the sight of a machine among machines. It is naturally attracted to industrial activity that chugs, belches, and grinds; the human subjects that it does happen to observe seem alien and unknowable. Depicted in their time, those human subjects remain modern ones: always in a group and always shaped by the technology that surrounds them. If these subjects display emotion, it is captured by the lens as something that occurs without impact and as something that is as or less important than the machinery that anchors these urban subjects.

In the form that these early films take, there is a question of how the lens captures or remains oblivious to affect. Comedy becomes a useful point of reference for this: artist David Robbins in his text Concrete Comedy theorizes that the development of the sensibility of deadpan humor can be directly linked to the industrial revolution. In this theory, the comedian roleplays as primitive machine, or as the object that is both unresponsive to and non-expressive of the social signs of affect. Some notes on deadpan: A deadpan machine that has failed feels no shame and has no idea that it has failed; it continues at full force into impending doom. Perhaps the most ubiquitous and fitting embodiment of a machine performing deadpan humor is the easily recreated spectacle of “cinder block in the dryer.” Video depictions of such consist of a two to five minute self-destruction sequence in which the unevenly balanced centrifugal force causes a dryer to shake so violently that the surfaces perform as “consumer-oriented” are ripped off, revealing a monstrous machine beneath. The dryer becomes a smoking, shaking, dumb object that dies without evoking pity.

The term deadpan, then, becomes a useful descriptor of the camera during this stage of cinema: it is drawn to deadpan objects and it is also a deadpan object. Still, as an object that offers sight from a disembodied perspective, it simultaneously carries key elements of a subject. In its machine-like capacity, it may incidentally capture emotion, but it will not respond to it. Points of reference here include the Lumiere Brothers’ 1896 film The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station along with Louis Le Prince’s 1888 Roundhay Garden Scene. Buster Keaton’s physical comedy functions as the epitome of deadpan comedy, or as the subject that acts like an object.

2.9 camera as theatre audience

The transition between camera as machine and camera as theatre audience is a slow gradation, occurring most significantly between 1915 and 1930. In this transition, the camera actually “sees” affect for the

23 Note that the development of this sensibility as well as the naming of this sense of humor are possibly distinct events. In a New York Times article titled “Slang of the Film Men” dated March 11, 1928, the first published description of the term “dead pan” is in print, and indicates that the terms linguistic origins lie in vernacular, rather than in publishing, history.
24 Other variations on the deadpan machine appear to double flip, embodying a machine acting like a human that acts like a machine. A 2007 youtube video titled “Heinz Automato 2” depicts a Heinz Ketchup bottle that has been rigged on top of remote control tank-treads but which also displays prosthetic, muscled arms that rapidly spin as the machine smothers a hot dog beneath a liter of ketchup.
first time, but it keeps a distance from its subjects similar to that which is maintained between audience and stage in a theatre setting. One argument goes: D.W. Griffith most significantly developed cinematic affect with the production and editing styles of his 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*. Despite its racist politics and its galvanization of the Ku Klux Klan, film critic James Agee explained that, “To watch [Griffith’s] work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man.”

Contemporary critics, amazingly, still attempt to isolate the film’s content from its form. The film’s importance to cinema is sinister and gestures toward a difficult pill to swallow: cinematic affectual conventions become incredibly manipulative and, perhaps appropriately, find their tactical origins here. The development of cinematic convention follows the function of this film as racist propaganda, and further, it embodies a key moment in the aestheticization of politics. The specific cinematic conventions that Griffith developed are tactics that are incredibly effective at capturing an audience and include continuity editing, the use of multiple cameras, and the 180-degree rule, but the introduction of sound becomes another touchstone in the camera’s capacity for carrying affect, marked by the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*. In this development, the shift towards immersive audio pushes the cinematic blur away from the deadpan and more clearly towards drama.

Not everyone saw these developments as benign. The 1929 release of *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov is positioned as something of a reflection on the first three decades of cinema, and more explicitly, as critique of film like that which Griffith developed, or what Vertov called “acted cinema.” This film relies on the deadpan nature of the camera as it images other technologies, the city, and the people that interface with both. The film becomes an immersive (but self-reflective) documentary of the filmmaker himself as he operates this machinery, and was framed in opposition to the very notion of narrative in cinema. This Marxist critique of “acted cinema” frames it as that which functioned as both pacifier and as vehicle for deploying ideology. In that context, Vertov names it the “new ‘opium of the people,’” and describes it as a tool that works like drunkenness, religion, or hypnosis, structured in order “to stuff such and such ideas, such and such conceptions into the subconscious.” In this critique of ideology, the superstructure/substructure framework becomes central but the role that affect plays in the construction of such narratives is mostly ignored.

2.91 camera as ghost

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The transition into *camera as ghost* primarily removes the theatrical distance developed and maintained in those earlier films. The treatment of cinema as a medium of its own and not, rather, as transposed theatre marks what becomes this third stage of cinema. Here, the affectual connection between the lens and its subjects becomes so intense, it becomes difficult to not become emotionally wound up in each character. The development of cinematic conventions such as the “over-the-shoulder” (OTS) dialogue shot and the refinement of sound design and foley techniques become reliable methods for building cinematic characters that are not only immersive, but emotionally demanding.

Further formal developments include an increased cut speed in cinema. Around the 1930s, the shot length in films averaged from 8–11 seconds. By the 80s, ASL rarely went past double digits, and recent measurements of ASL have dropped to 4.3-4.9 seconds. In more extreme instances, movies such as *Top Gun* and *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (each influenced by the proliferation of and formal qualities of music videos) marked ASLs ranging from 3–4 seconds. A simple formal shift like cut length has drastic effects on the way that these films are experienced; an audience that experiences a pummeling of images loses agency in the ability to remove themselves from depicted space. A rapid cut sequence functions as a somatic experience through its increased reliance on sensory input (as each cut requires a spatial reorientation of the viewer). As such, fast cuts interface more readily with an affectual space than with cognitive space. Observable increases in speed along with a closer intimacy between characters and audience makes it difficult for anyone to not be swept up in the tactics of cinema.

If this shift in cinema were to be illustrated in a film narrative, *Ghost* (1990) becomes something of a point of reference by showing, in its depiction of Patrick Swayze, resonating moments of converging intimacy. In the iconic early scene in which Swayze wheel-throws clay with Demi Moore from behind, the positioning of his body functions as a stand-in for the camera in an “over the shoulder” shot. Later, as a ghost, his ability to inhabit Whoopi Goldberg’s body along with his ability to travel as a disembodied, unnoticed entity echo the new capabilities of the camera in a post-1960s field of cinema.

In describing the history of these conventions, what is at stake? The permeation of these conventions, this distribution of imagery, and the resulting logics become so normalized, pointing towards their emergence is necessary for recognizing their positions as non-neutral. Returning to Vertov’s animosity towards “acted cinema,” the increasingly refined ability to orchestrate an audience through means of manipulating emotion is primarily used for promoting hegemonic ideologies (a notion that Slavoj Žižek develops in his *Pervert’s Guide* series). It is a combination of affect and ideology that determine subject.

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29 This becomes an important marker for the insertion of an affectual dimension into a superstructure/base critical framework.
scripting by determining the methods in which an audience should recognize emotion while simultaneously
determining how the audience feels about specific characters. In this context, it is the banal, popular films
that are more insidious than dramatically propagandic films; they politely normalize through absence of
shock and through an immersion of earnestness. In Gramsci’s terms, hegemony is built through
rearticulations, and seeing “Tom Hanks” and “Meg Ryan” repeatedly fall in love is a key site for this. In
these films, minute details determine, for an audience, which characters deserve empathy and which ones
deserve scorn. Through these methods, one encounters the values of a society.

Silence of the Lambs (1991) is a key point of reference for a cultural anchorpoint that combines
affect and ideology so efficiently that highly compressed, fragmented elements of the movie inevitably secrete into the world. For anyone not seeing this film in theatres in 1991, there is usually already some familiarity with several explicit references (“It rubs the lotion on its skin,” “Hello, Clarice,” and “Would you fuck me? I’d fuck me”); implicit references to this movie, on the other hand, might lie in the tone with which transfeminine people were referenced after 1991. In its most highly circulated scene, the film’s transfeminine antagonist, Buffalo Bill, dances erotically in a basement to the upbeat, synthpop hit “Goodbye Horses” by Q Lazzarus. The scene is iconic of cinematic horror; it perfectly profiles a hateable character.

Bill, in his representation, is framed as despicable in his position as serial killer, but he only becomes monstrous through what gets framed as his “perversion”: his failing attempt to become a woman. A line of dialogue clarifies the pre-op/post-op dualism that gets maintained within the film’s baseline sensibility: “Billy is not a real transsexual, but he thinks he is; he tries to be.” Because he’s not a “real woman,” he’s not only a monster but also a liar. His only redeeming quality is that he embodies a sadistic comic relief as the audience gets introduced to his basement dance scene. A montage consisting of close crops of his body, seen as he prepares to record himself, builds an erotic, affectual relationship between his character and the audience. He turns on a camcorder, and the audience’s non-diegetic camera merges with the diegetic one. The audience observes him fumble as he tucks himself, in doing so, they catch a sudden, pathetic look in his eyes as he looks towards the right edge of the screen, before backing away from the camera in order to fit into frame in a pose of femme high-evil vanity.

A combination of these elements and the minute instances of scorn that the camera projects upon Bill’s character is not so simple as a question of a positive/negative identity representation conversation, which I have less interest in. Instead, the pre-op/post-op dualism reinforces the problematic “common sense” position, that Bill can only become a woman through Western medical intervention, as if gender isn’t a social construct that has varied across global cultures. This functions as an ideological

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31 A line that, actually, is never spoken by Hannibal Lecter, but is filtered through Jim Carrey’s caricature of Hannibal in The Cable Guy (1996).
32 While transphobia obviously predated Silence of the Lambs, transphobia after Silence of the Lambs was different..
33 This pronoun is used throughout the movie.
injection that constructs the world that the audience is supposed to live in; it’s not the gender binary that is wrong, it is Bill. Further, the dance scene constructs a polarity between perpetrator and victim, despite the fact that statistics reveal the vulnerability, rather than the violence, of transfeminine subjects in the world. In 1988, the *Silence of the Lambs* original novel was released. This same year marked the death of Venus Xtravaganza, a trans sexworker most widely memorialized through her profile in *Paris is Burning* (1990). Targeted violence against transwomen has continued to rise despite more trans visibility than ever before, and of course, intersectional factors are at play that determine that trans women of color remain most vulnerable.  

Depictions like this one ripple outwards. In 1998, the children’s television show *PowerPuff Girls* introduced its most evil villain: *Him*, a transfeminine satanic character with claws for hands. Him conducts most of his villainy from a living room, perhaps a similarly domestic space as is depicted for Buffalo Bill’s villainy. The packaging of such a character in the context of a children’s show more readily can be seen for its elements of indoctrination: that transfeminine characters not only target women, they target femininity as a whole. The massive distribution models of such media makes it so that as these images continue to break down and circulate, at some point, they become difficult to parse from the rest of the world.

“Meg Ryan” had two experiences of her first kiss. The one that she would describe to her friends took place in a classmate’s beach house over a summer break during high school. Her description began with an evening of watching TV with friends who slowly filtered out of the basement living room as they drifted off, until it was just “Meg Ryan” and her crush watching a TV show on demand, episode after episode of *Flight of the Conchords*, slowly inching towards each other until the last inch between their lips closed and the two rolled around for the rest of the night, making out until the fuzzy darkness of night changed tone towards a blue dawn light. They slipped out of the house and tumbled to the beach, where they ran around making lots of noise and stared into each others eyes. “Meg Ryan” thought how cinematic it all was: “Is this more like that beach scene from *Grease* (1978) or like that beach scene from *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999)? Which character am I?”

The other first kiss, which she never told, happened in a garage in a circle of milk cartons a couple years earlier. “Meg Ryan” and three friends conspicuously closed the garage door and sat next to old tools and trash cans. Garbage surrounded them. They started playing a game in which they passed an ice cube between the four of them without using hands until the ice cube disappeared. Tongues tied into each other and dribbled liquid down chins, but she got bored and started thinking:

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When Buffalo Bill addresses that girl in the well by calling her “it,” is it because he doesn’t want to think of her as human to make his killing easier, or is it the end game of a conversation surrounding femme objectification? Where does that leave him, when he dances in front of the camera; does he become the object as well? Who wrote that scene in the first place?

The four teens went home afterwards feeling tired and rubbed their chapped lips as they drove in the minivan. “Meg Ryan” thought, “I think I’m getting sick,” and drank some more soda.

Fan-fiction functions as the generation of new narrative through pre-existing characters. This structure is fairly wide-open, but has a reputation for the lewd since the perversion of a familiar, G-rated character haunts any notion of fan-rewrites that involve familiar, puritanical characters. In reality, the emergence of fan-fiction goes far beyond the pornographic and is maybe more notable for its use of unfamiliar genres as well as for its emphasis on a relationship between audience a saturated media landscape. A dynamic here between audience and media is symbiotic but also tense: the fan is most comfortable writing through familiar, available character shells, often perverting (not always sexually) the ways in which narrative is structured along with the ways that these characters behave. Fan-fiction becomes a site for exerting agency over a universe of provided character shells.

To approach how the fan-fiction genre is broken down, there are three foundational categories that broadly categorize the basis of the narrative as being a general narrative (gen) or a romantic one, and further breaking down romance as either heterosexual (het) or same sex (slash, referencing the punctuative division in “male/male,” “female/female”). Within any of these broader categories is the story’s narrative genre. Fan-fiction genres are most recognizable for their extreme specificity and for their honoring of non-normative narrative, subjects, relationships, etc. 36

A brief listing of genres: Hurt/comfort (h/c): one character gets hurt; another character offers them comfort; Mpreg: a narrative that hinges on a male character becoming pregnant; Deathfic: a narrative in which a major character dies. Curtainfic: a narrative so domestic that the main characters (often a male slash pairing) shop for curtains together; Episode fix: a rewriting of an event provided in canon to a deliberately noncanonical, preferred conclusion; Episode tag or Missing scene, a continuation of a canonical scene that provides more information; AU, or alternate universe, where familiar characters are dropped into a new setting (which, depending on the media source, may or may not be canonical, because many of the source texts have fantastical components and not a few have played with multiverses); crossover, combining two different sets of characters from two media sources into a single story (as in a Buffy the Vampire Slayer/X Files crossover); Fluff, an light story that often seeks to make a

tender emotional impact rather than put forward a plot; *PWP*, which gets spelled out either as “porn without plot” or “plot? what plot?”; and various forms of sexually explicit stories that revolve around *kink*, such as BDSM.37

The politics of fan-fiction gesture towards a cultural landscape that is both ubiquitous and internalized. In this, experience can be held only through external characters, but the potential of animating these character shells in order to actively adjust appropriate representation opens new possibilities. The title of the most predominant fan-fic archive, *An Archive Of Our Own*, self acknowledges the ambition of reclamation. Those preexisting cultural narratives become sites of repression, and early efforts of projecting same-sex desire onto otherwise cis-hetero leading men/women function as a gesture of world building.

A fan encounters external characters that can function as inanimate vessels for their own cultural needs. In writing the fan-fic, the character shells become animated by the life that the fan breathes into those characters. The narrative, the characters, the scenery; each is encountered by the fan and is embraced by that fan. Each character holds onto their preexisting character developments as well as the level of distribution they’ve had onto the world but they become blank for the instrumentalization of the fan. But in this broader notion of finding identity within character shells, there is also a breakdown of all subjectivity, that is, when we are all Hermione Granger, when we are all Hitch, and so on, individualism is abdicated for a blurry universalism.

3.2

In 2017, the film *Disobedience* (starring Rachel McAdams and Rachel Weisz) stirred a niche sexual awakening on the internet. In a central sex scene, Weisz slowly dribbles a stream of spit into McAdams’ mouth. The internet translated excitement around this steamy, non-reproductive, queer, erotic specificity into a series of posts and memes that asked simply, “spit (and i can not stress this enough) in my mouth.” The circulation of a very specific combination of elements (business formality filtered through a performed immediacy and casualness (i.e. no capitalization) with the content of a polite sexual request) quickly transformed into meme imagery (a smiling stock image of a conventional looking young white man with a yellow shirt with this text printed on it in black ink) before transforming away from its content (a series of Microsoft™ Office aesthetic graphics forming an image with the text “yee (and i can’t stress this enough) haw”).

3.4

37 Ibid.
Throughout this text, I’ve locked onto the metaphor of microplastics in order to isolate certain qualities of their distribution, their redistribution, their nature as a material that fragments, their invisibility, and their ubiquity. But I am using a perverse methodology, and there are qualities of this metaphor that break with an intention of materializing the immaterial: in Anne Pollock’s text “Queering Endocrine Disruption,” she notes that a specific strand of anti-pollution eco-protectionism is not-so-quietly fueled by an embedded homophobia/transphobia.38 One headline she highlights from a nature.com article reads “Mercury Causes Homosexuality in Male Ibises.” The conversation that follows centers rhetoric of what is “natural” along with a thinly veiled reverence for “reproductivity” as synonymous with “unpolluted” as synonymous with “goodness.” Pollock points to what has been called something of a “sex panic” in environmentalist impulse for which this effect of pollution becomes the final straw.39

Pollock’s writing articulates an ambivalence that feels relevant in any text that grapples with the construction of contemporary landscapes. She references theorist Mel Chen’s link between the words toxic and intoxicated. Pointing towards the ibis article, she explains, “Yeah, maybe these birds are ‘fucked up’ by their polluted environment. But I do not think that I am saying too much about my own experiences of intoxication, or assuming too much about that of the reader, to point out that it can be fun to be fucked up.”40 Throughout the essay, she carefully toes a line that resists absolving global polluters from their responsibility to the natural world while also pointing towards a non-essentialist biology, one that resists the assertion that the natural world functions in opposition to pleasure or that it interfaces cleanly with taxonomies. Acknowledging the insidious elements of pollution, she argues for the legitimacy of these ibises strolling on the beach without chicks. Where does this leave cinema? The sheer scale of it as a hyperobject leads towards a question of how one can make the invisible more visible. In an April 2017 letter to its shareholders, Netflix boasted that its 100 million subscribers had clocked in 500 million hours watching “Adam Sandler” films alone.41 In that, how can “Meg Ryan” not be in my glass of water? Or “Tom Hanks” in an ant? Pollock’s tongue-in-cheek defense of pollution becomes most useful for imagining how a pervasive entity can be reevaluated for its capacities as a material. Recognizing the presence and the non-neutrality of that material is a first step, parsing its tactics and its position in a contemporary landscape is a next step, especially if we are to adopt Shaviro’s post-cinematic affect in the future. Judith Butler’s notion of the camera as the phallically-organized disembodied gaze contextualizes the ways in which this field naturally settles towards the hegemonic, but instances of exerting agency over these settings through sites such as

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39 Ibid, 184.
40 Ibid, 185.
fan-fiction allow for resisting a fetishization of what is “natural.” Instances of the power of cinema—*spit (and i can’t stress this enough) in my mouth*—reveal new potentials for this distribution of imagery as media more fully develops into the post-cinematic. Movies live inside of us and can be toxic, but they can also be intoxicating. Cinema/microplastic is (and i can’t stress this enough) in my mouth. Recognizing its materiality and beginning to point towards effects are keys toward isolating the quietly insidious and emphasizing the empowering.

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Bibliography


Vita

Education

2019  MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, Sculpture + Extended Media, Richmond, VA (candidate)
2014  BFA, Maryland Institute College of Art, Painting with concentration in Sustainability and Social Practice, Baltimore, MD, USA

Solo Exhibitions

2019  In defense of pure evil, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
2018  Edith, Esther Klein Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
2017  Edith’s Ghost, GHOST, ghostfeaturefilm.com

Selected Group Exhibitions

2019  Finding Gender, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
2018  Yukon Gold, 891 N. Main, Providence, RI
2018  Ventriloquist, Evening Hours, New York, NY
2018  Genderfail Archive Project, Past & Future Fictions, MoMA PS1 (Sunday Sessions), New York, NY
2017  Genderfail Archive Project, International Center of Photography, New York, NY
2017  Miami is Nice, Spacecamp Gallery, Baltimore, MD
2016  Mission Universe: A Curanaut’s Journey, curated by Erin Lehman and Susan Isaacs, Towson University Gallery, Towson, MD
2016  Surface Tension, curated by Joseph Shaikewitz, Current Space, Baltimore, MD
2016  Document V, curated by Temporary Art Review, The Luminary, St. Louis, MO
2015  Narrow Waves, U:L:O II, Springsteen Gallery at Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY
2014  Bawlmer, curated by Dwayne Butcher, Crosstown Arts, Memphis, TN
2014  57th Chautauqua Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, juror Jerry Saltz, Visual Arts of Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, NY

Projects

2016-present  Director, GHOST (ghostfeaturefilm.com)
2014-present  Founder/Editor, Post-Office Arts Journal (baltimore-art.com)
2014-2016  Co-founder, Bb (bb427.tk)
2013-2016  Collective member, Open Space (openspacebaltimore.com)

Publications and Essays as Author

2018  “K-Y,” Curiosx, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2017  Borders, and Other Printed Matter, self-published.
“Jeremy Cimafonte @ First Continent,” Temporary Art Review, February 17.
Arts Criticism and the Arts Outpost, Post-Office Arts Journal, September 1.
“Justine Lieberman at Rowhouse Project,” self-published, April 15.
“xXx @ Current Space,” Post-Office Arts Journal, January 2.

2014
“Freddy Gallery, in Baltimore, MD,” self-published/Bmoreart, September 11.

Selected Curatorial

2017
ASPICE ET ABI (Bettina Yung), GHOST, Connecticut
New Spring, co-curator with John-Elio Reitman, GHOST, Connecticut

2016
No No No No (Dina Kelberman), co-curator with Allie Linn, Bb, Baltimore, MD
A Temporary Curse (Stephanie Hier, Michael Bussell, Noa Glazer), co-curator with Allie Linn, Bb, Baltimore, MD

2015
Brass In Pocket, Third Chorus (Max Guy, Alex Goss, Maggie Fitz, Audrey Gair, Julia Yerger), co-curator with Allie Linn, Artist-Run Hotel Satellite, Bb, Miami, FL
Playroom (Alex Goss), co-curator with Allie Linn, Bb, Baltimore, MD
Slsleeping (Michael Jones McKean, Christina Haines, Grace Davis, John Zane Zappas), co-curator with Allie Linn, Bb, Baltimore, MD

2014
Nip Slips (Flannery Silva, Kim Westfall, Connor Creagan, Alan Resnick, Maggie Daviet, and Allie Linn), co-curator with E. Roche, Current Space, Baltimore, MD

Lectures/Readings

2018
K-Y reading via Lucifer (Max Guy reader at Slummer Nights), CANADA, New York, NY
Flux Thursday Visiting Artist, Flux Factory, Queens, NY
Visiting Artist Talk, March 8, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
Arts Criticism and the Arts Outpost, panel discussion, PMF, Baltimore, MD
Artist-Run, panel discussion, Artist-Run Miami, Miami, FL

Honors/Awards

2019
Honorable Mention, Beauchamp Prize in Critical Art Writing, Gulf Coast Journal, TX
Graduate Research Grant, VCU, Richmond, VA

2018
Paul F. Miller Graduate Scholarship in Sculpture, VCU, Richmond, VA

2015
Grit Fund grant recipient for Bb, The Contemporary, Baltimore, MD

2014
Harold R. Anderson Memorial Award, juror Jerry Saltz, Visual Arts of Chautauqua Institution 57th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, NY