Migratory Patterns:

Media, Materiality, and Circulation in Moving Image Works

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Abstract

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Madeline Bogoch

Despite over a century of struggle against the myth of the artist as a singular genius, there persists a tendency to disregard the impact of circulation and viewership on the meaning of an artwork. This thesis proposes that the materiality of media and the methods by which it circulates are decisive factors in the way moving image works become lodged in the social memory. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework established between the fields of film studies, media studies, cultural theory, and art history, these themes are developed through the analyses of three video works: Todd Haynes' *Superstar; The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), and Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). An exploration of the general relationship between social processes and technology leads to an analysis of the material characteristics of magnetic tape, and the impact this had on access and circulation. By tracking these historical developments through to the increasing dematerialization of digital video in the present day, this work elucidates the implications on, and entanglements between, image, economy, labour, and psyche in the contemporary moment. This thesis works to redistribute a portion of agency to those who bootleg, analyze, archive, view, and share artworks. It reveals how the materiality and circulation of images are important indicators for how these processes will be conducted, and ultimately dictate the way these films influence socio-historical memory.

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Introduction

It occurred to me recently that the production of this thesis will likely bookend the pandemic quite neatly. The initial proposal was submitted in March of 2020, and it is due to be deposited for the fall of 2021, at which point I hope that enough of the population has been vaccinated for "some degree of normalcy" to reappear. I was struck by this coincidence since many of themes discussed in the following pages have taken on newfound significance in the past year, as currently, screen technologies facilitate nearly all our personal and professional interactions. Programming of moving-image work has shifted online, significantly altering the experience of watching films as well as ceding a degree of control over the environment to the viewer. This thesis examines how the materiality of moving images inflects meaning, and how the circulation of those images impacts how they come to be represented in social memory. The recent and dramatic shifts in how we circulate and receive moving-images are part of a long history that encompasses collisions of social contexts, technological development, and creative interventions, all of which have all shaped our relationship to the past and the present.

The following thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on a different moving-image work and draws from a broad range of scholars, critics, and theorists. The first chapter looks at *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (directed by Todd Haynes), the second explores *Videodrome* (directed by David Cronenberg), and the final chapter pivots away from magnetic tape to consider digital materiality as represented by Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc*. Although he is relatively absent from the majority of the text, Walter Benjamin has served as a proverbial North Star in the project. When it comes to discourse surrounding circulation, reproducibility and so many other concepts, which to this day feel nascent, Benjamin got there first and his influence and endurance are unwavering and unmatched.[1] His prescience in naming the paradox of authenticity in the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" back in 1936 has left a distinct mark on the field of media art, and as image technology evolves, so too do questions surrounding the condition of their reproduction and circulation.[2] Like many, these ideas were first introduced to me via Benjamin and it is through his immortal essay that I first considered materiality and circulation as critical passages which shape our relationship to images, media, and memory.

Building on the implications of Benjamin's novel theory, this thesis considers the circulation of moving images through chapters that demonstrate the significant impact of materiality in how images are mobilized in culture and absorbed into social memory. Contemporary scholar of media circulation Erika Balsom argues that while Benjamin's thesis of reproducibility remains vibrant that today, it is not video's capacity to produce a facsimile of reality, but rather it's dissemination patterns, which structures our current relationship to the medium,.

In addition to Balsom and Benjamin, I have drawn significantly from succeeding media theorists including Raymond Williams, Marshall McLuhan, Lucas Hilderbrand, Caetlin Benson-Allott, Laura U. Marks, Andrew Burke, and Will Straw. Each of these theorists approach the field from a unique angle. As Balsom contends it is an era “after uniqueness” with far-reaching implications for the art world in particular. Zeroing in on artists’ moving-image works in particular, her writing examines the problems and potential of circulation in an industry which fetishizes singularity. Both Benson-Allott and Hilderbrand explore circulation from the perspective of video, exploring the cultural shift that occurred as a result of magnetic tape and time-shifting technologies emergence. Marks writes of the affective resonance of quality loss in analogue media, while Straw and Burke take a flexible approach to format, focusing instead on how these containers mediate cultural memory.

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[1] Erika Balsom, introduction to *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation*, ed. Erika Balsom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 4-5.

[2] This is in reference to his famous 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

In addition to this survey of scholars whose work is directly situated in studies in dissemination, I’ve also drawn significantly from cultural theorists such as Jodi Dean, Karen Tongson, Kip Pegley, and Mark Fisher, whose critical insights provide indispensable perspectives into each case study. Additional sources include reflections by contemporaneous critics in an attempt to capture the cultural context cited in the films. For example, the first chapter cites a *Village Voice* profile written of Haynes by critic Hilton Als, who poetically contemplates the filmmaker’s legendary love of artifice. The final chapter on Hito Steyerl, “I’m Online and It’s Raining,” incorporates recent critiques of the artist to consider the complex and fluctuating dynamics between art and politics. Each of these sections concerns a different moving image work, taking media materiality and circulation as the jumping-off point, but pursuing very different histories and contexts. While this imparts a sense of vast heterogeneity onto the case studies, it also serves as a reminder that the significance imparted by the channels of circulation is not prescribed but rather determined by the social values which surround them.

The first chapter explores the haptic intimacy inscribed onto the latter bootlegs of Todd Haynes' film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). This chapter examines the trajectory of the work through the informal bootleg economy in which it has circulated. Following scholar Lucas Hildebrand's meticulous research on the film, and the cultural impact of magnetic tape, this section, titled "Fakeness + Fantasy," looks back that the latter 20th century to examine the culture that surrounded both The Carpenters' music and Haynes' film. At the heart of this chapter is the relationship between the viewer and the decayed image, and an exploration of visual noises' proximity to mortality and loss. Building on Hildebrand's research and considering the intimate channels which facilitated the film's endurance in culture, I explore how the grainy quality of the videos impacts the portrayal of Karen's own death, and the subtext of the AIDS epidemic.[3] Focusing on bootlegging as a form of fan participation in preservation and distribution, this section presents a case study that evokes the concept of circulation as central to understanding the film's significance.

In *Superstar,* the fluid materiality of the format plays a crucial role in dictating the relationship between the image and the viewer. As the first chapter draws comparisons between the material decay and Karen's withering body, the second explores the relationship between video and national identity. Centered on the 1983 Canadian horror film, *Videodrome,* this chapter considers the Canadian cultural landscape during an era of mounting anxieties regarding media imperialism and magnetic tape. Cronenberg inserts references to Canadian media throughout the film, including through characters inspired by celebrated media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and the founder of the television network Citytv, Moses Znaimer. Functioning as an allegory of the Canadian cultural landscape, *Videodrome* depicts a collective psyche of vulnerability during the 1980s, weaving this ambient anxiety into a cerebral take on the body-horror genre. Unpacking the relationship between media materiality and identity, this section is particularly indebted to prior scholarship on the film by Caetlin Benson-Allott, studies on Canadian broadcast by Kip Pegley, and Andrew Burke's recent text *Hinterland Remixed,* which considers the Canadian 1970s through a variety of moving-image works. In addition to providing indispensable research, Burke's work offers a methodological approach that compassionately complicates the indulgence of memory, nation, and nostalgia by negotiating the potential harm of fetishizing a bygone era, but also the value in critically reflecting on the past through these audiovisual remnants. I have kept this strategy close as I navigate the complexities of naming qualities of the Canadian experience when such definitions risk sustaining erasure and settler-colonial attitudes.

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[3] Lucas Hildebrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays: Superstar and Bootleg Aesthetics," *Camera Obscura vol. 19*, no. 3 (2004): 60.

There is a sense of vulnerability expressed by Cronenberg through the permeability of video that invites comparison to Haynes' film. In both case studies, the materiality of the magnetic tape is compared to sick or susceptible bodies. This analysis draws from a phenomenological perspective of technology, which takes into account the intimate relationship between the viewer and the image, and the role of screen mediation in that dynamic. To elaborate on this, I borrow from Laura U. Marks' melancholic essay, "Loving the Disappearing Image," to consider how the texture of analogue media coaxes viewers to confront their own mortality in the decay. The motif of vulnerability thus emerges as a connective tissue in this thesis. Hilderbrand refers to the particular look of video as an "aesthetics of access," emphasizing the essential openness of the medium. While this porousness offers the creative potential for intervention, there's a commensurate sense of vulnerability corresponding to the media's mutability. In *Superstar,* the evidence of this vulnerability becomes an advantage, strengthening the narrative through decay. In *Videodrome*, this vulnerable quality of video is allegorized through both the individual body and its susceptibility, and the Canadian psyche caught between the cultural poles of the United Kingdom and the United States. The final chapter revisits this theme of vulnerability, focusing on Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.,* and the precarious state of economics and labour in the digital era.

"I'm Online and It's Raining," the third and final chapter, examines Steyerl's film and circulation in the age of the internet, to argue that the chasm between digital space and physical space has eroded as economies, images, media, and data have become increasingly dematerialized. Steyerl is skilled at forming bonds between disparate themes and *Liquidity Inc*. does just that—connecting the dots between capitalism, weather, mental health, and the art world. Following the story of Jacob Wood, a financial analyst who lost his job during the 2008 crash and became a Mixed Martial Arts fighter and ringside pundit, *Liquidity Inc.* illustrates how precarity has become a widespread repercussion of life under neoliberalism. Steyerl is an essayist and filmmaker whose theoretical trajectory zigzags between her films and texts, often translating and mutating ideas between the two. Her body of work often comments on the art world which she inhabits and its complicity in global finance, arms manufacturing, and other shadowy industries. Following this disposition in her work, this section also examines the role of art and the artist in late capitalism, and how critique can be susceptible to subsumption by the very systems it seeks to undermine.

Readers may notice that I hesitate to deem the role of circulation as necessarily positive or negative. This apparent ambiguity reflects the complexity of these circulatory channels and the dependence of social factors to determine their impact. These contexts are explored in relation to the materiality of the media, which act as "containers" for the images.[4] While the specifics of each case study have taken my research in different directions, each section follows from the simple question: how does the materiality of a moving-image work affect its relationship to access and circulation?

This thesis is steeped in questions of technology; each inquiry follows from the qualities of the media the case study is concerned with. Yet this is done not to eclipse the human conditions which are immersed in these images and their travels, but to emphasize them. In his 1974 text, *Television, Technology, and Cultural Form,* author Raymond Williams critiques technological determinism, which claims that social conditions follow the emergence of a technology. For Williams, this predetermination fails to consider the constellation of causes that predicates the emergence and use of a technology.[5] Building on Williams' assertions of the messy interdependence of social factors and media, these case studies pay equal attention to the format's materiality and the multitude of cultural factors which shape and are shaped by it. This thesis proposes that recorded memory shapes and determines our collective memory and that, through the audiovisual fragments of the past, we can deepen our critical perspective on history (both distant and recent) if we consider the material conditions of their migration and existence.

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[4] Will Straw, "Embedded Memories," *Residual Media,* ed. Charles Acland, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 7.

The approach I have taken in writing about these films comes from my humble position as a viewer—an avid and critical one, but a viewer nonetheless. As a result of this, I've peppered my analyses with observations that come from the process of reflecting on the films as I watch them (repeatedly) and consider my relationship to their contexts. Outside of my academic work, I work in experimental film distribution and collections, and I also program films, both independently and as part of a collective. These positions are all centered around the circulation of the moving image. Yet I had been treating my writing and research as separate from the other facets of my life when clearly they are not. As I hope the following case studies will illustrate, the materiality and circulation of a moving image work naturally influence the viewer's reception of it. Meanings may continue to evolve and shift long after the production of the work itself; as such, the channels through which these images travel is a vital site of research and interest for anyone who is engaged in the active dispersion, curation, or simply viewing of moving images pieces.

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[5] Raymond Williams, *Television, Technology, and Cultural Forms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 11-12.

Chapter One: Fakeness + Fantasy: Superstar, Video, and the Canonization of Karen Carpenter

"Because things that are marketed as collectibles are never the ones that pan out that way," explained my mom to me, circa 1998, as I tried to explain to her why she should be eagerly investing in the Princess Diana themed Beanie Baby I covet. In hindsight she was right, and although I cherished that plush toy dearly, it has yet to appreciate in value. Historically speaking, it is circulation, not intention which determines what objects will become sought after. A decade prior to me negotiating the purchase of my beloved beanie, filmmaker Todd Haynes made a film at Bard College about the late soft-rock star Karen Carpenter. The experimental biopic, titled *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) famously uses Barbie dolls in the place of actors (fig.1). Haynes' film was one of the first signs that Karen's legacy would be reanimated as a cult icon. After failing to acquire the rights to The Carpenters' music, which is featured prominently in the film, Haynes decided to go ahead and release it anyway and, for about two years, *Superstar* screened in galleries, festivals, and repertory theatres. Its run was predictably short, as both Richard Carpenter (Karen's brother and the other half of The Carpenters' musical duo), and Mattel (the manufacturer of Barbie Dolls) issued cease and desists. Following these threats of litigation, Haynes was forced to remove the film from circulation in 1989. While this might have been the logical end to the story of *Superstar*, it was really only the beginning. Both Hayne's film and its subject, Karen Carpenter, have experienced accidental afterlives as cult icons, the curious trajectory which led to this is a result of chance and a redistribution of aura which reclaimed Karen from her previously uncool margins. Similarly, as *Superstar* continued to circulate through the bootleg economy at the hands of enthusiastic fans, the story of the film became compounded by the material degradation of successive generations of tapes. In the intervening years, *Superstar* has appreciated in cultural capital and is a totem of VHS culture and analogue circulation (fig. 2).

What follows is my revisitation of Haynes' film, as well as considerations of its subject Karen Carpenter, the surrounding cultural context, and the narrative agency of material degradation. Following *Superstar* through its journey underground as a banned film, I consider how the "poor image" reveals an embedded social history of circulation and how the haptic qualities of its decay influence the role and experience of viewership.[6] Following its removal from distribution, the film was preserved by socially driven efforts, by fans whose incremental archival acts of dubbing and distributing kept the work circulating. The story of *Superstar* marks a sharp departure from usual modes of distribution. It is a case of preservation that relied not on financial or institutional incentives but rather on community interest, and the mutable qualities of video which facilitated a model of viewer-based dissemination. As a result, the occasionally competing values of access and authenticity are elicited to emphasize both the challenges and fortuities of art in "an economy of multiples."[7]

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[6] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 32.

[7] Balsom, introduction to *After Uniqueness.* 7.

Child's Play

At least part of the enduring appeal of *Superstar* is the novelty of the dolls, which carry with them a loaded culture of oppressive beauty standards, charging the film with extra irony and a critical subtext. The indulgent reliance on pastiche like the PSA interludes and biopic clichés feel somewhat schlocky but also accounts for the film's notorious protean appeal. For instance, when it was initially released, the film was shuffled between experimental screenings and more cinematic venues as well as landing as a teaching aid for eating disorder clinics.[8] Despite the use of parody, Haynes deftly manages to reflect his earnest investment in the subject, while simultaneously undermining the impossible standard of normalcy that The Carpenters' public image proxied. Branded by their record label as the paradigm of wholesomeness, The Carpenter's image aligned the duo with a conservative political affiliation which, while appealing to some, was also repellant to many audiences, especially those who saw themselves as socially progressive.

The film begins with Karen's mother discovering her lifeless body, her frantic screams set against a severe soundscape recalling the tenor of a climactic reveal in a horror movie. As the film pans out on a shot of Karen's house, a narrator questions what could have led to the death of this 32-year-old starlet before the scene fades to Karen's own voice singing. The dialogue and the performances are naturally limited by the artist's choice to use Barbies in the place of actors, and while the dolls are certainly the most notable feature of *Superstar,* it consequently means that the film must rely on narration to offer a lot of exposition. Throughout the 45-minute running time, the story follows the rise and fall of the siblings' career, culminating with Karen's premature death as a result of her eating disorder. Between the doll scenes, Haynes splices strategic intervals that offer context while playfully sampling a range of genres. In an establishing scene near the beginning, the narrator voices over news footage of the 1970s American cultural landscape. This outsourced footage was sourced by Haynes simply pointing his camera at the television screen. The scene is revealing of Haynes' investment in the subject material. Having always maintained his earnest fandom for The Carpenters' music, Haynes describes their music, which reminded him of his Southern Californian upbringing, as a mixture of "fakeness and fantasy" that offered listeners a retreat into the receding (and constructed) memory of a simpler time.[9] I came across a *Village Voice* profile written on Haynes by Hilton Als, in which the author similarly ponders the filmmaker's attachment to television and television culture:

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[8] Glyn Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 29-30.

> When I hear the word Television, I pack my bags and go. For Todd though, I think TV was the shiny mirror of his upbringing, suburbia's version of soul: neat, neat, neat.[10]

When Haynes was in eleventh grade, a teacher told him that "films weren't about reality," a revelation which struck the filmmaker and has had a lasting impact on his work.[11] This preoccupation is reflected in *Superstar,* which channels Haynes' obsession with artifice through both the depiction of a pop-starlet whose highly fabricated image was shattered by her premature death, and the use of plastic figurines in the dramatization. In the introduction to the screenplay, Haynes disclosed the questions he was chasing through the film, asking: “what would happen if the narrative gears subsumed by our identification were quietly revealed? Would viewers’ desire to identify even succumb to an ensemble of plastic”?[12] Placing celebrity next to plasticity on a spectrum of realness may be a provocative gesture, but Haynes’ sincere devotion to the culture he critiques redeems his intentions as loving rather than callous. To quote Als’ poetic rumination on *Superstar*: “its lyricism is the lyricism of the fan-zine eye that knows of what it speaks.”[13]

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[9] Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*,15.

[10] Hilton Als, "Ruminations on Todd Haynes," *The Village Voice,* April 16, 1999, https://www.villagevoice.com/1991/04/16/ruminations-on-todd-haynes/.

[11] John Lahr, "Todd Haynes Writes the Hollywood Playbook," *The New Yorker,* November 11, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/11/11/todd-haynes-rewrites-the-hollywood-playbook.

Young America at its Best

The cultural climate that coincided with The Carpenters’ popularity was much more fraught than their brand divulges, Haynes works in a pointed critique of this omission in *Superstar*. During a montage depicting anti-war protests and civil unrest, the narrator asks, “what if instead…of the angry words and hard rock sounds, we were to hear something soft and smooth and see something of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith?”[14] This is the context that created The Carpenters’ appeal and is inextricable from the cult afterlife of their music, Karen, and *Superstar*. The succession of images that frame the era’s turbulent social energy is in stark contrast to the cheerful veneer of The Carpenters. Scholar Karen Tongson has described the duo’s sunny disposition as confirming “Richards Nixon’s worldview that staunchly held on to an attitude of Sunbelt optimism, despite the international and domestic turmoil caused by the Vietnam War."[15] Just a year after The Carpenters released their 1971 best-selling self-titled album, they would perform at the White House at the request of Nixon, who would refer to the duo as "young America at its best" (fig.4).[16] Over the course of just a few years during a particularly charged era of history, the nation would see mounting opposition to the Vietnam war, the break of the Watergate scandal and subsequent resignation of Nixon, and the approval of the Equal Rights Amendment by both Congress and the Senate. Against this backdrop, The Carpenters' wistful lyrics and soft melodies seemed anti-zeitgeist by design, and intentionally marketed to listeners who wished to remain oblivious to the surrounding social and political frictions (fig.3). In retrospect, the circumstances of Karen's death and the accumulated visual decay of *Superstar*, a direct result of successive dubs, cuts through the myth of wholesomeness that the duo projected. The material conditions of the film's circulation and subsequent decay parallels the legacy of Karen's life, death, and legacy. Although Haynes' project is adoring of Karen, it does not shy away from elaborating (and perhaps occasionally embellishing) on the flawed aspects of The Carpenters. The parents are shown to be overbearing, Haynes unnecessarily likens Karen's body to images of holocaust victims, and the film hints that Richard harbours a secret "private life" that doll-Karen threatens to expose during an argument.[17] The framing of the narrative indicates that Haynes is interested in performing a critical read of the culture of "family values" that surrounded

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[12] Lahr, “Todd Haynes Writes the Hollywood Playbook.”
[13] Als, “Ruminations on Todd Haynes.”
[14] Todd Haynes, *Superstar,* (New York, 1987), 16mm.

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[15] Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), xi.
[16] Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters,* 6.
[17] Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 18-19.

The Carpenters.[18] *Superstar* signaled the beginning of the cult reclamation of The Carpenters and their music, casting new light on the duo (but especially Karen) as campy icons of performative suburban-ness. Throughout his career, Haynes has demonstrated an interest in interpreting the perils of fame, and the American obsession with purity. These are very present themes in *Superstar* and are personified by the life and death of Karen, who acts as a fitting vessel for Haynes to expose the artifice behind good old-fashioned American values.[19]

Generation Loss

The initial loss of resolution in the original film occurs in the found material that Haynes crudely incorporates from network programming. Montages of pageants and stock footage of happy heterosexual couples brandish the grainy traces of the video-to-film translation and undermine their authority. Flickering scanlines, which mark the found-footage excerpts, expose the intermedia translation and pre-empt the exponential generational loss the film would eventually undergo.[20] Although the film was shot on 16mm, its relationship to video is a central part of its history. Even before it was removed from circulation, the film had been sold and shared on VHS through several alternative bookstores, and as screening copies between curators and critics which made efforts to completely remove it from circulation a futile endeavor.[21] The migration to VHS as a primary vehicle of viewership further impacts the film's aesthetics: with each dub, the loss accumulates, resulting in increasingly more visual noise. The accumulated deterioration tracks the circulation of the film through the hands of enthusiastic bootleggers; moving further and further away from its original look, an acquired underground history is charted through resolution loss. The history of *Superstar* after its removal from circulation is inextricable from its relationship to the video format it inhabited, and the cultural shifts that had coincided. As video and bootleg scholar Lucas Hilderbrand, writes:

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[18] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 58-59.

[19] Lahr, "Todd Haynes Writes the Hollywood Playbook."

[20] Generational loss refers to the diminished resolution as a result of copying tapes.

[21] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 64-65.

> The coinciding eras of analog magnetic tape and of fair-use copyright exemptions constitute a significant historical period, one marked by actual and potential democratic participation enabled by technology that gave way to largely taken for granted privileges and consumptive uses.[22]

Hilderbrand's book, *Inherent Vice,* takes a close look at this history, to explore what constitutes "an aesthetics of access."[23] The vice named in the book's title alludes to the implicit illegality of video technology. In 1972, just one year prior to The Carpenters visit to the White House, the first commercial VCRs were hitting the consumer market.[24] One effect of this technology was a newfound level of access granted to the user, to record themselves "to an unprecedented degree," and to record and alter network and studio programming.[25] Right away, this redistribution of power towards the user fostered a sense of simmering potential, not unlike the anticipation and hopes that would later be applied to the early days of the internet.[26] However, it is difficult to say to what degree the high hopes that were pinned on video came to pass. Perhaps part of the appeal that bootleg culture offers is the opportunity to glean a sliver of that defiant zeal.

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[22] Lucas Hilderbrand, introduction to *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.
[23] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 3.
[24] Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matter,* 28.
[25] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 7.
[26] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 7.

By the late 1980s, when *Superstar* was circulating, video technology was widespread and dubbed copies became the central channel of distribution. In its travels, the accumulated deterioration acts as a watermark, visibly tracking the circulation of the film through the hands of eager bootleggers. Moving further and further away from Haynes' initial film, an accumulative history is thus charted through resolution loss. From the vantage point of several decades that have witnessed the dematerialization of media, this fan-driven economy feels especially sacred, the evidence of a faded golden age of many subcultures whose exclusivity was guarded by the sanctity of a physical transaction. Part of the evocative experience of watching *Superstar* is to indulge in a form of nostalgia which encodes these social transactions and indexes the era in which they flourished.[27] Aesthetically, the decaying image ruptures the polished Californian suburban-ness of The Carpenters' branding and signals the shifting tides of cultural memory that have reclaimed the duo as something else entirely. In an article in *Rolling Stone* written in 1994, at the peak of the Carpenter's resuscitation, the author writes of their legacy, "this nostalgic desire is coupled with the awareness that completely happy families are as illusory as The Carpenters' carefully manufactured squeaky-clean image." Nostalgia was a key ingredient in The Carpenter's own music which melancholically yearned for 'yesterday once more.'[28] Branded as such, nostalgia serves a mindset that mobilizes its affect in service of regressive politics.[29] This is what scholar Svetlana Boym refers to as “restorative nostalgia,” a modality which often dog whistles racism and misogynist ideology.[30] As an alternative to this, Boym offers “reflective nostalgia,” which does not seek to return to the past or whitewash the experiences contained within it, but reconciles that there is value in a critical practice of remembering.[31] I bring this up not to disown the indulgence of nostalgia but to assert that any work that tarries in its sentiment must do so self-critically with care and caution surrounding its sometimes regressive instrumentalizations.[32] At every turn in the history of *Superstar*, nostalgia has been a driving force in shaping the relationship to the viewer. For The Carpenters, their music offered some listeners a soft and soothing reprieve from the tumultuous social climate which surrounded them. For Haynes, a Karen biopic was ample territory upon which to play around with the semiotics of suburbia for which he held a childhood affection for. Furthermore, for those who participated in its underground circulation, the film became a token of inclusion in a community, a fetishization of the past, and a vernacular archival process which redeems ephemeral audiovisual fragments from the trash heaps of history.

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[27] Straw, "Embedded Memories," 9.

[28] The Carpenters, "Yesterday Once More," written by Richard Carpenter, and John Bettis, May 16, 1973, A&M Records, track 6 on Now and Then, 1973, LP.

In the intervening decades, The Carpenters’ legacy has taken a surprising turn towards the cult canon, a shift which is undoubtably at least partially attributable to Haynes’ film and its cultural impact.[33] In 2012, the film was included in a retrospective of

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[29] Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters,* 62,

[30] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 184-186.

[31] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia,* 184-186.

[32] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 8-9.

[33] Hilderbrand, *Grainy Days and Mondays,* 68.

VHS culture at the Museum of Art and Design in New York, simply titled "VHS."[34] A review of the show in the *New York Times* begins with the hook: "IT was the video that went viral before there was such a thing as viral video," a dramatic line that is evident of the persistent notoriety of *Superstar*.[35] While some might attest that The Carpenters' accidental rebranding is an ironic subversion of intent, I prefer to think that it aligns with what they have since come to represent: the impossibility of normalcy, a liberation that has continued to resonate with succeeding generations. The bootlegs of *Superstar* disclose this fabrication by exposing the layers of mediation between index and image and approximating this dissonance in visual terms. A recent book entitled *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (2019) by scholar Karen Tongson (named after the singer) suggests that Karen, as a tragic pop icon, appeals to a diverse cross section of fans who identify something campy, queer, or cool beyond the duo's milquetoast pretence. Haynes perhaps got here first and his contribution to Karen's cult-reclamation is indisputable, as is musician Kim Gordon's various tributes through her music and writing which likely reached a wider audience than Haynes' banned student film.[36] Karen's iconicity is not, however, limited to these venues. Tongson's book unpacks the renegade popularity of The Carpenters in the Philippines and among the Filipino diaspora, as well as the induction of Karen as queer icon. Addressing The Carpenters' resonance in queer culture, Tongson explains that the laboured performance of "aberrant normalcy," which the duo exemplified, strikes a chord with her and other POC and queer-identifying fans who see their efforts to adapt to straightness or whiteness reflected in the soft, haunting melodies sung by Karen, which seem to suggest that, beneath the flawless veneer, something more complex lingers.[37] As an auteur of New Queer Cinema, Haynes's direction in *Superstar* covertly lays bare the subterranean queerness of The Carpenters, but the film's incidental foray into the bootleg economy radically compounds the social histories which can be examined through the film.

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[34] Erik Piepenburg, "An Armchair Revolution, and Barbie Too," *The New York Times,* June 28, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/movies/vhs-film-retrospective-at-museum-of-arts-and-design.html.
[35] Piepenburg, "An Armchair Revolution, and Barbie Too."
[36] Sonic Youth (Gordon's band) included a song on their 1990 album *Goo* titled "Tunic (Song for Karen)" with lyrics referencing Karen's eating disorder. Gordon also penned an "Open Letter to Karen Carpenter" (date unknown) which published in the Sonic Youth autobiography *Sensational Fix: Sonic Youth* (2019).

There is another history which is told in the aesthetic deterioration of *Superstar*—the story of Karen's premature death and long struggle with anorexia.[38] I am far from the first fan to make this connection, and I do so cautiously, recognizing that Karen's tragic death often eclipses her life. However, because my focus is not on the life of Karen or even *Superstar*, but their respective afterlives, the circumstances of her death remains a poignant detail which I would be remiss to exclude. The blurry and illegible quality of *Superstar* discloses a sense of materiality and fragility, a 'memento mori' for the viewer. It is hard to look past the relationship between the faded surface and the image, and Karen's gradual physical depletion leading up to her death. Unlike the typical tragic rockstar biopic, which is often characterized by excess, Karen's death is the opposite, a result of extreme deprivation which the viewer is reminded of by the faded picture quality. Despite the grim subject matter, the film's tone is mostly superficial, never lingering in abjection or tragedy for too long. I wager that Haynes is leveraging this gloss to make a point about the semiotic weight of genre, and the vacuousness of celebrity culture. But there remains a sense of melancholy unaccounted for by basic elements of the film itself, which I attribute to the deteriorated materiality of its later dubs and their visible quality loss. This undertone of sadness is evidence of the narrative agency damaged images can hold. There is a theoretical foundation to this feeling, as Laura U. Marks suggests in her elegiac essay, “Loving the Disappearing Image” (1997), when she argues that these decayed images proxy the dying or deceased body, offering viewers a moment of identification, not with characters or figures, but with the surface of the image itself.[39] Marks borrows Freud’s pathologizing of melancholia as a state of dispersed grief, but departs from his assertion that this condition is inherently unsatisfactory.[40] Instead, she considers how melancholy might be used to articulate the emotional resonance of such a disappearing image.[41] Counter to the Freudian prescription of melancholia, Marks argues that there is solace—if not closure— in this dis-coherence, or as she puts it, “a loving regard.”[42] The implication of Marks’ thesis on Haynes’ film provokes compelling insight. Marks expresses skepticism in the standard exchange of empathy (from viewer to character), instead arguing that something more profound occurs between the viewer and decaying image which compels a dispersed and haptic identification.[43] It’s almost as if Haynes has pre-empted that skepticism in his decision to use the dolls. It’s a clever device, which doubles-down on the cultural criticism that surrounds The Carpenters’ synthetic image and announces the artifice and performativity of gender in a novel manner. Near the start of the film, there is a detail that perfectly captures Haynes' preoccupation with the concept of simulation. A screenshot bears the caption, "A Dramatization," an ironic disclaimer that redundantly announces that a film acted primarily by Barbies is not "real" (fig.5).[44] According to Haynes, part of the impetus for the film was to gauge whether or not audiences could invest emotionally in the dolls. In a 2003 interview about his work, Haynes claims:

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[37] Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters,* 15.
[38] Hilderbrand, *Grainy Days and Mondays,* 76.

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[39] Laura U. Marks, “Loving the Disappearing Image,” *Cinémas* 8 no.1-2 (1997): 98-99.
[40] Marks, “Loving the Disappearing Image,” 98.
[41] Marks, “Loving the Disappearing Image,” 102-105.
[42] Marks, “Loving the Disappearing Image,” 105.
[43] Marks, “Loving the Disappearing Image,” 104.

> In each case there is something that stands between the central character and ourselves, some impediment to free immersion that clogs the system and turns identification into each story's silent wager. Perhaps the most emblematic example of this occurs in *Superstar* in which the use of the dolls combined with many viewers ironic regard for The Carpenters— pretty much rules out any expectation of a deep investment. But investment is precisely the point. And I somehow felt that by carefully embracing a well-known genre — in this case the rise and fall star biopic— the desire to identify could even succumb to an ensemble of plastic.[45]

Taken alongside Marks' thesis regarding the disappearing image, I argue that the degrading quality of the bootleg video continues Haynes' pursuit of immersion. If you accept Marks' premise, and Haynes' objective was to overcome the threshold of material identification, then the bootleg version takes this pursuit even further, going beyond the dolls to project oneself onto the disappearing image.

To dig even deeper into the intertextual ramifications between Marks' essay and Haynes' film, there is in both a strong subtext surrounding the AIDS epidemic. Marks chooses several films about HIV/AIDS to foreground her assertions, but beyond this, she writes from a cultural context of grief that charges the text with a humbling and affective resonance. When I was reading contemporaneous reviews of *Superstar* (what few I could find), HIV/AIDS was a common theme that kept reoccurring but has since disappeared from the film's more recent analyses. Hilderbrand makes note of this as well in his comprehensive essay on *Superstar* and bootlegs, remarking that, at the time of its release, it would have been difficult to avoid the obvious connection between the diminished Barbies and the AIDS-affected body; yet as time goes on, this link seems to have weakened in the public's eye.[46] This connection is one of many social memories that are reified in the film's haunting decay, which furnishes the film with an ambient melancholy. Yet the connection to the AIDS crisis and prevalent sense of grief is a link that subtly persists the more I spend time with *Superstar*.[47] Made in 1987, the film coincides with the near-peak of the AIDS crisis in New York, a defining context in Haynes' own life and career. The following year, the director would become a founding member of Gran Fury, a group of visual artists who produced material for New York-based activist group ACT-UP. Speaking about this role, Haynes explains how he became fascinated with the representation of queerness in the media and was infatuated with dissecting how the mainstream media formed depictions of deviance and normalcy.[48] These inquiries would later manifest in his 1993-sci-fi horror triptych *Poison,* though I can't help but consider the counter cultural drive to reinvent communities on the outside of the mainstream representation and how bootlegging contributes to such processes. As a consequence of the mutable qualities of VHS and the lack of legitimate forums to screen the film, viewers were elevated to the role of amateur archivist, curators, and distributors. In an informal survey surrounding the bootleg economy of *Superstar*, author Lucas Hildebrand summarizes his findings as stories of "sentimental personal association or quest narratives," indicating that the modes in which the dubs circulated were determined foremost by friends and fans.[49] Those who possess these tapes see their lineage as coauthors of the tape's meaning. Perhaps the most memorable response cited by Hilderbrand was from filmmaker Jim Hubbard, whose VHS was inherited from a friend who passed away in 1992: "to me it's more important as an object that belonged to my friend Dave than as Todd's film (which is rather poorly represented by this copy)."[50] I have no way of knowing how Hubbard's friend died, though given the timeframe and Hubbard's prominence as an HIV/AIDS activist-filmmaker, the quote seems to imply a further connection between the coinciding histories, and acts as a reminder that *Superstar* is a queer film which circulated in queer art scenes just as those very same communities were ravaged by loss throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Hubbard explains, for him the film is precious not for its intended 'use' but rather for the furtive narrative inscribed within it. As Haynes' film recedes into blurriness, emergent texts come to the forefront and offer the viewer a richly encoded imprint of the plural histories that have packed themselves into the cultural baggage that *Superstar* carries with it today.

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[44] Davis, *Superstar,* 54.
[45] Davis, *Superstar,* 86.

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[46] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 60.
[47] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 83.
[48] Lahr, "Todd Haynes Writes the Hollywood Playbook."

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[49] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 83.

[50] Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 83.

Chapter Two: Northern Exposure: Media Imperialism, Video Materiality, and the Canadian Identity

While *Superstar* only became a video classic through social migration, David Cronenberg's 1983 horror film *Videodrome* is a work that seems endemic to video. The film takes the pre-eminence of magnetic tape as a catalyst to speculate on the potential entanglements between technology, the psyche, the body, and cultural sovereignty. Like *Superstar*, video and its migratory patterns play a key role in expressing the social contexts which are obliquely alluded to or proxied in *Videodrome*. In the previous chapter, I discussed bootlegging as a vernacular distribution practice brimming with potential. Shifting gears to examine other affects contained within video's rich texture, this case study explores how the materiality of magnetic tape expresses vulnerability, repression, and further encodes a social history of media and identity. Although the film falls outside the paradigm of what many assume to be typical Canadiana (such as CBC programming or Margaret Atwood novels), considering its themes alongside the national cultural context offers a compelling optic into the allegorical narrative Cronenberg establishes. Set in Toronto, Canada, the film's location is a significant yet understated detail. Evidently, contemporaneous reviews narrowly dwell on the provocative themes in the film rather than the geopolitical metaphors. In the decades since the film's release, scholars have picked up on the national allusions embedded in the plot.[51] Emerging during a charged moment in media history, the rapidly eroding psychological barriers wrought by a globalizing world become the raw material for the film's climactic arc. A furtive neurosis which haunts the film from early-on exposes the possibility that, as much as amplified circulation offers opportunities for subcultural participation in image distribution, increased mobility may also imperil existing boundaries (both physical and psychological).

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[51] The earliest citation I can find which explicitly ties the film to the motif of a Canadian psyche and concern about cultural imperialism is Bart Testa, "Technology's Body: Cronenberg, Genre, and the Canadian Ethos,"*Post Script 15*, no. 1 (1995): 39–56.

The themes and approach I've taken with the material I am writing on is greatly influenced by Winnipeg-based scholar Andrew Burke's 2019 book *Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s*. Named for *Hinterland Who's Who*, the memorable NFB shorts which introduced a generation of Canadian viewers to local wildlife, the book explores how the aesthetics of obsolescence resonate within the formation of cultural memory. In his essay on magnetic tape as a vehicle of regional affect, Burke briefly discusses Brett Kashmere's 2006 short experimental film, *Valery's Ankle,* an essayistic film which examines violence in hockey.[52] Borrowing this case study, I too will draw on Kashmere's film to explore the themes of media, material and national identity from a different point of access, namely experimental essayistic non-fiction rather than mainstream cinema. Using found footage, *Valery's Ankle* evokes both the cultural memory and "selective amnesia" embroiled in the game of hockey to speculate on the Canadian psyche.[53] In contrast to Kashmere's film, which remediates archival footage from Canadian sports tapes, *Videodrome* weaves the material conditions of its format into the narrative, producing an imperfect yet prescient horror film. Between the two examples, an illustration of the relationship between social memory and magnetic tape manifests to unpack formative moments in the history of Canadian media and synthesize a cluster of feelings regarding national identity amidst newly transgressed media frontiers.

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[52] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed*, 126.
[53] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 128.

The Media is the Message

Videodrome follows Max Renn, the president of a sleazy Toronto-based television station which brands itself as “the one you take to bed with you.” Renn’s station, Civic-tv, is a play on local Toronto channel, Citytv, and allegedly Renn himself is an interpretation of the well-known co-founder of Citytv, Moses Znaimer (though Cronenberg denies it).[54] Hungry for content that pushes the boundaries of his usual line-up of softcore programming, Renn becomes infatuated with a mysterious broadcast signal called Videodrome, which is intercepted by his technician Harlan, and depicts scenes of erotically charged sadistic torture. As Renn and his love interest Nikki Brand become increasingly obsessed with Videodrome, he probes an associate for information on the signal, which leads him to the eccentric media-prophet Professor O’Blivion, a figure who only appears on television screens. Following a lead to the Cathode Ray Mission, Renn meets O’Blivion’s daughter, Bianca, who runs the Mission as an experimental service to “patch” the homeless back into the “world's mixing board.”[55] Bianca’s choice of words here further invests in the central analogy of flesh and technology. “Patching” alludes to a process of connecting one electronic media to a system; used in this context, Bianca substitutes media with disenfranchised individuals as an attempt to assimilate the latter back within society. O'Blivion himself is a hyperbolic adaptation of the 20th century Canadian media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, whose quotable aphorisms drive the underlying ethos of the film.[56] Later, O'Blivion sends Renn a tape which hazily explains the origins of Videodrome. The signal is an experimental mind-control project which he unwittingly created with his former partner Barry Convex, "an enthusiastic global citizen who makes eye-glasses for the Third World and missile guidance systems for NATO."[57] Convex has since weaponized the technology he pioneered with O'Blivion. Around this time, Renn also begins experiencing vivid and violent hallucinations, most notably in a scene where a gaping orifice appears in his torso (fig.6).

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[54] Greg Klymkiw, “Videodrome,” *Electric Sheep: A Deviant Review of Cinema,* August 10, 2015, http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/reviews/2015/08/10/videodrome/.

[55] David Cronenberg, *Videodrome*.

The technology comes to life on many occasions. In one scene, a throbbing cassette delivers a visceral moment of likeness between flesh and media to abjectly illustrate McLuhan's thesis about technology as a sensory extension of the body (fig.7).[58] In another, Brand (who later only appears on screen through a screen) seduces Renn to insert his head into the now penetrable television monitor, rearticulating the indistinguishability between organic bodies and the technologies which invade them (fig.8). It is later revealed that Renn has been betrayed by Harlan, who is in league with Convex, in a shadowy plot to control society through the airwaves. The two insert a tape into Renn's chest-VCR to manipulate him to kill Bianca. The hallucinations, which have overtaken the narrative (as a result of their hold on Renn), are revealed to be the embryonic stage of a brain tumor caused by the signal. After being dispatched to eliminate Bianca, it is revealed to Renn (and the viewer) that O'Blivion has been deceased for some time and exists only in the collection of tapes which continue to project his likeness through pre-recorded monologues played on CRT monitors. After killing his colleagues under the influence of the insidious signal and then turning on Convex and Harlan, Renn retreats to a houseboat. A television containing Brand's image compels Renn to kill himself in order to fully defeat Videodrome. The television screen shows Renn an image of him killing himself with his flesh-gun hand. He appears to accept his fate and utters the iconic (and opaque) mantra of the film—'long live the new flesh'—before the screen fades and we hear a shot.

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[56] Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh: Videodrome's Format War," in *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 75-76.
[57] David Cronenberg, *Videodrome.*
[58] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 11.

Summarizing the plot fails to capture what works in the film. While it never quite pulls off the lofty philosophical ambitions it seemingly attempts it does offer compelling visual metaphors and prophetic awareness of the invasive potential of technology. I was reticent to include any such description of the film because it doesn't easily translate to a synopsis, and there already exists plenty of material that analyzes the film in relation to its genre, content, plot and so forth. Instead, I am interested in focusing on its treatment of video materiality and what this might evoke. For this reason, I am more interested in thinking around the paratextual qualities of *Videodrome*, than actually dwelling in the film itself. Offering a window into the late 20th century in Toronto, *Videodrome* encapsulates a slice of cultural consciousness that reflects the chaotic but reciprocal relationship between media, the body, and cultural identity.

In his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man,* McLuhan proposes a redistribution of attention towards the media itself and away from the content, suggesting that the greatest effects a technology engenders in society will not be a result of the message (content) but rather the medium.[59] McLuhan will always be best known for the catchy aphorism contained within that text: "the medium is the message."[60] This seductive declaration has captured the attention of audiences for decades and while, like any intellectual trend, McLuhan's has had his ebbs and flows, overall his ideas have remained remarkably in favour among media scholars. In recent years, some have made a case for McLuhan's continued relevance by considering his ideas in relation to those who have been previously been overlooked in both his writing and the field of media studies in general. For example, in 2017, Sarah Sharma (the current director of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto) adapted the theorist's popular Monday night seminars to consider the role of gender in his body of work through a series of events cleverly titled "MsUnderstanding Media" (fig.9).[61] Scholars such as Sharma who take up the McLuhan mantle today bring renewed life to his texts and create new critical synapses for them to thrive. Within the oeuvre of popular culture and horror film, Cronenberg does the same, translating McLuhan's famous saying into a horrific premise wherein the eponymous signal is instrumentalized by Convex as a tool for psychic colonization.[62]

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[59] McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 1-2.
[60] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1.
[61] "U of T Careers: Sarah Sharma on Being a McLuhan Scholar," University of Toronto Bulletin, accessed November 11, 2020, https://www.utoronto.ca/bulletin/u-t-careers-sarah-sharma-being-mcluhan-scholar.
[62] Mark A. McCutcheon, "Monsterous Adaptations: McLuhanesque Frankensteins in Neuromancer and Videodrome," in *The Medium is the Monster* (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2018), 122.

When we first meet Prof. O'Blivion, he appears on a talk show with Renn and Nikki Brand, but unlike his fellow guests, he appears not in the flesh, but on a TV monitor wheeled into the studio. Appearing several screens deep and claiming that television is more real than reality, O'Blivion delivers a monologue that resonates as a hyperbolic adaptation of McLuhan's energetic proselytizing. The framing of this monologue foreshadows the central conceit of the film by setting up the nebulous relationship between television and reality, which envelops the viewer as the horizon line of the real recedes farther into Renn's hallucinations. 'The medium is the message' becomes a literal premonition in *Videodrome*, as the viewer discovers that the content of broadcast (the violent and sexually charged images) is designed to deliver the signal to CIVIC-TV's audience and eradicate them through the terminal side effects the broadcast engenders.

The body-horror genre is Cronenberg's specialty as an auteur. In *Videodrome,* he collides his preoccupation of this genre with the influential assertions of McLuhan to deliver a meta-prophetic vision of the interconnectedness of flesh and technology. The two-way dialogue the film sets up between body and technology complicates the cyborgian ideal of technology-enhanced organisms.[63] The signal invades the body but the tapes themselves also writhe and pulsate akin to an organic entity. McLuhan's bridge between media and body, meanwhile, is never quite so visceral. In *Understanding Media,* he makes the romantic-yet-reductive observation that all technology is an extension of human senses.[64] Raymond Williams, a notable critic of technological determinism, (a quality he associates with McLuhanism) seeks to deconstruct this ethos throughout his book *Television Technology, and Cultural Form* (1975)—a compelling foil to *Understanding Media*. Elaborating on his critiques of Mcluhan, Williams explains:

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[63] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 83.

[64] McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 15.

> McLuhan's work was his apparent attention to the specificity of media: the differences in quality between speech, print, radio, television and so on. But in his work, as in the whole formalist tradition, the media were never really seen as practices. All specific practice was subsumed by an arbitrarily assigned psychic function, and this had the effect of dissolving not only specific but general intentions.[65]

McLuhan delivers his theories with an almost neutral-utopianist tone, but the way his ideas are applied in *Videodrome* is much more grotesque. The film focuses on the effects of video on the body and psyche both at the individual and societal levels.

Part of what makes *Videodrome* so suited to tape has nothing to do with the plot but more broadly the genre. There exists a strong link between horror and video (owing greatly to the corresponding eras in which both thrived). In his article about the instrumentalization of nostalgia in VHS distribution, media scholar Daniel Herbert refers to the 2009 'Mumblegore' film, *House of the Devil,* which is shot on 16mm and set in the 1980s.[66] As an extension of the film's thorough immersion into the period, it was released on VHS and sold quite well as a novelty long after the format was largely obsolete.[67] This suggests that the bond between horror and magnetic tape persists to this day; the marginal feel of grainy video correlates perfectly to the lo-fi flair that is associated with the genre and appeals to a cult-centric nostalgia that applies to both.[68] What the body-horror genre—and *Videodrome* especially—does is evoke an anxiety associated with the body (and in this case technology as well) to reflect how access elicits vulnerability. This perhaps addresses a blind spot in McLuhan's thesis, which positions the senses as obedient extensions of a controlled and vaguely clinical body. There is the insinuation that technologies manifest as extensions of our senses and that they obey our intentions to expand our sensory capacities. This is a romantic notion and not one without merits, but it overlooks the unwieldy-ness or fallibility of the body in question. Rather than the Platonic ideal espoused by McLuhan, the body is also a site of anxiety, abjection, failure, and othering. Cronenberg takes advantage of this by doubling down on the physicality of the video—both in its object-ness and also through the texture of its image surface.

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[65] Williams, *Television, Technology, and Cultural Forms*, 120-121.

[66] Mumblegore is a subgenre of Mumblecore and denotes a specific caché of films that are made in the spirit of independent and aestheticized horror. One notable entry in the genre is an anthology assembled by Adam Wingard, featuring works by multiple filmmakers titled "V/H/S" (2012). The collage leans into the format of video and especially the mixtape aspect to create a collage of lo-fi vignettes.

[67] Daniel Hebert, "Nostalgia Merchants: VHS Distribution in the Era of Digital Delivery," *Journal of Film and Video 69*, no. 2 (2017): 6.

Lucas Hilderbrand refers to the "aesthetics of access" as the material inflections of video's dissolution of boundaries between creator, viewer, and distributor.[69] These aesthetics are depicted in *Videodrome* as an anxiety that accompanies the newly permeable borders of both of the body and a nation (which will be explored in more detail later on). Depicting an anxiety as such contradicts the notion that technological extensions simply amplify our bodies and suggests that, coextensive to these new abilities is a potent sense of vulnerability. This consequence is one which McLuhan himself addresses, referring to his contemporaneous era as the "age of anxiety," a condition which he diagnoses as a result of major technological transitions.[70] Returning to Laura U. Marks' impactful essay "Loving the Disappearing Image" (1997), in which she posits a theory of identification between viewership and the haptic image, I would suggest that the very texture of video offers a sense of the same vulnerability the film approximates. Although Marks is concerned with analogue media as a whole, her approach paves the way to a similar conclusion regarding the lo-fi look of magnetic tape and the anxiety of having a body that is susceptible to both disaster and disease.[71]

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[68] Hebert, "Nostalgia Merchants," 5-9.
[69] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 3.

Cronenberg was a student at the University of Toronto while McLuhan taught there and, although he didn't take classes with him, he recalls how the famous theorist exuded an aura which greatly influenced him.[72] McLuhan is one of the rare few whose theoretical premises have suffered the fate of pop-culture absorption — a fate which he fully embraced. While some might say it's the high watermark for philosophy, the popular appeal of his famous axiom tends to obscure the more complex aspects of his theories. However, the most substantial criticisms levelled against McLuhan are not for his indulgence in celebrity but rather for his disregard of the complex drives that produce the very technologies he writes on. Raymond Williams, an influential Marxist scholar, focuses his critique on the dismissive assumptions McLuhan makes regarding the emergence of media and sociopolitical contexts.[73] The way it is described by McLuhan, new technologies simply emerge irrelevant to the coinciding cultural conditions which surround them. Williams' more holistic approach is, in many ways, less romantic than the monolithic process advanced by McLuhan which casts technology as the undisputed catalyst at the center of all cultural motion. I've introduced Williams' rebuttals not simply to balance the portrayal of McLuhan as the undisputed titan of media theory, but because he introduces a critical paradigm that resonates in my research methodology. Williams' argument is messier than McLuhan's bold proclamations, but his insistence on the entanglements between political and social relations, and the implementation of media is a crucial connective tissue between all my case studies.

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[70] Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 10.
[71] Marks, "Loving the Disappearing Image," 94.
[72] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 74-75.
[73] Williams, *Television, Technology, and Cultural Forms* ,4.

Garrison Mentalities

Horror-centric video theorist Caetlin Benson-Allott has analyzed *Videodrome* under the lens of its contemporaneous relationship to American media, claiming that "the movie posits its own theory about the effects of video spectatorship on the subject's relationship to the lived body—as well as Canada's relationship to international media technologies and content producers."[74] Her reflections hinge on the notion that the Canadian psyche is afflicted by an overwhelming sense of paranoia owing to the nation's close yet tenuous relationship with the United States.[75] This dynamic, as interpreted by Benson-Allott, is allegorized by *Videodrome,* which weaponizes the threat of U.S. media imperialism that loomed heavily in the late 20th century Canadian media landscape. Throughout the 20th century, the Canadian government enacted legislation specifically targeting this threat. Formed in 1968, the Canadian Radio-television and

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[74] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 71.
[75] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 88.

Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is a regulatory agency with an aim to oversee broadcasting systems in the “public’s interest.”[76] Over the decades, this mandate would include a campaign of cultural protectionist measures, such as quotas for Canadian content, production subsidies, and tax incentives.[77] Speaking on the need of these policies, Pierre Juneau, the first chairman of the CRTC who went on to become the president of the CBC, declared,

> “Perhaps broadcasting best illustrates our (Canada and the United States) different traditions. Most Americans seem to believe that market forces will bring about what they want their broadcast media to do for them. We believe that broadcasting is a matter for collective concern and that the intervention of the state may well be necessary to achieve national goals.”[78]

Videodrome was made in a climactic era in media history, and to understand the film as a fable of border anxiety, one must fully consider the context that surrounded it, both domestically and internationally. Just as *Videodrome* was hitting theatres, a landmark case was settled before the United States Supreme Court, which is known as “The Betamax Case.”[79] The plaintiff of the case was Universal Studios, who argued that the technology of video constituted an infringement of their copyrights. The defendant, Sony, would ultimately win the case in 1984, when the court ruled that time-shifting technology did not constitute a violation. Although the case was settled in American courts, the effects were felt internationally, clearing the way for the home video market to thrive and establishing a still-relevant precedent for what constitutes fair use.[80] Whether or not the proliferation of these technologies offers liberation or domination is a matter of ideology. For all the cautionary rhetoric that surrounds this era and the threat of psychic imperialism via the airwaves, the nation-state's cohesion of an identity is also facilitated by the very same technologies. Thus, at the same time many conservative perspectives lament the amassing dependency of an increasingly globalized media landscape in Canada, the "imagined community" of the nation-state is also exploiting this media as a vehicle for its ideas. This paradigm is referred to by scholar Maurice Charland as "technological nationalism," an ideology that binds the capacity to develop and harness technology to the authority to create a nation.[81] The paradox that emerges however is the dual reliance on, and anxiety around these emergent communication methods. In my research, I came across a quote from Québec filmmaker Jean-Claude Labrecque, which I think offers a geographically apt analogy of how technology was perceived as a threat to social sovereignty. Referring to the technology's evolution, Labrecque pronounced, "it's like snow: it keeps falling and all you can do is go on shoveling."[82]

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[76] Len Katz, and Sean Speer, *A New Digital Policy for A New Digital Age: A Mandate Review of the CRTC*, (Ottawa, ON: A MacDonald-Laurier Institute Publication, 2016), 4.
[77] Katz, and Speer, *A New Digital Policy for A New Digital Age,* 12.
[78] Katz, and Speer, *A New Digital Policy for A New Digital Age,*10.
[79] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 17.

Benson-Allott's impression of the nation's character being dominated by a sense of insecurity recalls what mid-century Canadian literary-critic Northrop Frye calls the "garrison mentality."[83] According to Frye, this mentality hinges on the assertion that the

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[80] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 18-19.
[81] Charland, "Technological Nationalism," 197.
[82] Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 129.
[83] Benson Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 88.

Canadian psyche is overwhelmed by survivalist instincts on account of a foreboding natural environment and the struggle over cultural autonomy. The thesis describes the "beleaguered" early European settlers erecting forts against the threat of an untamed and vast wilderness in the 17th century.[84] As time went on, this practice transformed into an attitude which Frye describes a "stultifying" psychic bondage driven by fear and obedience.[85] Frye's allegation of a uniform mentality points to an impasse—the imaginary and the often-problematic idea that Canadianness correlates to any shared psychological condition or identity. It's an assumption which either explicitly or implicitly gestures towards white-ness. Taking into account the erasures that occur whenever a vision of national identity is evoked, I want to proceed cautiously to critically unfurl how motifs such as the "garrison mentality" endure without further naturalizing them as essential conditions. In tandem with a centuries-long (and counting) campaign of settler-colonialism, Canadian identity is a mythopoetic tradition and one which media and the fine arts have contributed to substantively. The visual manifestation of this mythos has long been the representation of Canada as an empty and rugged frontier. The distinction of these natural features was manipulated to carve out an identity between new and old superpowers, but also explicitly to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land, rights, and sovereignty. Frye's "garrison mentality" corroborates this evaluation of the territory, which is known as Canada, as empty and feral.[86] This familiar language recalls the notion of *Terra Nullius,* the justification used for many settler-colonial occupations which erases Indigenous presence and replaces it with a vast, empty, and fictional frontier. To Frye, a critic who played a central role in defining the Canadian condition of the latter 20th Century, the national creative consciousness is "haunted by the natural world."[87] Therefore, it is the responsibility of the artist (according to Frye) to take "psychic possession" of this landscape—an objective which extends the manifest destiny of settlers to conquer the region and its resources both physically and intellectually.[88]

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[84] Northrop Frye, "View of Canada: never a believer in a happy ending," *The Globe and Mail,* April 6. 1976.

[85] Frye, "View of Canada."

[86] John O'Brian, and Peter White, "Wilderness Myths," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art,* ed. John O'Brian, and Peter White (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens Press, 2007), 24.

Imagined Communities

There persists an idea that Canadian identity is structured between the shadow of the old-world power of the British Empire and the new world dominance of the United States.[89] What Benson-Allott proposes in her analysis of *Videodrome* is that the film comes out at a time when these anxieties are amplified by technologies which extend access, thus dissolving the already tenuous boundaries of nation and self.[90] Supporting her claim, the author recalls a speech given at a conference regarding American and Canadian broadcast policy (the very same year that *Videodrome* is released) in which University of Toronto professor Frank Peers claims that "Canada is the first nation-state whose continued existence is put in jeopardy by media influences arriving from another country."[91] The weaponization of the broadcast signal in the film materializes this fear of

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[87] O'Brian, and White, "Wilderness Myths, 32.
[88] O'Brian, and White. "Wilderness Myths." 32.
[89] Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind,* 7.
[90] Maurice Charland, "Technological Nationalism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory vol. X,* no1-2 (1986): 208-209.
[91] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 84.

"media imperialism."[92] Renn, the purveyor of a local smutty cable station, depicts this anxiety through the permeability of his own body, which is penetrated on several frontiers by the insidious signal.

The attitude of *Videodrome* is closely linked to its protagonist, Renn, the viewer sees only what he sees and knows only what he knows. Therefore, part of what makes *Videodrome* hard to read as "Canadian" is that Renn himself comes off as American (and is portrayed by American actor James Woods). As a character, he is driven by libido and curiosity, in contrast to the humble chastity associated (perhaps erroneously) with Canadian virtues. Yet, despite this, Renn is based on Toronto media magnate Moses Znaimer, the founder of Citytv and MuchMusic, who was incidentally influenced by McLuhan to create edgier and modern Canadian content (fig.10). Znaimer is considered a pioneer of local broadcasting, after leaving the CBC on bitter terms in the early 1970s, he developed an idiosyncratic brand of television that featured "locally produced news shows and softcore pornography."[93] *Videodrome's* own opaque Canadian identity reflects a curious dialectic cultural energy between Canadiana and un-Canadian-ness, which Znaimer himself emulated. Never one to shy away from the spotlight, Znaimer seems to have enjoyed his position as an entrepreneur and public face of Canadian media. What's interesting about this is that, when I comb through contemporaneous profiles of Znaimer, he often refers to himself as an outsider in the field of Canadian media. As the child of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants who grew up in Montreal (later settling in Toronto), these claims may be a response to the experience of growing up a first-generation Canadian settler, though it's also possible he is referring to more acute idiosyncrasies. For instance, Znaimer displayed distinctly "un-Canadian"[94] appetites for gaudy displays of wealth and attention, yet it is still curious that such a front facing and influential figure in the national media landscape would hold onto this sense of alienation. It seems as though Znaimer's programming is a direct response to this sense of exteriority—I would go so far to call it a reactionary foil to the national zeitgeist.

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[92] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh,"72.

[93] Benson-Allott, "Addressing the New Flesh," 73.

Citytv (which becomes CIVIC-TV in the film) bears the distinction of being the first local cable station in the country, similarly MuchMusic was among the first stations to get a specialty programming license from the CRTC(fig.11).[95] Both these milestones harken to a significant era for Canadian broadcast history, the latter of which is discussed at length by Canadian scholar Kip Pegley in her book, *Coming to You Wherever You Are: MuchMusic, MTV, and Youth Identities* (2008). Pegley's research revolves around a comparison of the "televisual flow" between MTV and MuchMusic in an attempt to extract and identify a distinct quality of the latter.[96] Within the same year that *Videodrome* was released, MuchMusic hit the air, the Betamax case went to court, Karen Carpenter died, and political historian Benedict Anderson also published his text *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), which pursues the intricacies of nation-based identities. Following Anderson, Pegley borrows the term “imagined communities” to more minutely examine how social constructs like nationalism are reflected in American and Canadian music television.[97] What Pegley discovers is that, in contrast to MTV, which favours homogenized blocks of content to secure continuous viewership, MuchMusic engages a greater degree of heterogeneity in its programming.[98] This could be misconstrued to bolster the illusion of Canada as a “mosaic” (as opposed to America as a “melting pot”). However, I am resistant to champion this model as the favorable one (as it is often presented) because any claim to racial equity that the nation clings to is thoroughly disproven by the way the governing bodies of the country have treated newcomers and failed to honor treaties and relations with Indigenous communities. Instead, I would interpret this alongside another observation of Pegley’s who claims that:

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[94] John Haslett Cuff, "And Moses Said…'Let it be done my way," *The Globe and Mail,* May 30, 1981.
[95] CRTC 50 Years," Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, accessed October 18, 2020, https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/acrtc/50.htm.
[96] Pegley borrows Raymond Williams' concept of televisual flow which analyzes programming as a holistic sample from which to draw conclusions.

> MuchMusic, while undisputedly commercial, was inflected with the public broadcasting ideology (a pervasive model in Canada perpetuated largely vis-à-vis the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), which attempted to serve a wide demographic of Canadian viewers of varying styles and tastes.[99]

This notion of public broadcast spaces having such a strong influence on the nature of national media suggests an endearing consequence of this era in which regional peculiarities flourished prior to the totalizing trend of conglomeration.

Pegley introduces another observation regarding the presence of regional specificity. As she reviews MTV against MuchMusic, she notes that MTV makes a concerted effort to remain timeless and placeless in contrast with MuchMusic, which is more transparent regarding its location and temporal bracket.[100] The sacrifice of this transparency is the illusion of globality, with MTV striving to maintain this illusion through the erasure of any differentiation, an objective which, as Pegley notes, is aptly delivered in their slogan— "coming to you wherever you are."[101] This analysis of MuchMusic presents a fuller picture regarding the media landscape of the 1980s in Canada. This history demonstrates the complex entanglements between identity and televisuality by taking a wide-angle view of the two channels to examine how they each reflect the culture they coincide with. As demonstrated by Pegley, MuchMusic is unlike its American counterpart MTV, but also differs substantially from other ubiquitous Canadian channels like the CBC (not to mention its departure from the nature-preoccupied media that Frye describes). It is unique in its simultaneous appreciation of pop culture yet distinct Canadian-ness. The station and its programming are undeniably a product of the video era and evidence of the hybridized culture it engendered.

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[97] Kip Pegley, “Coming to You Wherever You Are: Exploring the Imagined Communities of MuchMusic (Canada) and MTV (USA),” in *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones,* ed. Roger Beebe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 201.
[98] Pegley, “Coming to You Wherever You Are,” 204-205.
[99] Pegley, “Coming to You Wherever You Are,” 209.

The past will always be indexed by the look and feel of the media which corresponds to it.[102] Cronenberg pre-empts this connection in *Videodrome* and weaves a narrative around the capacity of media to reveal the affective qualities of social conditions. This relationship between an era and the media which coincide with it is expressed well by Burke, who states, "video mediates but also becomes the texture and format of cultural memory itself."[103] One chapter of his text *Hinterland Remixed* in particular focuses on the residual affect of magnetic tape, as “the connection between format and feeling.”[104] The Hinterland shorts, which Burke uses as a jumping-off-point for his reflections on media, nation, and memory, represent something quintessentially Canadian; they are humble and good in a way that reflects how Canadians like to imagine themselves. In contrast, *Videodrome* revolves around provocative images of sex and violence—far from the typical traits Canadians pin to their identity. Among the eclectic range of films that Burke discusses in his book is Brett Kashmere’s *Valery’s Ankle* (2006), a film-essay that also speaks to the themes of nationality, violence, repression, and cultural memory through the lens of hockey (fig.12). The game does a lot of heavy lifting in upholding the idea of an autonomous national culture, but the sheer brutality of professional hockey exposes a paradoxical contradiction between our aforementioned good-ness and acceptance of violence under the guise of sport.[105] The essayistic film compiles found footage of Canadian hockey games, while Kashmere’s soft and unassuming voice delivers the film’s thesis, arguing that the repression of violence rather than its absence represents the true Canadian psyche. The filmic collage assembled by Kashmere bears the traces of resolution loss and tracking lines, reminding the viewer as to the prominent role television and video have played in our construction of modern history. Video is not simply the vehicle through which these memories have been transported to contemporary viewers, but an active agent in shaping how we retroactively construct our notion of the past. Kashmere demonstrates this by playing a clip of a game during the 1972 summit series between the Soviet

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[100] Pegley, "Coming to You Wherever You Are," 220-222.
[101] Pegley, "Coming to You Wherever You Are," 222.
[102] Burke*, Hinterland Remixed*, 5.
[103] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 126.

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[104] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 116.
[105] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 127.

Union and Canada, in which a Canadian player brutally slashes an opponent's ankle. Kashmere gives the footage the full forensic treatment, rewinding, pausing, and replaying the images to expose (to borrow the term from Burke) a "glitch" in cultural memory which casts doubt upon the profile of Canadians as humble and kind (fig.13).[106] In the concluding moments of the film, Kashmere leverages the claim that the Canadian psyche is dominated by repression, and the identity that transpires clings to what we are not, rather than what we are.[107] The filmmaker doesn't go so far as to name what is implied in that negation, but I certainly read it as gesturing towards American-ness, an idea which—addition to causing concern for media imperialism—has also offered Canadians a comfortably low bar by which we can measure our own moral integrity against.

True North

When I apply Kashmere's polemic of repression to Cronenberg's allegorized fear of psychic penetration, it seems clear that both filmmakers have sought to dismiss the old archetype of Canadian-ness and to provide a contrast to the persistent impression of provincial politeness. Kashmere's reliance on domestic archival footage to leverage his thesis also suggests that, unlike the dominant fear that American culture is the primary threat to our social identity, the real danger comes from within our own borders. Since the emergence of video, viewers have been transformed into users who have become active participants in preserving the cultural memory. Following this, it becomes less and less possible to uphold the metanarrative of a stable national identity. I interpret this so-called threat as a desirable trajectory and perhaps part of a necessary project of undoing the harmful subterfuge of nation-based identity, especially one which obscures the colonial foundations it rests upon and perpetuates.

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[106] Burke, *Hinterland Remixed,* 128.
[107] Brett Kashmere, *Valery's Ankle* (Montreal QC, 2006), found footage.

Dramatizing details from the field of Canadian media and scholarship, Cronenberg's film offers a fictionalized time capsule which pits the local broadcaster against an international conspiracy to weaponize the airwaves. While the film's urban setting is a far cry from the garrisons of Frye's theory, the threat of a vast unknown is reiterated through the Videodrome signal and the unknowable factor of technology in general. I have wavered on whether or not there is a moral bottom line in *Videodrome*, or whether the film is an indictment against television and the desensitization of sex and violence that accompanies it. Cautiously, I would argue otherwise, that Cronenberg evokes these themes with an air of ambivalence that stops short of moralizing.[108] His arena is not that of morality but rather the terrain of the psyche. In *Videodrome,* the viewer (almost unwittingly) explores the Canadian psyche and all its fabled virtuosity to peel back the skin of this assumption and expose the violence, vulnerability, and carnality underneath. The film is now nearly four-decades old yet retains vital prescience in its shrewd optic on the relationship between media materiality, identity, body, and nation. Recognizing the dissolving boundaries between skin and screen, Cronenberg's film interrogates the very texture of video and the narrative integrity it wields as a potent force in the formation and circulation of social memory.

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[108] Gary Indiana, "Videodrome: The Slithery Sense of Unreality," *The Criterion Collection,* December 7, 2010, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1678-videodrome-the-slithery-sense-of-unreality,

I’m Online and It’s Raining: Pixel Politics and Digital Gentrification in *Liquidity Inc.*

During the autumn of 2019, I was having a discussion with a friend who leads digital art programming with kids. He recalled a recent conversation in which a young participant had expressed confusion over his use of the term “internet,” which surprised my friend as he knew the participant to be a frequent user of social media and digital devices. He responded with a brief survey of sites that would of course be familiar to the child, naming popular domains such as Facebook and Instagram. Finally grasping what my friend meant, an expression of relief settled on the participant's face as she replied: “oh, you mean apps!” This exchange was relayed to me as such events often are, an ethnography of the young amongst adults who are warmly reminded of the magic realism of childhood perception. The specifics of this conversation, which had resulted in a brief miscommunication, exposes more than a simple generational lapse. It’s true that the age discrepancy had exposed a slippage in lexicons, but the anecdote also aptly illustrates the thesis of filmmaker and cultural theorist Hito Steyerl’s boisterous 2013 essay, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” First published on multifaceted art platform *e-flux*, “Too Much World” questions the state of the internet, asking, “is it dead?” before quickly establishing that “the internet is probably not dead. It has rather gone all-out. Or more precisely: it is all over!”[109] It’s a thesis which was a foregone conclusion for the young user who had no reason to atomize the internet, or even name it, since for them it's *all-over-ness* was a naturalized fact as long as they could remember.

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[109] Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux,* November 2013, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/.

In the essay, Steyerl chews over the politics of circulation in an era of surveillance, post-cinema, and globalized economies. Many of these themes are remixed in Steyerl's 2014 video-installation, *Liquidity Inc.* The film loosely follows Jacob Wood, a Vietnamese-born financial advisor who, after losing his job during the 2008 financial crash, reinvents himself as a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter and ringside pundit. Wood's story provides a semblance of a narrative arc, but the film takes many detours away from this structure into more experimental territory (fig.14).[110] Between Wood's story, Steyerl intersperses weather reports, delivered by balaclava-clad forecasters who authoritatively speculate about the cultural climate. Weather and water serve as central metaphors in the film and both motifs are thoroughly excavated by the artist who stretches the meaning of each to simulate the experience of living in an intangibly digital world.[111] Taking the plurality of significance associated with liquidity. Steyerl alchemically creates a cosmology between global economics, social precarity, modern warfare, psychology, weather, and digital image velocity.

Throughout the previous chapters, I have considered the relationship between materiality, decay, and vulnerability. This final chapter continues this pursuit by unpacking Steyerl's various depictions of digital materiality to consider how channels of circulation overlap with politics and economics. Recently described in *The New York*

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[110] Karen Archey, "Hyper-Elasticity: Symptoms, Signs, Treatment in Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.,"* in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2014), 224.
[111] Gary Zhang, "Hito Steyerl's Liquidity Inc. and Art Under Neoliberalism," *The Kings Review*, January 13, 2017, https://www.kingsreview.co.uk/17jan .

Times as a “networked thinker,” Steyerl’s interdisciplinary practice habitually bounces ideas back and forth between texts, performance-lectures, and films. For this reason, I will be drawing from a range of her works to consider how they might offer additional insights.[112] A critical yet secondary theme in *Liquidty Inc.* is the allusion to the psychological bondage of capitalism. Following this, I will consider Steyerl’s film alongside texts by theorists Jodi Dean, Mark Fisher, and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, all of whom have considered the toll of neoliberalism on the contemporary psyche. Additionally, Steyerl’s self-reflexive mode of making invites timely questions as to the role of art and the artist. For instance, how do artists who work in “postproduction” (in the Bourriaudian sense) engage the routes of circulation in a critical and meaningful manner?[113] What function does politically motivated artwork serve when the art world is institutionally linked to capitalist interests? Steyerl does not necessarily provide answers to these questions, as much as she considers them from a unique vantage point, drawing from a range of sources and demonstrating a knack for connecting the dots between them. With this in mind, I pursue these questions through *Liquidity Inc.* to examine the politics of the pixel in the present neoliberal environment.

Focussing on the material qualities of the digital image, I aim to examine how Steyerl’s depiction of circulation runs parallel to her indictments of late capitalism and a self-critical understanding of the artist’s and institutions' roles in these systems.[114] As the distinction between producer and consumer wears thin, it bears considering how the "aesthetics of access," which I have elaborated upon in the preceding case studies, are entangled with systems of globality and economic ideology.[115] Densely packed with intertextuality and synonymy, *Liquidity Inc*. offers a unique optic into how the digital era has been shaped and informed by the conditions of media materiality.

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[112] Kimberly Bradley, “Hito Steyerl is an Artist with Power. She Uses it for Change,” *The New York Times,* December 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/arts/design/hito-steyerl.html.

[113] Referring to Nicolas Bourriaud’s essay on Postproduction from 2006 in which the author observes the trend of artists basing work on pre-existing works. Nicolas Bourriaud. *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (Berlin, DE: Sternberg Press, 2006).

[114] Zhang, “Hito Steyerl’s Liquidity Inc. and Art Under Neoliberalism.”

I Still Dream of Orgonon:

Presenting the theory that both the neoliberal subject and digital images are expected to embody a state of fluidity, *Liquidity Inc.* goes to ambitious lengths to scrutinize the links between image, economics, and politics.[116] Wood serves as a perfect avatar for this thesis. From the beginning, his story is shaped by geopolitical flux. A Vietnamese-born American, he first arrived in the United States by way of "Operation Babylift," a controversial program that transported displaced children from South Vietnam to America (and elsewhere) after the Vietnam War.[117] As an adult, his career on Wall Street began with the dot-com boom, a period of exponential growth and excitement that surrounded the early days of the internet, and ended with the 2008 market crash, an event which saw the United States' housing market collapse.[118] These two moments in recent history bookend the cultural climate which Steyerl grasps for in the film. Both events serve to illustrate the extremely speculative nature of the economy, a quality that the artist likens to forecasting. Upon abruptly losing his livelihood, Wood decides to pursue his MMA hobby as a full-time job. MMA fighting, like finance, also fetishizes this concept of liquidity— a connection which Steyerl drives home by lingering on shots of Wood sparring, staying constantly in motion, loose, and ready to pivot at a moment's notice.[119] These skills, the film contends, are survival tactics for the contemporary ubiquity of neoliberal precarity. The late capitalism labourer must be prepared for the bubble to burst at any moment, and they must learn to keep going to stay afloat.

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[115] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice,* 3.
[116] Archey, "Hyper-Elasticity," 225.
[117] Paddy Johnson, "Hito Steyerl's Artists Space Show Mixes Money, Violence, and Art and Delights the Mind," *ArtNet News,* April 9, 2015, https://news.artnet.com/market/hito-steyerl-scopes-nexus-money-violence-art-286092.
[118] Archey, Hyper-Elasticity," 222-223.

The opening moments of the film show Bruce Lee on an iPhone screen. Lee, who acts as one of several pseudo-narrators, delivers one of the film's most poignant lines: "water can flow or it can crash…be formless, be shapeless, be water my friend" (fig.15).[120] Visually, the film shifts dramatically between live-action, digital rendering, and hybrids of the two. These shifts make *Liquidity Inc.* slippery to summarize but also fold the theme back onto the film's form. While maintaining a consistent thematic focus, the film undergoes noticeable changes of state, similar to the cycles of precipitation depicted, to allegorize life under neoliberalism. The film moves quickly between styles and metaphors, abruptly cutting between documentary style footage of martial arts matches to CGI-rendered water and found news footage. As a result*, Liquidity Inc.* demands flexibility on the viewer's part, its fluidity simulating the pace of online consumption.

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[119] Archey, Hyper-Elasticity," 225.

[120] Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.* (2014: Berlin, DE), HD Video.

As Lee contends, water can crash, and the violent potential of a world in which finance and data are thoroughly intertwined with systems of warfare and surveillance is fully realized by Steyerl, who parodies the structure of weather reports to announce opaque monologues on the state of economics and images. The forecasts are delivered by figures wearing owl shirts, and balaclavas which obscure their features and suggest a terrorist-esque aesthetic (fig.16).[121] During one forecast, one of the “weathermen” (as they are credited) offers, a poetic report with lines like, “weather is time,” “weather is money,” “weather is water.”[122] In another, a second balaclava-clad figure, this time a child, announces that “the Weather Underground is busting corporate clouds using orgone cannons.”[123] This line is one of several mentions of the far-left militant group, the Weather Underground, active in the United States in the 1960s. It’s a citation that taps into Steyerl’s ongoing regard for activist culture. Speaking to this recurring motif in the artist’s work, critic Karen Archey speculates that it serves an externalizing function, allowing Steyerl to “point outside the spheres of artistic practice and academia into the realm of world politics.”[124] The Weather Underground, the Vietnam War, Hokusai and all the variegated motifs that Steyerl includes in the film point to the historical richness of her citations. Although presented in a very contemporary aesthetic, much of the content of Steyerl’s film is rooted in history, and the political and cultural exchanges that have fundamentally shaped our current aesthetic and economic ideologies.

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[121] Archey, “Hyper-Elasticity,” 224.
[122] Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*
[123] Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*
[124] Archey, “Hyper-Elasticity,” 228.

Like many elements in the film, the term “clouds” is used to evoke multiple notions. The allusion to “cloudbusting” and “orgone cannons” refers to a pseudoscientific process invented in 1930s by the eccentric psychoanalyst Dr. Wilhelm Reich, who claimed to possess the ability to harness his theorized entity, orgone energy, to control precipitation. Reich too is a recurring motif, alluded to later more inconspicuously through the presence of a Kate Bush song titled “Cloudbusting,” which references his work and life.[125] These references function to draw even more entangled synapses between history, weather, the psyche, and pop culture, all themes which Steyerl is intent on mining to the core.

Horizontal Blurs:

An earlier text by Steyerl titled, “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2009), charts a theoretical lineage towards both “Too Much World” and *Liquidity Inc*. Originally published on *e-flux*, a domain which Steyerl’s ambiguous and experimental style has come to epitomize, the essay characterizes the political allegiances of images according to resolution. Steyerl casts the ‘poor image’ as the rogue-ish icon of the proletariat, in contrast to its flashy high-definition counterpart, claiming, “focus is identified as a class position, a position of ease and privilege while being out of focus lowers one’s value as an image.”[126] The text is one that has been deeply influential in my research and acts as a common touchstone between all three very distinct case studies. Picking up on the heels of her “defense,” Steyerl further investigates the potentials and perils of what she calls circulationism (the idea that images acquire more potency as they travel) in “Too Much World,” claiming that “the tools of postproduction…have become means of creation, not only of images but also of the world in their wake.”[127] Similarly, *Liquidity Inc.* compares ways in which images, money, and data circulate to weather patterns. However, the comparison goes beyond analogy here. It is not simply that images and currency have both become dematerialized entities which flow freely; rather, their common states inform one another, and shape the world in turn. In other words, the barrier between virtual and physical spaces is vastly deteriorating.[128]

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[125] Reich’s theory of orgone energy was based on Sigmund Freud’s concept of libido, which he bizarrely envisioned as a corporeal rather than psychological energy.

[126] Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” 33.

“In Defense of the Poor Image” introduces a sense of optimism about the ease with which images are shared and reauthored, which resembles the tone expressed in artist Seth Price’s 1998 post-internet quasi-manifesto titled “Dispersion.” Price’s essay levels a lofty polemic at the art world’s well-established methods of gatekeeping. Written on the precipice of the Web 2.0 era, Price energetically suggests that the “horizontal blur” facilitated by the internet, which encourages sharing and appropriation, might offer itself as a democratic and public space for artists to experiment without the gatekeeping of the traditional institutions of the art world.[129] Although the democratized landscape that Price envisioned several decades ago is a far cry from the commodified reality of platform capitalism in which the current web exists, the essay has now taken on a life of its own and serves as a prescient landmark of a time of anticipation surrounding the possibilities of the web 2.0 era. *Liquidity Inc*. aims its sights at similar themes, touching on the rise and fall of web.20 as well as circulation and the role of the artist in an online age. However, it does so from the other side of economic catastrophe (the 2008 crash, which serves as a touchstone for the film), and the requisite skepticism engendered by those intervening years.

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[127] Steyerl, “Too Much World.”
[128] Steyerl, “Too Much World.”
[129] Seth Price, “Dispersion,” in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the 21st Century,* ed. Lauren Cornell, and Ed Halter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 54.

The past decade-and-a-half has witnessed the rise of social media platforms that rely on user participation to create and circulate content.[130] This shift in digital infrastructure has changed the way information is gathered and shared online. In a previous section, I described how a micro-community of bootleggers kept Haynes' film *Superstar* afloat after it was banned from legitimate distribution. I would argue a similar impulse drives online content creators, who carefully curate content and share it with a community of followers. This system, however, is complicated by the exploitation (and monetization) of those creators' content by the platforms which host them. The same drives which once found a home in 'zine culture or independent publishing now inhabits microblogging domains such as Tumblr pages and Twitter feeds. The drive remains the same, but the channels are compromised by the financial interests of the platforms.

At one point in the film, Steyerl uses the interface of one such platform as a backdrop, a Tumblr page featuring multiple filters overlaid on Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1829-33) (fig.17). The famous Japanese woodblock print, which is one of the most reproduced images in the world, makes an appearance during one of the weather reports. It's the image *par excellence* of transnational aesthetic exchange and charts a compelling history as to the relationship between media and circulation and is evidence of the nascency of global interconnectivity that emerged in the Industrial Age.

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[130] While this is a fairly basic assessment I offer, a more in-depth critique of this economic shift can be found in Nick Srnicek's book *Platform Capitalism (*Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).

Perfect Storm:

Forecasting is used as a narrative device in *Liquidity Inc,* and the speculative language that the weathermen in the film use often touches on the psychological ramifications of late capitalism. For example, during one report, the weatherman says, "maybe because you realized that your feelings are affecting weather and you're feeling not so great, you might be insane."[131] Moments such as this hint at the influence of psychoanalysis in *Liquidity Inc*. The state of instability which is evoked in the film is not just evidence of the way information moves across screens and into the physical infrastructure of our lives, it is also a process of remaking the ways in which our minds absorb that information. Written on the heels of 2008 crash, Italian theorist Franco 'Bifo Berardi's text, *The Soul at Work,* attributes increased rates of depression to the incapacity of the "social brain" to manage the complexity and flows of information.[132] Similar to Berardi's diagnosis, late theorist and blogger Mark Fisher has supplied the neologism "capitalist realism," which refers to the successful naturalization of capitalism in the contemporary psyche.[133] The psychological undertones which Steyerl sprinkles into the film nod to the dynamic between politics, culture, and mental health. As Fisher's concept suggests, the central battlefield for economic reform is not in policy or academia, but foremost on the psychological terrain. Yet the difficulty in imagining life beyond capitalism is not the only symptom Fisher observes. Like Berardi, Fisher alleges a direct link between depression and late capitalism, claiming,

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[131] Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*

[132] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), 10.

[133] Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism: Is There No Alternative* (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2009), 1.

> "The 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high."[134]

The volatility of capitalist systems that Fisher takes aim at is represented in the film by contentious weather. Water can be stormy or tranquil but, most notably, its tides are apt to change at any moment. This unpredictability, as applied in the metaphor of late capitalism, imposes a state of perennial anxiety upon those who toil under it.

At around the halfway point in the film, the balaclava-clad child in the oversized owl t-shirt reappears, pointing towards the top corner of the screen, which displays an animated image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* flapping his wings (fig.18). Unlike *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa,* the prior art historical reference to appear in the film, Klee's angel is more obscure, an easter-egg most recognizable to those familiar with Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* which provides a remarkably eloquent exposition on the figure. Steyerl herself uses an excerpt from the *Theses* as an epigraph to her piece, "Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time."[135] The Klee painting depicts a cartoonish looking angel with lopsided wings and roughly rendered eyes. Benjamin (who purchased the piece from Klee) saw in it a profound significance and has historicized the image through his writings.[136] In his essay*,* Benjamin describes how, as the storm of Modernity drives him forward, the angel of history has turned his gaze back towards the catastrophic debris left in the wake of progress, resisting the storm which propels him forward into the future but succumbing to the forces propelling him forward in history. In Benjamin's version, the storm is blowing from paradise, but Steyerl reverses this trajectory. The child explains that "a storm is blowing from hell; driving us back into the past."[137] The scene Benjamin describes is linear and entropic, but Steyerl's version is backwards. In the era of digital proliferation, images are experienced simultaneously with information flowing in all directions and thus fracturing the experience of time as stable.[138] Steyerl's subversion of the paradigm of progress sparks a resemblance to another famous Fisher-ism, "the slow cancellation of the future."[139] This phrase diagnoses the cessation state of novelty in favour of perpetual pastiche. The tone Fisher imparts is more listless than Steyerl's manic aesthetic, but the two seem to offer symbiotic essences. Both Steyerl and Fisher observe the toll of precarity, insecurity, and constant connectivity on the exhausted and overstimulated contemporary psyche.

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[134] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* 46.
[135] Hito Steyerl Steyerl, and Anton Vidokle, "Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time," in *Art Without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism,* ed. by Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 9.

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[136] Stuart Jeffries, "The Storm Blowing From Paradise: Walter Benjamin and Klee's Angelus Novus," *Verso*, August 2, 2016, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2791-the-storm-blowing-from-paradise-walter-benjamin-and-klee-s-angelus-novus.

[137] Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*

[138] Vanessa Gravenor, "Hito Steyerl: Artist's Space," *The Seen Journal,* June 15, 2015, https://theseenjournal.org/hito-steyerl/.

[139] Mark Fisher, The *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures (*United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2013), 30.

The Artist Is Present:

The visually protean nature of the screen in *Liquidity Inc.* resembles a desktop more so than cinema. Message bubbles appear, and at several points, Steyerl incorporates time-lapsed desktop footage of someone rendering digital water. As a result of the drastic shifts between scenes and avid layering, the source of the footage is often unclear. It's a device that further complicates the boundaries between production and consumption, a distinction that has become increasingly illegible in the digital age. This shift is preempted in Price's essay, which cautions that "immersing art in life runs the risk of seeing the status of art—and with it, the status of the artist—disperse entirely."[140] To illustrate his point, Price tells the story of Marcel Duchamp trying his hand at an amateur inventor's fair with his roto-relief optics toy in 1935. Although Duchamp was already a renowned artist, his authority did not extend to the realm of toy production and thus the experiment was not a success and his toy never took off.[141] This anecdote is used by Price as a parable of the challenges that might confront artists of the internet era; while institutions such as galleries and publications have controlled access to the art world, they have also provided legitimacy and structure. The very flexibility that Price contends might diminish the artist's status is vaunted as a prerequisite by Steyerl, who is quick to illuminate that artists too are held to the same standard of "liquidity" that all late capitalist labourers are expected to contort to.[142]

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[140] Price, "Dispersion," 52.
[141] Price, "Dispersion," 52.
[142] Archey," Hyper-Elasticity," 225.

The precarious nature of creative labour is elicited in the film through simultaneous exchanges between Steyerl, her *e-flux* collaborator Brian Kuan Wood, and curator David Riff, which appear via pop-up chat bubbles and relay a mid-production crisis. The artist writes that she is having a nervous breakdown and won't be able to deliver the film on time. As a result, part of the budget will "evaporate." She has no budget to hire someone to do the CGI and will subsequently have to do it herself, learning as she goes through YouTube tutorials. Like Wood, and the very condition of instability which Steyerl orbits the film around, she herself must "go with the flow." Steyerl is probably one of the most in-demand artists working, but even she is not immune to the ebbs and flows of art world funding. Her texting cameo in the film serves as a reminder that art (and artists) do not exist outside of these global paradigms but are in fact vulnerable to them, and complicit.[143] In Steyerl's words, "If contemporary art is the answer, the question is: How can capitalism be made more beautiful?"[144]

A potential shortcoming of the essay form is a conflation of observation with absolution. Steyerl's art star status and politically charged biennale contributions place her square in front of this type of criticism, which she would likely not deny; if anything, she preempts this critique by weaving it into her work in the first place. Frequently reminding viewers that art as an institution is instrumentalized to furnish neoliberal interests, Steyerl's has, on occasion, chased down leads between weapons manufacturers and galleries that hold her work, seemingly to reiterate codependency of cultural institutions and the military industrial complex.[145] The appetite for first-person essays is part and parcel of the commodification of the self, endemic to platform capitalism. Steyerl seems very aware of this and redirects her presence through surrogacy or opting for the plural pronoun “we” over “I” in her writing.[146] Even off the page (in this case on screen), Steyerl borrows and contorts the essay form in compelling ways. Acclaimed theorist Sven Lütticken unravels this dynamic in an essay featured in a catalogue of her work, claiming, “Steyerl effectively pits one form of speculation against another: a kind of hyper-speculative reasoning legitimized by the essay form against the speculative logic of hyper-capitalism.[147] Lütticken questions if this style of essay writing is all too compatible with the metabolism of late capitalism, and the contemporary art world, which seeks to consume both the object and the subject (the product and its producer).[148] Yet what separates Steyerl from practitioners of the “first-person industrial complex” is her renunciation of innocence. Noting the artist’s acute capacity to navigate such fraught terrain, Lütticken concludes that, “rather than downplaying the problematic and conformist side of her artistic essayism, Steyerl exacerbates it.”[149]

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[143] Zhang, "Hito Steyerl's Liquidity Inc. and Art Under Neoliberalism."

[144] Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post Democracy," *e-flux,* December, 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/.

One of the most common critiques aimed at Steyerl is her “looseness with facts.”[150] I would not go so far as to say Steyerl sets out to deceive, but part of her style is playing with contradictions and hyperbole. This, along with her popularity, also potentially and problematically create a loophole that insulates Steyerl and her work from any legitimate criticism, such as the ethics of representation, or her coziness with the institutions she critiques. However, a recent film installation, *Drill* (2019), garnered some unusually negative attention. One review, published on *Momus* and penned by critic Rahel Aima noted that:

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[145] This is referring to her performance-turned-film, “Is the Museum a Battlefield” (2013).
[146] Brian Droitcuir, “Steyerl as Essayist,” in *Hito Steyerl: This is the Future* ed. Adelina Vlas (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Toronto, 2019), 19.
[147] Sven Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” in Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2014), 53.
[148] Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” 54-55.
[149] Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” 54.
[150] Brian Droitcuir, “Steyerl as Essayist,” in *Hito Steyerl: This is the Future* ed. Adelina Vlas (Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of Toronto, 2019), 10.

> it's a variegated mix, the kind Steyerl usually splices together to brilliant temperature-taking effect. Not here, however. The footage is thoroughly overproduced – bland and slick with an uncharacteristic earnestness that wouldn't be out of place in a public service announcement.[151]

I've included this indictment because it registered as quite a shock to me when I first encountered it. To see such malaise leveled at the oft-celebrated artist prompted me to consider how this newfound criticism related to the depiction of tides and weather cycles in *Liquidity Inc.* In the art world, social currency and actual currency are deeply entangled. For instance, the hype that often surrounds artists will likely drive up their market value. *Liquidity Inc.* compares the contemporary art world and the economy with one another based on this common reliance on speculation and hype. Aima's critique was striking not just in its relative rarity but because it makes clear what is absent in this work compared to Steyerl's more effective cultural appraisals. There is no shortage of didactic political art with a shiny PSA-esque veneer, but Steyerl's particular aptitude is driving home the confluent aspects of contemporary art and capitalism's penchant for "bling, boom, and bust."[152]

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[151] Rahel Aima, "Firing Blanks: Hito Steyerl and the Voiding of Research Art," *Momus,* July 16, 2019, https://momus.ca/firing-blanks-hito-steyerl-and-the-voiding-of-research-art/.

Hasta La Vista Baby (Conclusion):

I was recently re-watching the 1991 blockbuster, *Terminator 2* (T2)*,* which introduces audiences to the dreaded antagonist, the T-1000 (played by Robert Patrick). The quality that makes this Terminator model so much deadlier than his predecessor (the classic T-800 portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger) is his liquid form. He is virtually indestructible, often melting into a metallic pool of liquid, which allows him to shapeshift or slip into spaces by oozing underneath tiny openings. The materiality of the T-1000 embodies the thesis of *Liquidity Inc.,* which argues that capitalism itself has become just like the T-1000— fluid and inextinguishable. Fighting the T-1000 proves nearly impossible; he can be anyone and anywhere, making him a very effective and foreboding villain. Critics of capitalism often face a similarly insurmountable feat, it is nearly impossible to exist outside the reach of capitalism, as the latter's saturation of every facet of life forecloses the possibility of simply resisting it through individual actions. Thus, any critique is necessarily levelled from within and vulnerable to the inevitable claims of hypocrisy.[153] As demonstrated by Steyerl's film, liquidity is the mantra of 21st century capitalism because its ability to be everywhere all the time means that labour, images, information, and even identity all become products for it to monopolize.

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[152] Steyerl, "Politics of Art."

[153] The most successful critics of capitalism inevitably ascend upwards in their field (arts, academia, literature, media) and it can become tiresome to be lectured about class politics from someone with tenure, or a book deal, or major gallery representation.

At first glance, it's challenging to reconcile the optimism Steyerl opines in “Defense of the Poor Image” with the omnipresent doom relayed in *Liquidity Inc.* Hers is a tricky position which both vaunts the potential strengthening of community through the ease of sharing, while also cautioning against the co-dependence that exists between these platforms, and corporate and state sponsored surveillance. According to scholar Jodi Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism, the content of online activity is neutralized by the participation itself. In Dean’s words: “communicative capitalism captures critique and resistance formatting them as contributions to the circuits in which it thrives.”[154] The question then becomes: how does one reconcile the drive to produce, share, and circulate content while resisting the fluidity of capitalism and commodification? Dean’s theory complicates this query. If, as she suggests, these channels demand constant noise and are entirely indifferent to the content, then this contradicts Steyerl’s notion of resistance through resolution. The stalemate that Dean presents makes it hard to glean any meaningful answers. Dean, however, does not advocate abstention from these platforms. While it’s hard to come away from her writing assuming any less, she specifies that her aim is rather to incite antagonism towards these circuits so that we might create modes of communication that subvert this messy impasse (between assimilation and abstention). To this end, Steyerl’s film is a powerful accomplice to Dean’s work, by offering a charismatic polemic from deep within “the neoliberal thick of things.”[155]

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[154] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2010). 12.

[155] Steyerl, “Politics of Art.”

One could read the trajectory of the dematerialization of media on similar terms as the dematerialization of art itself. Early Conceptualists saw their work as resistant to the modes in which capitalism claims art as an appendage. But, of course, this underestimated what Steyerl herself refers to as the “semioticization of capital” which easily redistributed the value of the object towards the more liquid subject (the artist or concept).[156] *Liquidity Inc.* aptly illustrates how the channels of circulation become gentrified, but that doesn’t mean that all actions that occur within those channels are neutralized. Returning to her text, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” Steyerl contends that, while information capitalism integrates the mechanisms of image sharing into its liquid clutches, the poor image may still, in all its haptic chaos signal, at very least, the desire to subvert these circuits.[157]

It’s difficult to say whether Steyerl is an experimental documentarian, or an experimental filmmaker making work about the documentary genre. Perhaps Steyerl’s elusive style is in service to her ongoing interrogation of the politics of representation.[158] In recent years, the most socially transformative documentary images have been images haphazardly captured through cellphone documentation and shared online, for example, footage of the Arab Spring protests, or the many horrific videos of violence committed against Black and Indigenous communities by police officers.[159] Steyerl’s practice does not attempt to capture or simulate the impact of these forms of documentation, which are often shakily captured with bad audio and widely circulated online. Instead, she looks at the conditions of this abstraction to undermine the hegemony of representation and quality.[160]

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[156] Steyerl, Defense of the Poor Image,” 42.
[157] Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” 42-43.
[158] Marvin Jordan, “Hito Steyerl: Politics of Post-Representation,” DIS Magazine, June 2, 2014, http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/.
[159] Ellie Buttrose, “Seeking Resolution: Hito Steyerl: Too Much World,” *Art Monthly Australia,* no. 277 (March 2015): 58-59.

Unlike many contexts, the abstractions that characterize these vernacular images legitimize the condition of their production mid crisis. The material quality which they present has become familiar in an age of smartphones and networked sharing capabilities and, because of this, is often overlooked. Yet the conditions of these images' capture, through iPhone cameras across the globe, and their circulation on platforms like Instagram and Twitter, have helped shape their relationship to their cultural moment. Since the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, much debate has raged over the faculty of these platforms in social change. Advocates are quick to note their unprecedented potential reach while critics condemn the superficiality of online participation, dependance on platforms and the virality of certain violent images which re-traumatize communities who are exposed to them again and again [161] This is an evolving debate which makes it difficult to weigh in too confidently on either side, suffice to say that caution and criticality are needed to navigate these new-ish forms. To this end, I would argue that, with each and form of media, a careful consideration of its material specificities and how it circulates is advantageous in observing how it is received, and how it is preserved in social memory.

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[160] Buttrose, "Seeking Resolution," 59.

[161] Jane Hu, "The Second Act of Social-Media Activism," *The New Yorker,* August 3, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-second-act-of-social-media-activism.

Focusing on the material qualities of magnetic tape, the first two chapters of this thesis examined both the surreptitious potential and hazards of video in the late 20th century. Inviting the viewer directly into the media, video sparked an exciting era of artistic innovation and cultural creativity; likewise, the dematerialization of the image in the digital era proliferated a whole new set of possibilities. While neither lived up to the revolutionary anticipation predicated on their arrival, perhaps, as Steyerl suggests, the channels of circulation are where some of this latent potential still lies. For this potential to materialize, careful attention must be given to the conditions of circulation. In the current landscape, the means of dispersion are continually becoming corporatized as online traffic is directed to increasingly monopolized spaces. For this trend to reverse—or even for a feasible counterculture to emerge—the discourse on technology must break out of the poles of determinism and technophobia that limit more nuanced engagements of the relationship between audiovisual materials and cultural memory.

The study of media's movement and materiality will keep evolving as the technology and our use of it changes. As new media emerge, it is not just our relationship to the contemporary that changes but also our relationship to the past. In Benjamin's *Theses,* the angel turns his gaze towards the trash heap of history, hoping to make it whole again as he is propelled forward into the future. *Liquidity Inc.*'s depiction of the digital era as rapid and intangible perhaps overlooks the inertial capacity of the internet to act as a repository of images and media. Yet perhaps that is part of the inverse effect that is hinted at in the film when the young weatherman says that the storm from hell is driving us to the past. The accumulation of that inertial capacity bears similarity to Benjamin’s heap of debris described in his elegiac theses. To make it whole again, these memories must be animated and reanimated into new configurations to resuscitate marginalized or forgotten histories and to do so in a way that subverts the privatization and commodification of the channels of circulation.

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Image Appendix

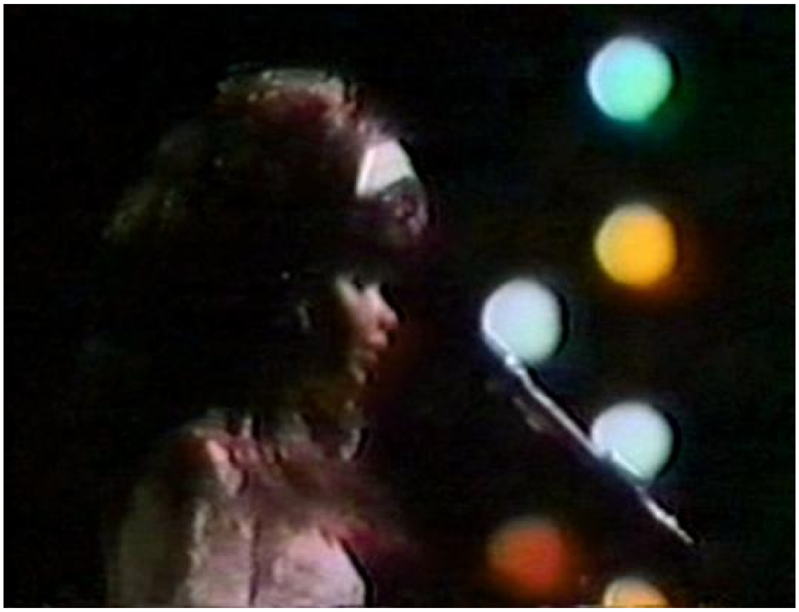


Fig. 1) Still from Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), 16mm transferred to video. Image sourced from https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/movies/vhs-film-retrospective-at-museum-of-arts-and-design.html.

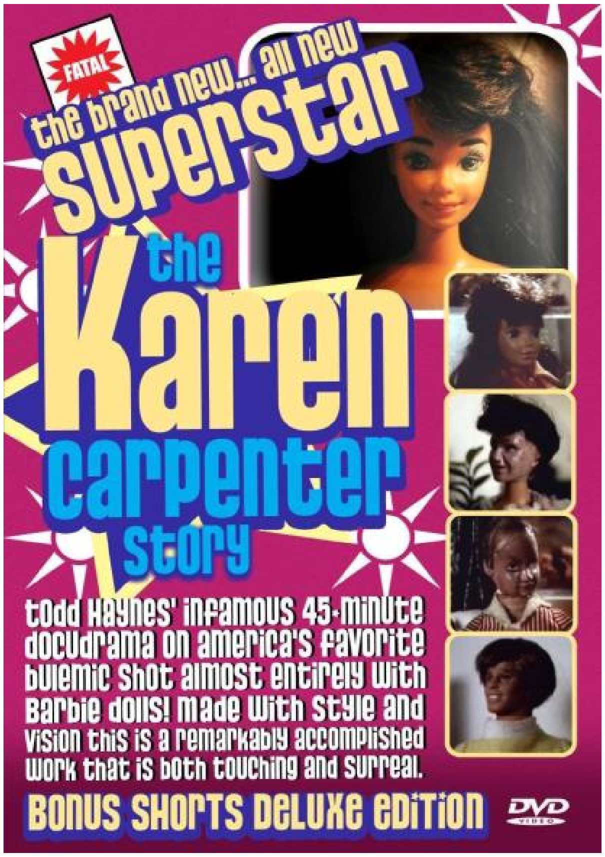

FATAL
the brand new... all new
Superstar
the
Karen
carpenter
story
todd Haynes' infamous 45-minute docudrama on america's favorite bulemic shot almost entirely with Barbie dolls! made with style and vision this is a remarkably accomplished work that is both touching and surreal.
BONUS SHORTS DELUXE EDITION
DVD VIDEO

Fig. 2) Bootleg DVD box of Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). Image sourced from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094075/.

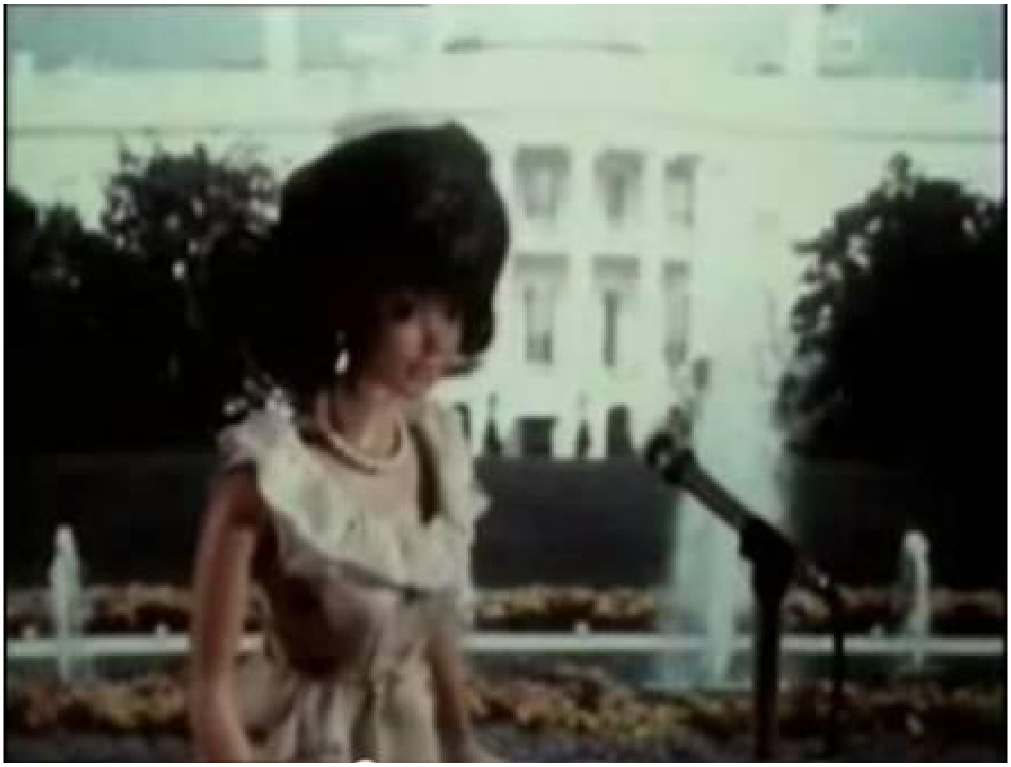


Fig. 3) Still from Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), 16mm transferred to video. Image sourced from https://mubi.com/films/superstar-the-karen-carpenter-story.

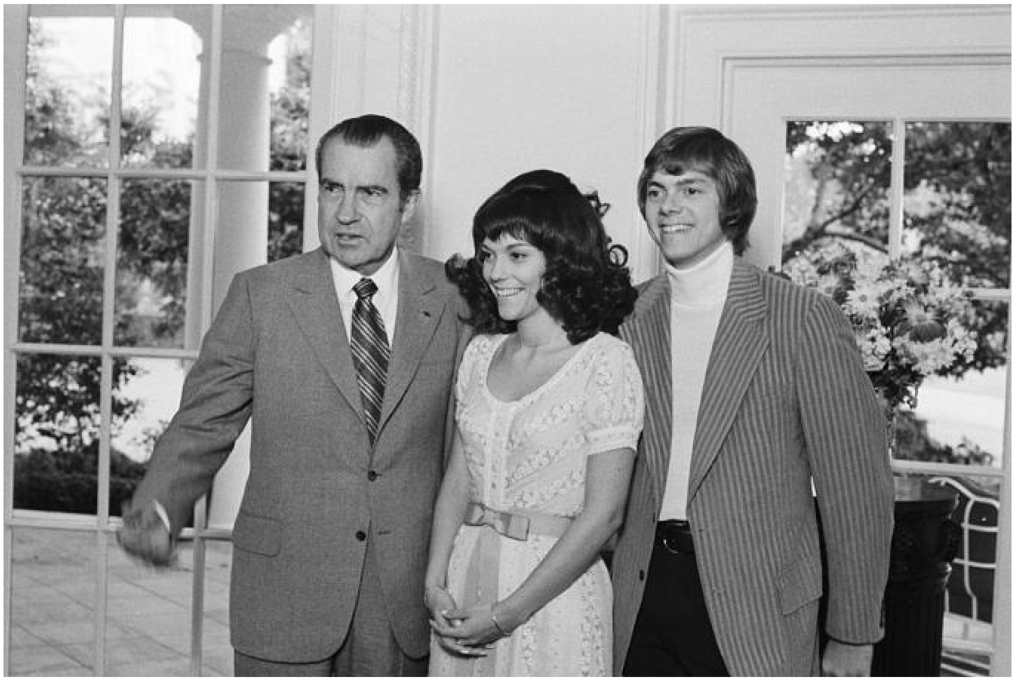


Fig.4) Karen and Richard Carpenter visit Richard Nixon's White House in May of 1973. Image sourced from https://www.heraldweekly.com/richard-carpenter-shares-a-rare-glimpse-into-the-carpenters-incredibly-sad-story/37/?xcmg=1.

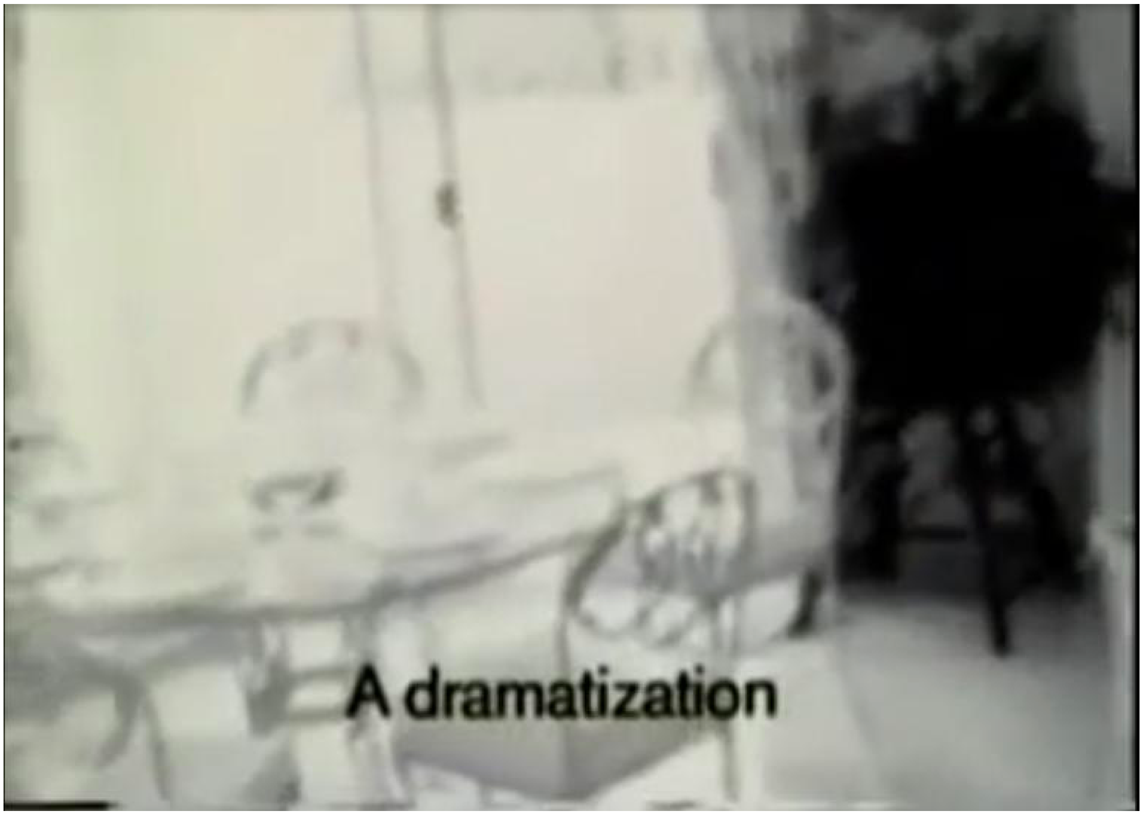


Fig.5) Still from Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). 16mm transferred to video. Image sourced from https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x363le1.

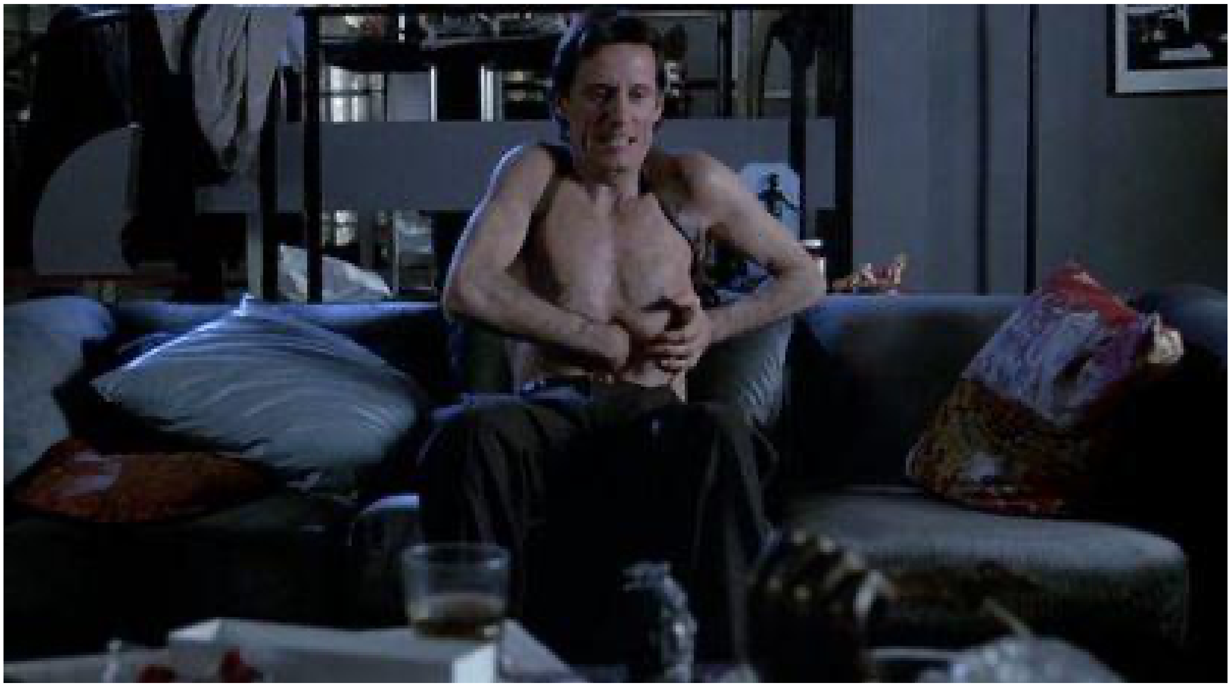


Fig. 6) Still from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1987). 35mm. Image sourced from https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcpnews-long-live-the-new-flesh-spring-revivals-at-the-charles-and-the-senator-announced-20170322-story.html.

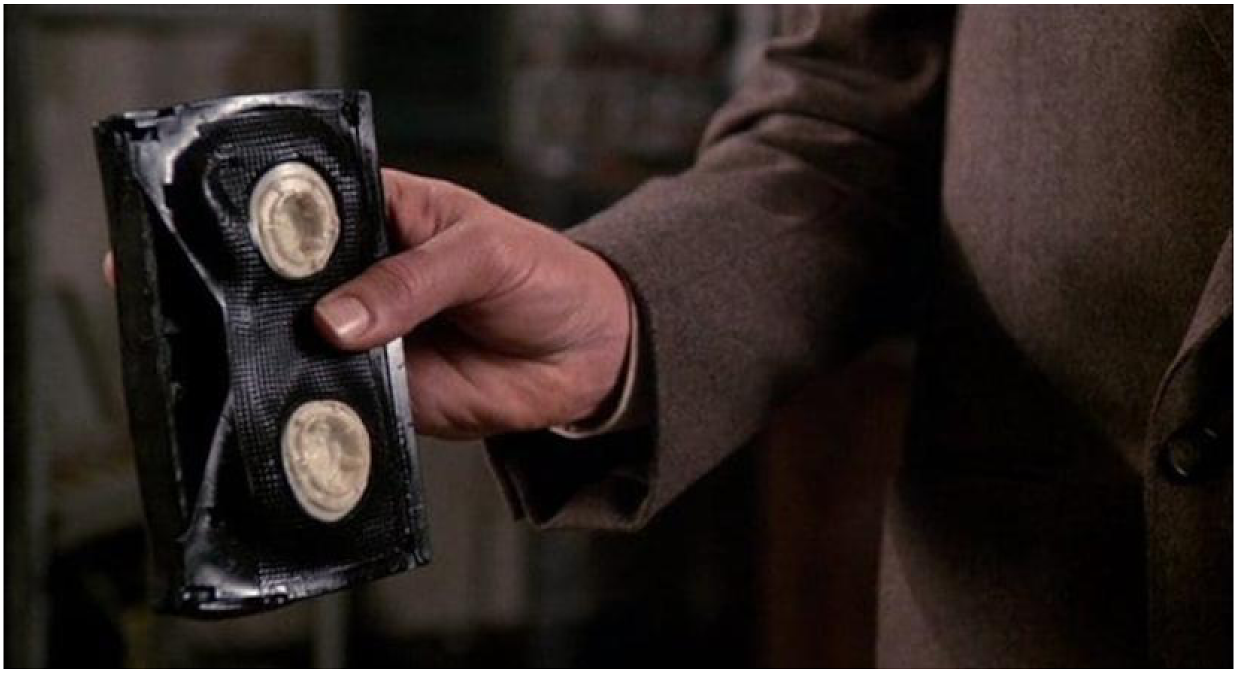


Fig.7) Still from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1987). 35mm. Image sourced from https://filmschoolrejects.com/the-power-of-vhs/.

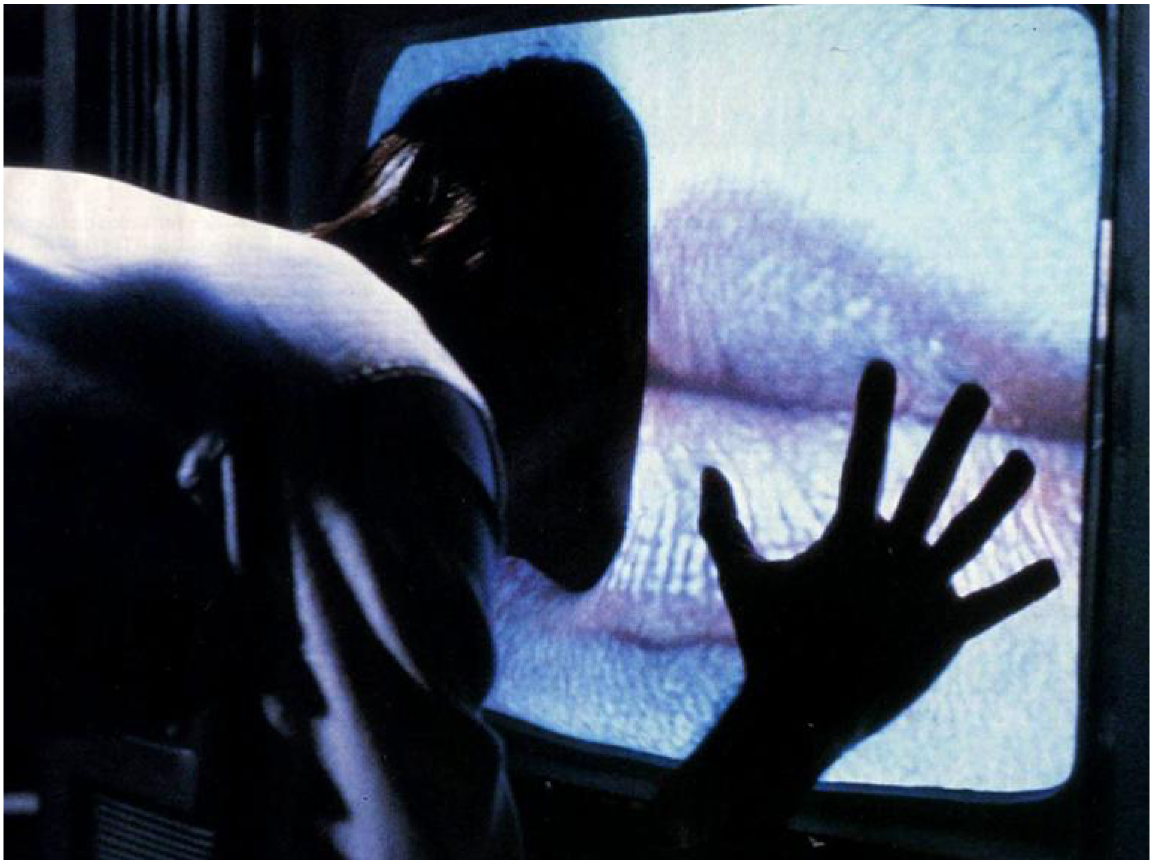


Fig.8) Still from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1987). 35mm. Image sourced from https://www.criterionforum.org/Review/videodrome-the-criterion-collection-blu-ray.

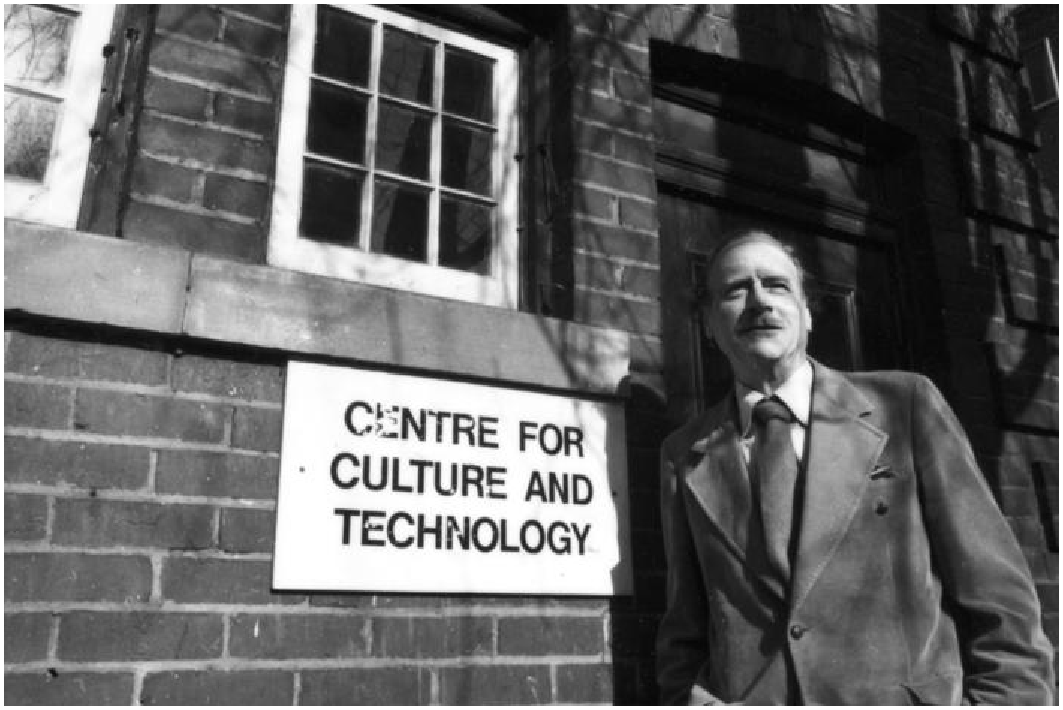


Fig.9) Marhall McLuhan outside the Coach House in 1973 which has been renamed the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology. Image sourced from https://www.utoronto.ca/news/coach-house-institute-renamed-marshall-mcluhan.

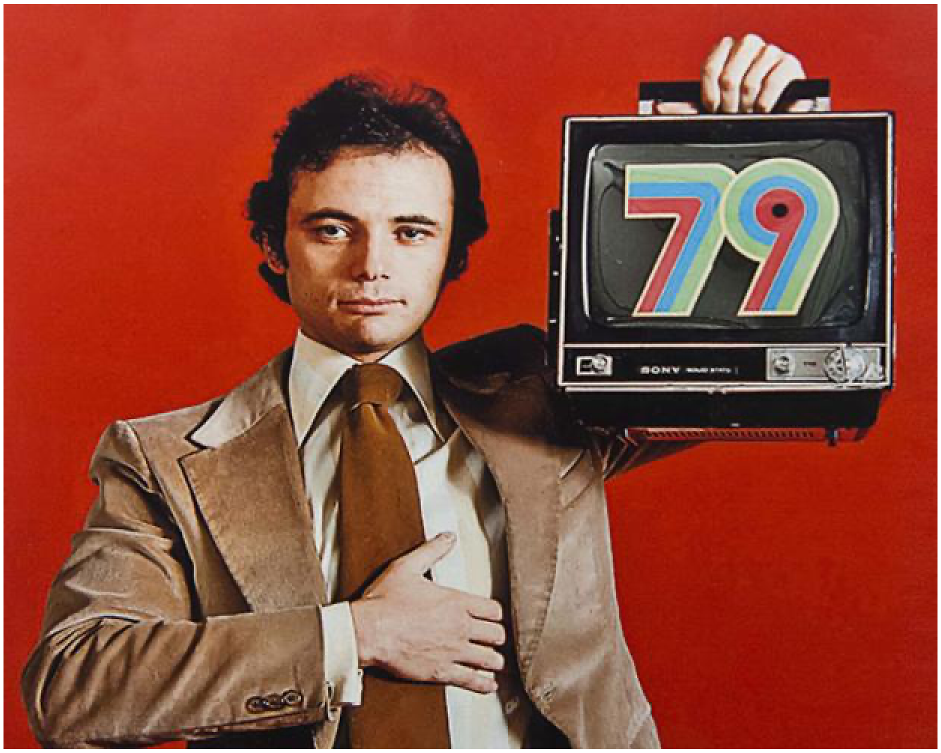


Fig.10) Moses Znaimer, Co-founder of Citytv and MuchMusic. Image sourced from https://www.videoageinternational.net/2020/03/13/hall-of-fame/moses-znaimer-a-new-mcluhan-but-with-a-mission-to-reinvent-television/.

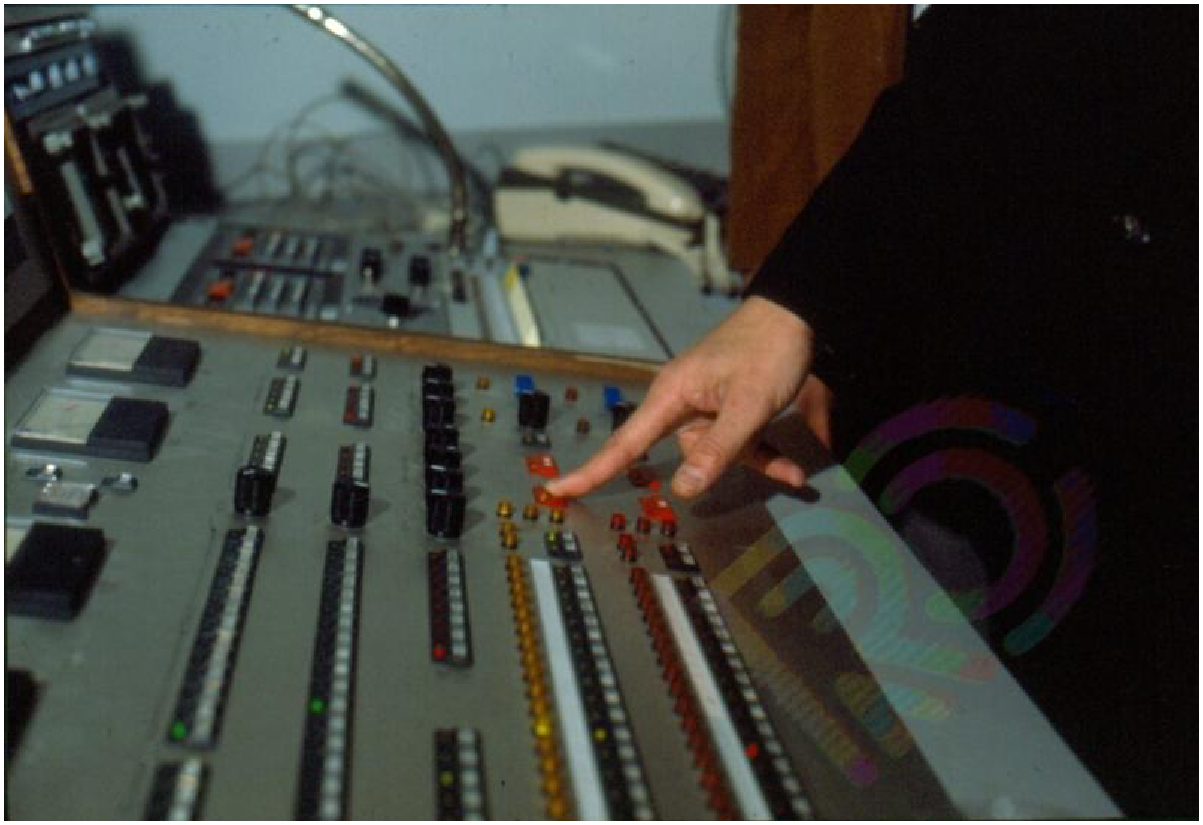


Fig.11) Photo of Moses Znaimer pressing the launch button on MuchMusic, August 31, 1984. Image sourced from https://retrontario.com/2020/08/30/muchmusic-the-revolution-will-be-televised/.

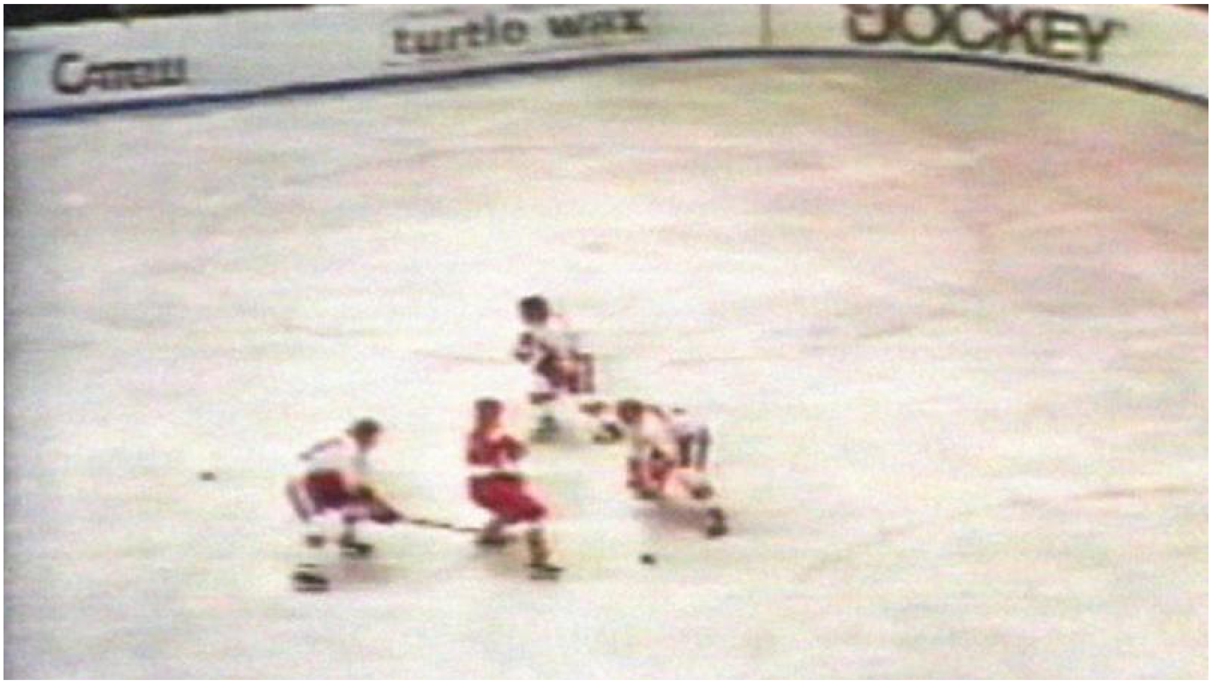


Fig.12) Still from Brett Kashmere's *Valery's Ankle* (2006), archival footage. Image sourced from https://vimeo.com/63041317.

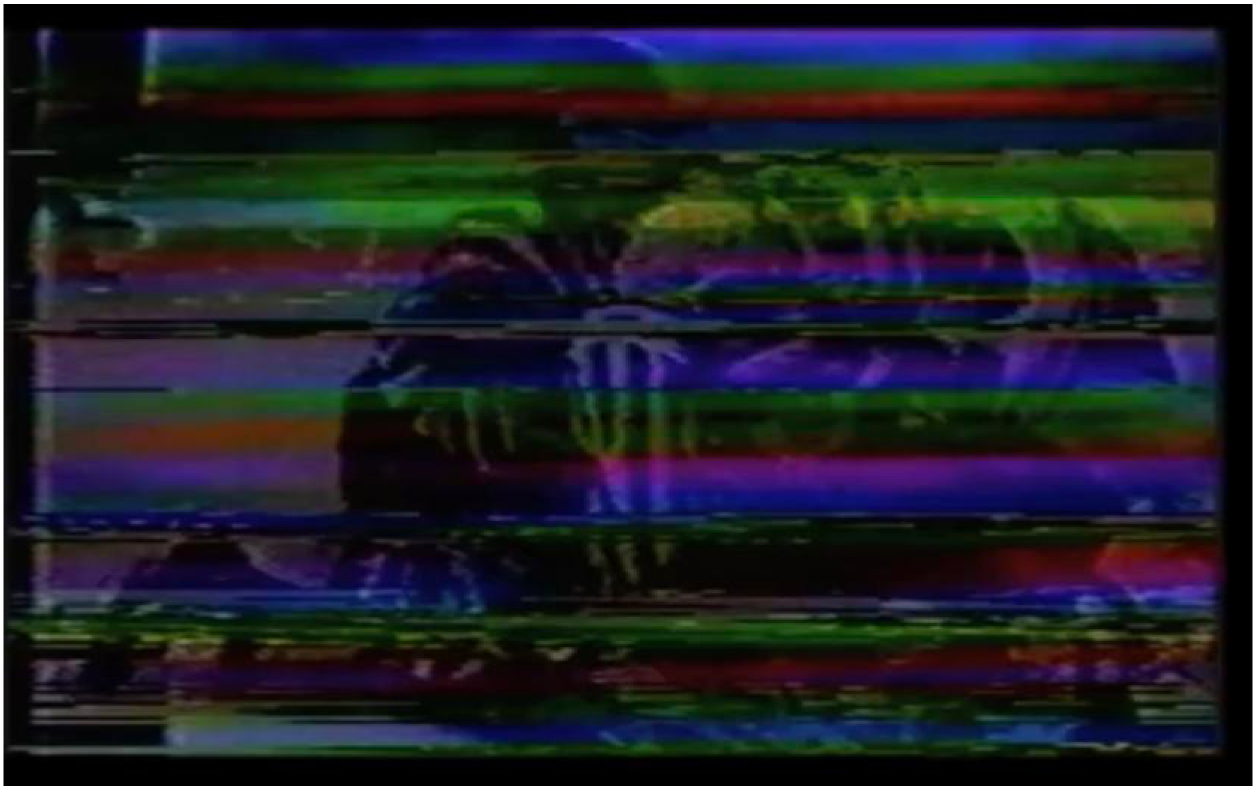


Fig.13) Still from Brett Kashmere's *Valery's Ankle* (2006), archival footage. Image sourced from https://vimeo.com/63041317.

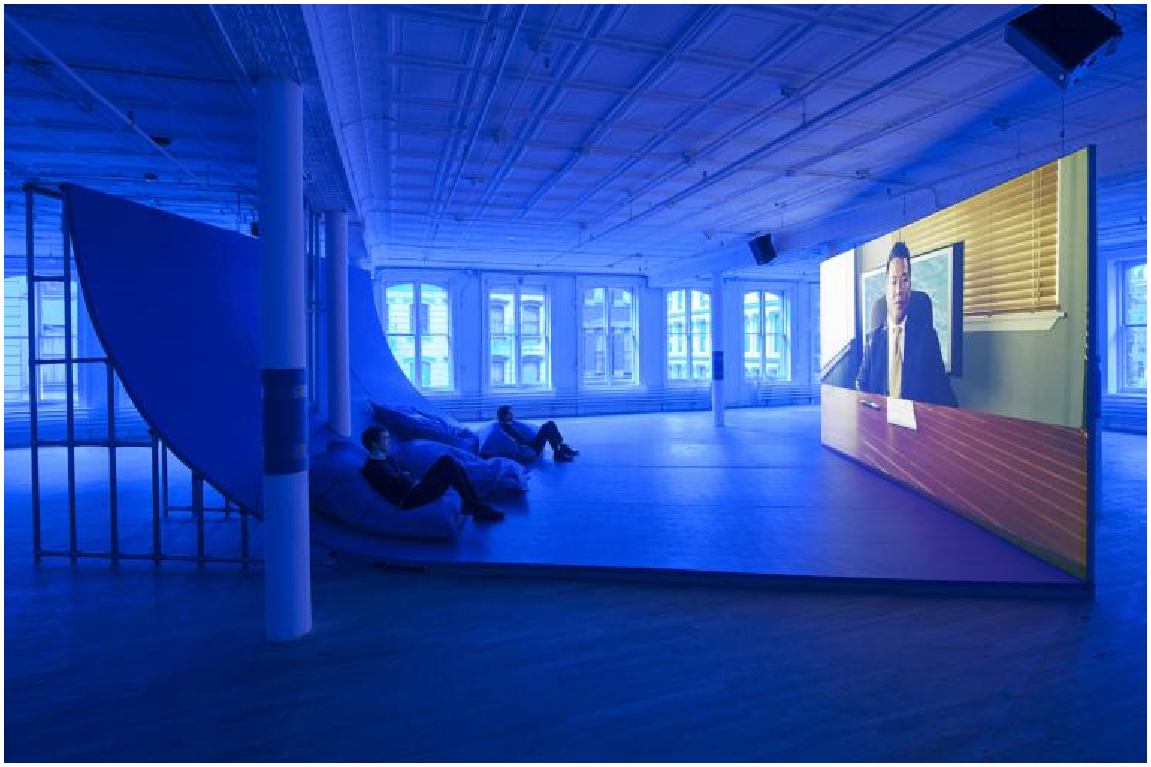
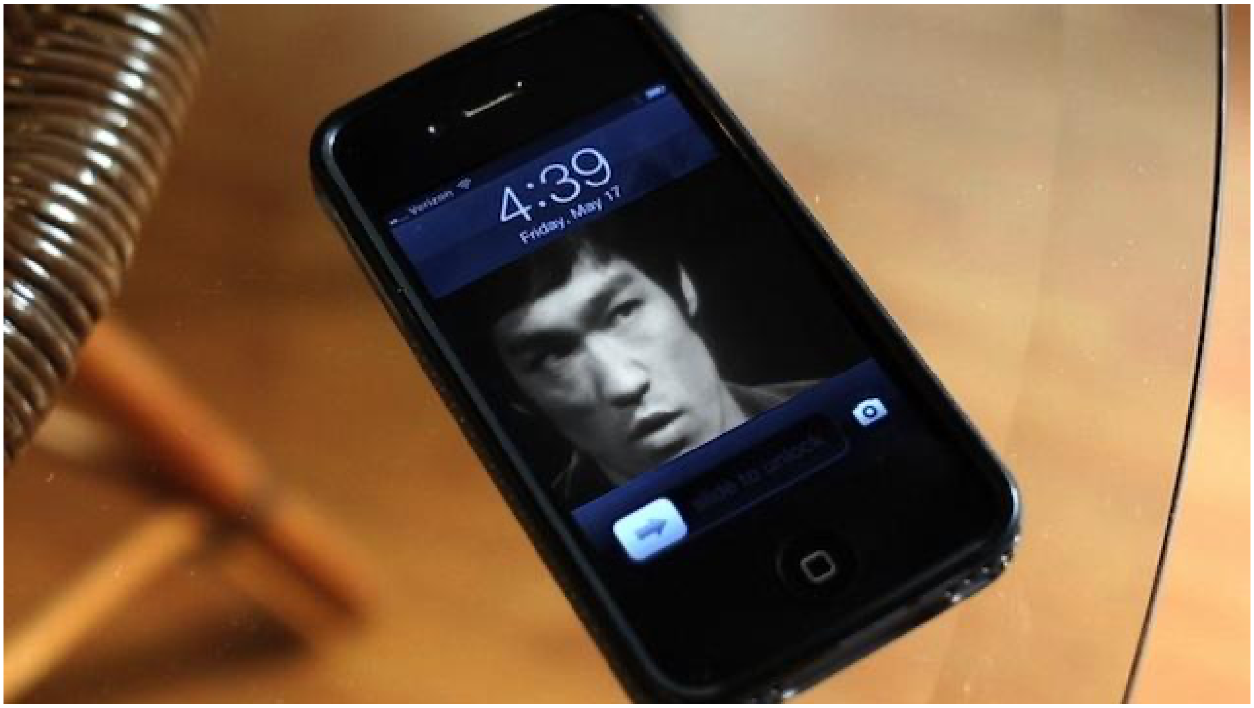


Fig.14) Installation view of Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). HD video. Image sourced from https://www.moma.org/collection/works/216220.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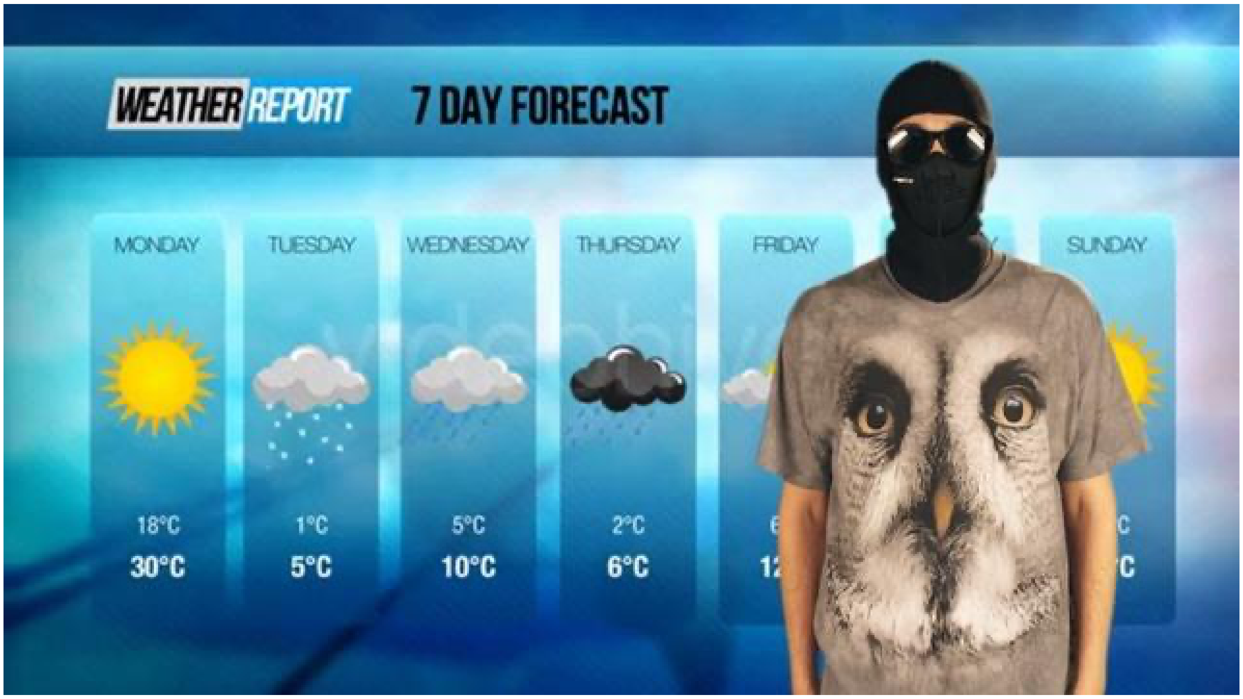
Friday, May 17
slide to unlock

Fig.15) Still from Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). HD video. Image sourced from https://artreview.com/ar-november-2017-feature-liquid-value/.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7 DAY FORECAST
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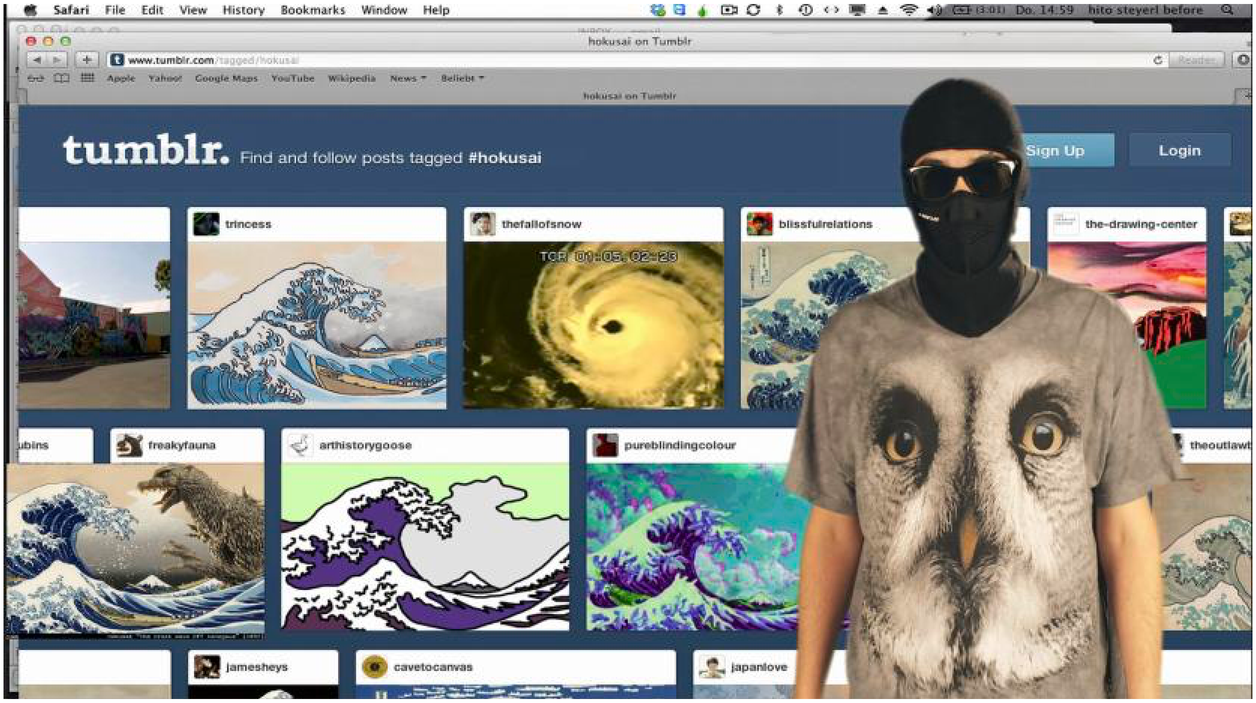
10°C
2°C
6°C

Fig.16) Still from Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). HD video. Image sourced from https://www.artsy.net/artwork/hito-steyerl-liquidity-inc-1.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theoutlawt
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cavetocanvas
japanlove

Fig.17) Still from Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). HD video. Image sourced from https://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/hito-steyerl-liquidity-inc.

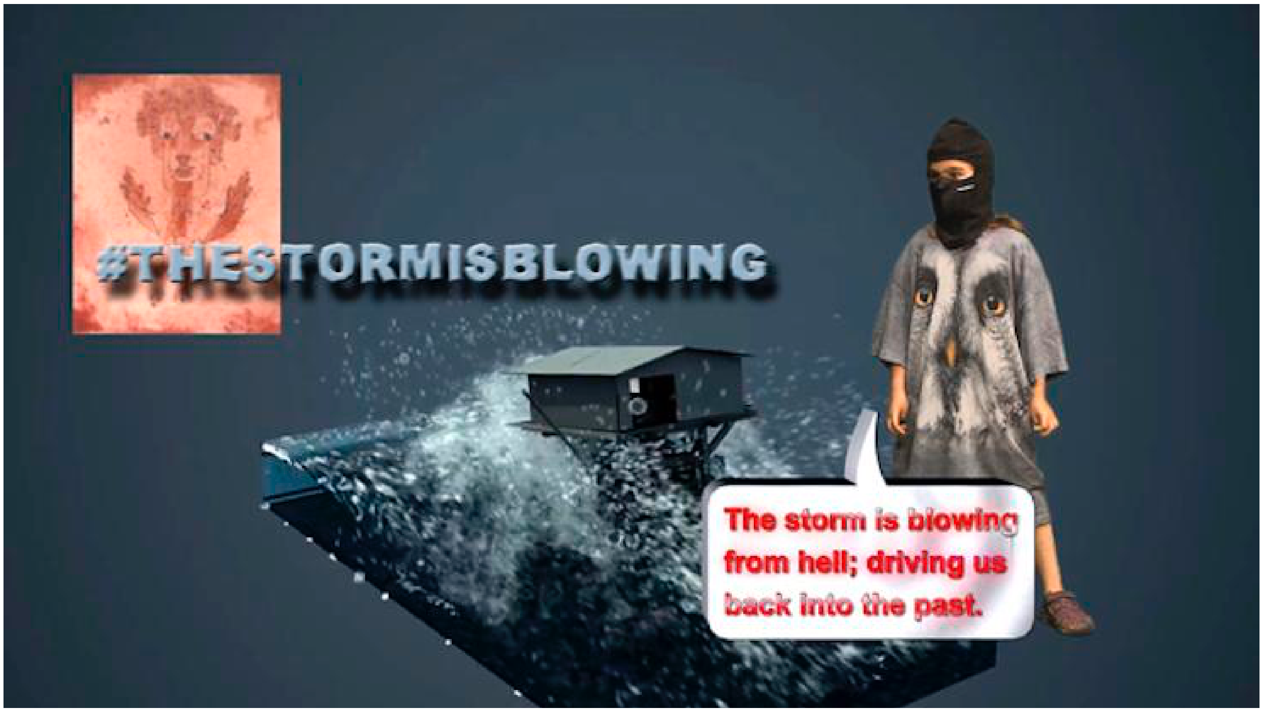
#THESTORMISBLOWING
The storm is blowing from hell; driving us back into the past.

Fig.18) Still from Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014). HD video. Image sourced from https://www.moma.org/collection/works/216220.