OPTICS OUT OF SHADOWS: CREATING A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY FROM CONTÉ SKETCHES

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ABSTRACT

Mary is a seven-minute animation based on my grandmother Mary, who died before I was born. The video integrates 16mm film, digital still images and digital video to represent the version of Mary's life I imagined as a nine year-old. This thesis explores the video as a conversation between my childhood version of Mary and my adult reflections on that fabulation. I contextualize my video through my personal history, art practice and research. I investigate theories that explore the nature of invention, including Gilles Deleuze's fabulation and Laura Mulvey's usage of the term delay. Giorgio Agamben's articulation of the lacuna and its relationship to the unspeakable helped me understand the creative choices I made in the video. I discovered that my childhood version still carries a powerful emotional charge and that the structural parallels between Mary's life and my own are shaped by events no language can contain or comprehend.

Keywords: Animation; lacuna; subtitles; video art; trauma; memory.

Subject Terms: Family -- Folklore; Animation (Cinematography); Digital video; Memory in Art; Psychic Trauma in Art; Photography of Families

This is dedicated to my husband

Benjamin Mikuska

who lets me love him

with my whole relentless heart.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My father's brothers and sisters were a lively bunch and an active presence in my young life. We lived in Manitoba, so my father often drove us to Saskatchewan to visit them, and they often came to visit us. In our family photograph album we had a black and white studio photograph from 1957, with my father with his siblings and parents including, in the centre of the photograph, Mary—my grandmother—who died before I was born. We all knew jokes and secrets about the photograph. The day it was taken, his brothers, despite their varying sizes, were each wearing one of my father's stylish suits as he was—and is—a clotheshorse. It was also a sad photograph; no one knew at the time of the picture that my grandmother Mary would be dead within a year. She died of cancer in 1957, so I grew up knowing her only from the stories that were told.

My father is a prolific storyteller, but he found it emotionally difficult to talk much about his mother. Perhaps my curiosity grew because of the mystery that surrounded her. From an early age she loomed large in my imagination, yet I knew very little about her. Old photographs, in the hands of children, conjure up memories both real and imagined.

Mary's grandmother was Jewish. I knew this as a child, although our family lived with no traces of Jewish tradition or culture. Her husband's family was Christian (Hungarian Orthodox), and as a young man, my grandfather Benjamin even managed a stint at seminary school in Hungary before getting

thrown out. After immigrating to Canada he became a farmer, and he also worked for CN Rail. He and Mary raised their family on a farm in Saltcoats, Saskatchewan. For many reasons, my grandfather actively hated all, and especially, state authority. He was against religion. He was shaken by the Regina riots of 1935, when police shot at rioting farmers. Whenever the topic of police credibility came up, his pat answer was: "They shoot farmers."

At one point during the Second World War my grandfather made a joke while sitting in a bar in Saskatchewan: "At the rate Hitler is making his advances, he will be in this bar having a drink with us next week." The next day he was arrested and accused of being a Nazi sympathizer. Not aiding in his defence was the fact that he sported a moustache identical to Hitler's. Having no solid evidence of treason, the authorities were forced to release him. Out of sheer spite, he maintained his moustache until the end of the war.

The bizarre confluences of my grandfather's Hitler moustache and my grandmother's Jewish heritage began to brew in my imagination as a child. I painted in the broad strokes of culture the way we do when we formulate through play what it is one does to survive. We played war, we played soldiers, we played field ambulance, we played prisoner of war camp, and we played assassination. Somehow I ended up with a family narrative that bypassed my grandparents' actual lives in favour of a more romantic and dramatic tale of survival and cultural destruction.[1]

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[1] See James E. Young "David Levinthal's *Mein Kampf*." At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture. New Haven; Yale University Press, 2002. p. 42-61.

My father was utterly heartbroken when his mother Mary died, at fifty-five years of age, on December 28, 1957, the day after my father's twenty-third birthday.[2] Whenever her name was mentioned, he would be too emotional to be able to talk much about her, so I grew up thinking of her death as a tragic loss that for some reason could not be spoken about. To my young mind the trauma of her death and its devastating effect on my father was inherently linked to the other tragic dimension of my grandmother's life: the almost incomprehensible scope of the persecution of Jews in her lifetime. I don't know if her Jewish heritage was an open fact, or a secret. It seemed like a secret to me, but almost everything about her seemed mysterious to me. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I began to examine my assumptions.

As I reflect, I realize that I don't know how she would have felt about any of the events in her lifetime—and my father's stories are silent on this subject—yet I carried in my imagination a version of her life that I felt to be emotionally true, and it seemed to me upsetting. I had also become fascinated with Mary because she had played the violin as a girl my age, but had ceased to play it, which seemed to be related to dying 'too young' from cancer. I saw her as a near artistic relative, and her life and death loomed like a cautionary tale. Even at twenty, in my magical way of thinking, Mary's refusal to pursue her violin playing, and her untimely death, fused as causal events, and I was haunted, beyond articulation by the feeling that I too would die if I stopped making art. Music and art seemed to me to be a part of generating life. I have been working

[2] Mary Soke (nee Kardos) was born March 25, 1902, and deceased December 28, 1957.

for the past two years on a series of videos concerned with certain formal issues, and some of them are related to family. As I approached my MFA project I asked myself if I could make a work about this grandmother I had never known. She seemed to have suffered such a tragic destiny. Perhaps I would try to send a love letter, and, if so, to which Mary would I send it—to the Mary I had imagined as a child, or to the woman about whom I knew next to nothing?

CHAPTER 2: ARTISTIC PRACTICE

My recent practice as a media artist includes the production of several single channel videos and a multiple channel installation with sculptural elements. Language, or absent language, is often the driving force in my work. During the span of two years I created the following single channel videos: buried treasure (2004), like (2005), cat + mouse (2005), the album (2005), the bell (2005), and Cascadia (2006). In them I undertook formal experiments with subtitles and timing. I also experimented with story-telling techniques, camera techniques and post-production effects. These all dovetailed into the research and creation of Mary.

The first video in this series, buried treasure, is an animation that recounts the life of my step-grandmother Anna, who became my grandfather's second wife after Mary had passed away. They married when I was 1 or 2, and had a house in Winnipeg, so I saw them weekly until my grandfather passed away when I was 13.[3] The images in buried treasure were from details of Anna's life that I knew intimately: a picture of her prosthetic leg, a portrait of the dog we gave to Anna and my grandfather, my thumb upon which I now wear my grandfather's wedding ring. The story of Anna's life is told, in part, in a series of subtitles. In reviewing that work I began to think more about the nature of the subtitle. It operated in a small area of the screen yet occupied a large part of our perceptual activity. It

[3] Benjamin Soke (Szoke) was born November 17, 1900 and deceased on March 4, 1976. He and Anna married in 1964, or 1965.

was like a voice-over, but its silent nature, and the act of reading made it somehow easier for me to internalize. By internalize, I mean that a voice-over remains in my imagination as an external voice, while a subtitle that is unattached to a character easily becomes my own internalized voice. Perhaps this is a bias I hold in hearing and reading. Others may perceive subtitles differently.

In the summer, before beginning graduate school, I made like, another subtitled single channel work in collaboration with composer, Isabelle Noël. The footage of moon jellies is highly saturated in blue and magenta, set to subtitled metaphors about falling in love. Isabelle's soundtrack integrates aquarium sounds, underwater sounds and a meaty bass into a delicate, funny and sincere composition. Upon entering my graduate studies I realized that I wanted to pursue this 'subtitle series', to explore its possibilities, and to see how far I could engage viewers. I wanted to explore the critical difference between language and image, and how people seem to trust in written language more than images.

The video cat + mouse followed, a wry metaphor for commodity capitalism's uneven social relations. The blurry imagery is shot from cat height, as if it is a cat's eye view of a shopping mall. In the subtitles I present various versions of the cat and mouse story that I have invented, each with different endings and twists—such as the cat catching the mouse, eating the mouse, and the mouse then being rescued whole, and still alive, by a veterinarian named Jonah. I then abandoned both the video and audio elements to explore making a work focused solely on text, the album. I wanted to explore the power of text

when used on its own in video. the album is based on my recollections of my father and his siblings, and parents, while looking at family photographs. The white subtitles occupy the centre space of the black screen, and the text forms the only images in the video. The stark black and white visual strategy of these textual sketches evokes black and white photographs. In each, I present a fragment of a story as a snapshot. I used grandiose and arcane language in the text to implicate a different point in time. In creating this work I was interested in the stories, associations and the intimate details one generates while looking through a family album. Much of the album was written as I considered the 1957 studio photograph of my father, his siblings, and parents. This piece began my process of cultivating the script for Mary. The family stories I held were rich and complex, and I wanted to create a video that was more complex than the brief sketches in the album. The length of the story I had told about Anna in buried treasure had been more satisfying to me. But I also became attracted to what could not be told, to the story I had created in the heart of my father's silence.

At the same time, I was working on my SSHRC application and considering the gap between my uncertain knowledge of Mary and my childhood version of her, a version which became more and more compelling, and which evolved into the focus of my graduate project. I considered her life as a farm wife and a mother of eight in the dusty Saskatchewan town of Saltcoats in the 1930s and 1940s. I butted these facts up against my childhood version of Mary, which included the importance I had attributed to her violin playing. I suspected that it was my own creative development that made me focus on what seemed to be

the doomed creative aspect of her life—naïvely ignoring the procreative fact and the demands of eight children. In truth, I know only a few anecdotes from Mary's life, as my father still finds it difficult to talk about her. They reveal how demanding her life was; for example, she kept a wary eye on my father, who was always trying to smuggle his favourite pig into the house. Making Mary seemed like a large risk to me: it was narrative, sober, sincere, and probably sad.

The next video, the bell, was borne in part from my desire to see how willing a contemporary audience (such as my cohort) might be to slide towards the mythic in narrative. It came from my observation that my own imagination often leaps to mythic proportions as easily as other people's imaginations find logical answers. It tells a story of a woman who dies in childbirth, whose body is accidentally unearthed generations later, and who has miraculously transformed into a bell. the bell acts as a metaphor for the offspring of generations and the literally empty maternal body. It also acts as a metaphor for music that rings out from us "like the sea from an empty shell."[4] As I reflected on the bell, I recognized some of its mythic proportions in my own imagined version of Mary. How is it possible that she buried a newborn, and kept going? She had to, as she had eight children. Known for her unerring marksmanship as a hunter, I imagined her as a relentless matriarch, with a soft, sad core. Like the metaphor of the bell her life continues to ring through the generations.

[4] John Guliak "Worm Dance." 7 Stories and 13 Songs, CD-ROM. Mint Records CD. 2002. I am indebted to John Guliak who gave me permission to use this image after I had heard it in his lyrics.

My next work was a collaborative effort. I shot the video, wrote the subtitles and edited the tape. Chris Grigor created the sound track. Cascadia was an extension of my love of video as painting, as a visual strategy that I had first explored in the bell. Cascadia—the port name of Vancouver and the name given to the dream of a utopian west coast nation—shows blurred footage of Gastown shot in one continual moving take from a car. The yellow subtitled story about an interaction on the street is offset by the twinkling, blurred images of the bright shops and tour buses. I am fortunate to have collaborated on this work with Chris Grigor, whose soundtrack features the brilliant, performance of car horns and ambulance sirens played on a trumpet, complete with Doppler effects.

These works I had created satisfied my formal inquiries into the limits and possibilities of subtitles. Yet after I completed them, I began to crave making a work based on story. I wanted to take what I had learned and address my fabulated memories of Mary. This brought up questions of who I was addressing in my fictive version of Mary. I felt ready to address the 'story' of my grandmother Mary—a story that I knew would challenge every part of me.

Ready to address the unknown, I began work on Mary, seeking out images for my animation. After making so many short videos back-to-back, it was a relief to get away from the computer, and start drawing. Drawing is a satisfying haptic endeavour, and it returns me to a different part of myself, as the process is both visual and tactile, and an immersive process.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH

I decided to find out as much about my grandmother as I could. As my research progressed, I found facts that varied wildly from the imaginative version that I had fabulated as a child—the version I grew up with (out). Considering all the storytelling in my family, I was surprised that I didn't know even the bare facts. I had assumed that Mary and her family had immigrated to Canada at the same age as my grandfather Benjamin. He emigrated from Hungary as a young man in the 1920s. It turned out that Mary's great-grandparents had been residents of Shanghai. Her grandmother Ester had left Shanghai, married in Hungary, and then, as Ester Kolmar, had emigrated from Hungary to Mobile, Alabama. Her daughter Elizabeth was born in Mobile, and the family then emigrated from Alabama to Canada, settling in Beaverdale, Saskatchewan in 1883. They had a 180-acre homestead. Eventually Elizabeth married and gave birth to her daughter Mary in Lethbridge, Alberta. Had I heard Mary's voice I would have recognized her distinctively Canadian accent.

I had always thought that Mary was a poor immigrant, like her husband (my grandfather). It turned out that Mary's family was pretty well off, and they travelled from Lethbridge to Hungary every three years. They were well educated and engaged with the changing state of Hungary. Looking back, I can see that part of my confusion about Mary's background came from the fact that my father and his siblings were fluent in Hungarian. This led me to assume they were first

generation Canadians. Their fluency, however, was based on the fact that they grew up with contemporary Hungarian children's books, textbooks and stationary from Hungary, and from their doting grandparents, Elizabeth and John.

More fascinating was the fact that my grandmother's family, who were Hungarian, had emigrated not from Hungary as I had imagined but from Shanghai. Mary's grandmother Ester's family were nineteenth century fabric merchants who had moved to Shanghai in order to export fabric from the Silk Road to Europe.[5] Ester was raised and educated in Shanghai, and at fifteen, she went to Hungary to attend "finishing school'. In Hungary, she met a young man, was courted, married, and immigrated to Mobile, Alabama. From there, my North American ancestors unfolded.

I decided I needed to go to Hungary to put my family into perspective. After all, being Hungarian was very important to my father's family. Before leaving, I began to do research on Hungarian Jewry, preceding, during and since the Shoah. I got a membership to the Jewish Community Library, and began to frequent it, looking at a variety of books about Hungary and its Jewish lineage. The women who worked there got more curious about me. Who are you? Do we know your husband? I found this difficult, and was worried that they would deem me some neophyte, window-shopping for identity. I tried to formulate many descriptions of my project: I am looking for roots, not wings. Thankfully, none of

[5] In the fall of 2005 I still wrongly assumed that Mary's family had once lived in Japan. At the time I made an immersive video project, which I performed live with the band The Orchid Ensemble, in the concert "Road to Kashgar". The music was composed by Moshe Denburg, and incorporated Chinese music with Western music, and Klezmer. Kashgar was a city on the historic Silk Road known for the confluence of cultural influences. Oddly enough, I did not know at that time that my own heritage included this same history.

my clichéd responses proved necessary. The library community was very welcoming. I found many lovely out-of-print publications, and came across gems by sheer accident, such as the name book that delineates the etymology of the name Mary as a form of Miriam. I found painstaking accounts of family lineages throughout Central Europe. I know that some of Ester's family survived the Second World War in Europe, or probably in Shanghai, and some, according to my Aunt Margaret, later lived in Odessa, but without Ester's maiden name they were impossible to trace.

Much of this family history had been unknown to me, or badly remembered, or otherwise distorted by my imagination. When I received my SSHRC award, I was thrilled to realize that it could fund my travel to Hungary for further research. En route, I had a visit with my elderly Auntie Margaret in Ottawa, who knows and shares the most about my grandmother Mary.[6] She clarified my confusions, provided me with detailed accounts of my ancestry, and was surprised at my version of her mother.

I flew into Paris and took the train to Budapest two days later. While still in Paris, at the Museum of Jewish Art and History, I finally saw the exact same betrothal plate that had earlier befuddled me in my research at home. I couldn't figure out why so many publications used the same image of the same plate. Here, in front of me, was the betrothal plate I had seen in these numerous publications, with its large missing chip. In fact, it's the *only* Jewish betrothal plate left from its era, as so many artefacts were destroyed. I don't know what took me

[6] We had also spoken about our family history via the telephone.

so long to grasp this, but here it was, this only plate. I cannot even now explain the potency that this image of the missing chip has on me. The absent part of the plate became the most important part, and became informative to the theme of my video.

At the Gare du Nord Station, boarding the train for Hungary, I noticed the ironic name of my train, *The Orient Express*. I wished that I could follow my investigation all the way to Shanghai, but this was not possible. En route I read George Konrad's "Hungarian Jewish Accounting", which I thought would be a good idea. [7] After all, my family had prided itself on its identification as Hungarian.[8] It turned out to be a hair-raising idea, as my proprioception registered the mode of my travel, and it pushed me up against the close proximity of historical events. The train tracks I was on were the same tracks that carried millions of Jews to their deaths. Worse yet, the moment the train entered Germany (between France, Austria, and Hungary) there was a visceral difference in the movement of the carriage. German lines are spaced slightly differently, so I could feel a palpable change when entering Germany. So much for sleep; I spent

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[7] George Konrad "Jewish Hungarian Accounting." The Invisible Voice: Meditations on Jewish Themes. Trans. Peter Reich. New York; Harcourt. 1999. p. 61-90.

[8] As a teenager, I had performed an act of nationalistic fervour. When I was 16, I realized that my grandfather Benjamin's last name had been standardized from its Hungarian spelling as he entered the USA via Ellis Island before coming to Canada. They changed our family name from Szoke, to Soke. At that point in time, I was able to legally change my name without parental permission. I did so, changing my name back to the original Hungarian spelling. As I hadn't consulted anyone, my father was furious with me for some time. Now my family accepts my variant name.

that night imagining Art Spiegelman versions of Nazis at every station, who became regulars in my dreams for months afterwards.[9]

In Hungary I discovered site-specific reading, and read the remarkable novels by Imre Kertesz, Fatelessness and Kaddish For An Unborn Child, while in his childhood and adult neighbourhoods, re-imaging the scenes. Both novels captivated me, and I returned to myself with images from the books seared into my imagination. As I walked through Pest, I considered Ruth Gruber's metaphor for Jewish history in Central Europe: the absent mezuzah.[10] Mezuzahs contain parchment slips upon which the Shema prayer is written and are affixed to doorposts, marking these as Jewish homes. Gruber's image is of the hollow space on doorframes throughout Central Europe where mezuzahs were once attached. Some doorposts bear the scars where the mezuzahs were removed, some bear just the nail holes, and others have been nearly filled with paint. I stumbled through Buda and Pest, looking for these absences, finding myself marvelling at the numerous renovation sites in the cities. In Pest, near the synagogues, I saw a young, pregnant woman dressed as an Orthodox Jew. She had a brilliant red vest, snug over her third term pregnant belly. I decided to abandon my peering: I felt like an intrusive outsider. I retired to a local restaurant, found a vegetarian entrée, and thought about the surrounding local customers who seemed to frequent this location. I felt lonely, and alienated. The next day, I

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[9] Please see the unsurpassable volumes: Art Spiegelman. My Father Bleeds History. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986-1991. Vol. 1 of Maus: A Survivor's Tale. 2 vols. 1986-91.; and Art Spiegelman. And Here My Troubles Began. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986-1991. Vol. 2 of Maus: A Survivor's Tale. 2 vols. 1986-91.

[10] Gruber, Ruth Ellen. Upon the Doorposts of Thy House: Jewish Life in East-Central Europe, Yesterday and Today. New York: Wiley& Sons, 1994. p. 4.

spent an afternoon at the new Holocaust Museum in Pest, and felt all around me Ruth Gruber's description of the Shoah as a "gaping, jagged hole in the tapestry of Jewish history."[11]

Hungary also boasts scars of contemporary anti-Semitic graffiti, which I found easily, and photographed. Budapest, or more accurately, Pest, remains the centre of Jewish Central Europe. In this repatriation journey I learned that China had saved more Jews than all of the Allied countries together. So much for European civilization: my grandmother's grandmother's family who survived the Shoah, had probably survived because they lived in Shanghai. It was ironic to be in Hungary, as my ancestors survived by *leaving*, and here I was, looking impossibly for clues.[12]

The matrilineal connections beyond Ester Kolmar came to an impasse. Resolving that I am not a genealogist but an artist, I returned to my original fabulations. For some reason, the Mary I had imagined as a girl remained more potent in my mind that the Mary my research had uncovered. In pursuing the video, Mary, I began an anachronistic conversation with my young self, drawing on my childhood imagination's version of Mary's life and world, but reviewing this version through my adult self. I was creating optics out of shadows, and turning fabulations into factoids, literally creating a photographic history from conté sketches of photographs and other mechanically reproduced images. I sought

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[11] Gruber 6.

[12] I easily found traces of my grandfather's family in a popular, and productive winery whose labels bear my last name. Matyas Szoke is the current winemaker and is followed in his skill by his son, Zoltan Szoke. They know we are somehow related, as my great Aunt Helen Soke, from Warren, Ohio, also attempted to follow our heritage, and likewise visited Hungary in her research.

out theoretical contexts that might address the creative bifurcations that issue forth between memory and an absence. How had my nine-year-old imagination filtered the few facts it was aware of? How had I charted my own invented pathways through this imagined history? How do my own senses continue to create moving images where there is nothing to be seen or heard? When I create absence as presence in my work, what is this elusive thing I attempt to locate? Is it some unnamable thing outside of time? Or outside of me?

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

The notion of absence as presence became central to my theoretical inquiries. I began to reflect on the nature of video as an agent simultaneously of absence *and* presence. I began to consider that my video actually draws from at least three separate eras: the time of Mary's life, my childhood imagination, and my adult reflection. Yet the main story is the version of Mary that my nine year-old self invented. This is the version that will not go away. With its trauma and its final frightening act of what seemed like punishment or cosmic retribution, it became my childhood story of origin and a mould into which the world I knew seemed to pour itself. I saw it as true then, and even now, although it is clearly a fiction when compared to the actual events of Mary's life. In considering my fictional version of my grandmother's life, and my reflections upon it, I realize that I am the one haunting history. It is Mary's death as my *father's trauma* that I revisit. This was a disturbing and profound discovery which must be taken up elsewhere.

In considering the video about Mary, Deleuze's concept of "fabulation" gave me a productive way to consider my work.[13] Fabulation is not merely story-telling. It is a complex ability of the imagination in flight to create a complex

[13] "The word 'fabulation' has been translated as 'story-telling'." Gilles Deleuze. "The Powers of the False." Cinema 2: The Time-Image. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson, et al. Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986. p. xvii.

world.[14] For Deleuze this flight occurs in both the writer's and the readers' imagination. In this vital process a few stray facts can multiply into a burgeoning fiction. My imagination is forged by stories and by missing stories. My childhood fabulation took on mythic or iconic proportions, giving me a means to hear and see through invention what I cannot perceive otherwise. My stories—remembered or invented—evolve into the subtitles that guide my viewers through Mary. It is here, in fabulation that I find not Mary, but myself, and my fears and hopes as the childhood 'creator' of my fabulation.

My childhood version of Mary was a way of 'making sense' of something—of life. I took an absence and evolved a tale of retribution from a few scraps of information. The tale has a beginning, middle, and an end, that began with a little girl of about nine—like me. It carries a version of her that is emotionally true to my experience of her as an absent presence. Can one inhabit a world if one does not create a story to live within? Or inherit a story to live with? Or both?

The version of Mary I generated as a nine-year old doesn't heed the facts of her life; it is a fiction, neither a haptic, nor optical fact, but a product of childhood fears, misunderstandings, and a will to order the world. Where I had no sense of Mary's body, or bodily memories of her, I had created a version of Mary that I had deeply internalized. While it is factually false it nevertheless has always

[14] Lambert, Gregg. "On the Uses and Abuses of Literature for Life: Gilles Deleuze and the Literary Clinic." Postmodern Culture. 8.3 (1998) par. 22. Project Muse. 22 March 2007 http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/journals/postmodern_culture/toc/pmc8.3.html

carried an emotional truth that has influenced me in ways I may never fully understand. I questioned what to do with this discovery.

In Death 24x a Second, Laura Mulvey views cinema through the term 'delay'. Delay works on two levels.[15] The first level refers to the actual physical slowing down of the rate of the filmic image, and the second level refers to a delay in time in which an embedded detail resides, as if waiting for our attention.[16] This embedded event bears a relationship to *Nachtraglichkeit*, a Freudian term for "how the unconscious preserves a specific experience while its traumatic effect might be realized by another, later but associated event."[17] Mulvey speaks to the experience of a detail being delayed in a film. This embedded detail later emerges to create a traumatic effect. In Mary there occurs a literal *Nachtraglichkeit* in the refusal, or inability of Mary to play her violin, a denial that later erupts as her cancer. Reading Mulvey makes me realize how the embedded traumatic effect occurs as a general principle and structuring agent in film. As well, when I examine my video, I discover my own unintended act of *Nachtraglichkeit*, for I have unconsciously embedded my own trauma within the video. The traumatic events in Mary are both absent and present, revealed yet hidden. I will return to this topic to fully contextualize it in the last chapter of this essay, "Mary: A Single Channel Video."

In searching for images to use in my fabulated version of my grandmother's life, I recalled and created images from the sensual economies

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[15] I extend the term "cinema" to include single channel video.

[16] Mulvey, Laura. Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image. London: Reaktion, 2006. p. 8.

[17] Mulvey 8.

she and I probably share: for example, the smell of a pig barn interior in the dew of early dawn and the irredeemable weight of the prairie sky in the middle of a hot summer afternoon. This strategy of personal, embodied history resonates with the protean dynamics of Nadia Seremetakis' politics of the imperceptible that she unpacks in *sense archaeology*.[18] She notes how the historical is always setting itself apart from the flow of the present, thereby embedding stillness into material culture.[19] Articles invested with sense memory produce perceptions, narratives and spaces that punctuate the a-historical present. Through them, a forgotten and embedded moment surfaces in the present, thereby activating history. Although it had previously been imperceptible, what is now 'real' has always actually been there "as an element of the material culture of the unconscious."[20] It is in the arena of the senses, in daily life, where the play of forgetfulness, imagination and misrecognition exchange and overlap. My senses awaken Mary's history via imagined images from her life. I am really not representing her history, but my own sense memories.

As I consider the impossible act of my video as a conversation between myself as a child and adult, Giorgio Agamben provides the most salient dimension to my considerations. As a commentary on Holocaust testimony, Agamben concludes that certain "testimony contained at its core an essential

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[18] Seremetakis, C. Nadia. "The Memory of the Senses, Part 1: Marks of the Transitory." The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity. Boulder: Westview, 1994. p. 1-18.

[19] Seremetakis 12.

[20] Seremetakis 12.

lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to."[21] He elaborates:

> Perhaps every word, every writing is born, in this sense, as testimony. This is why what is borne witness to cannot already be language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness. And this is the sound that arises from the lacuna, the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born. It is necessary to reflect on the nature of that to which no one has borne witness, on this non-language. [. . .] But not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. [. . .] It is thus necessary that the impossibility of bearing witness, the "lacuna" that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness—that which does not have language.[22]

In Mary I focus upon Mary's violin playing, as my childhood imagination made a traumatic conflation and saw her refusal, or inability to play as being somehow connected to her death. I had imagined an unutterable reality, a circumstance that had tragically overtaken her life. What I had imagined as a child had taken the place of a literally unspoken—perhaps, for all I knew—unspeakable reality. Despite knowing more, or even better, Mary's imagined fate remains an irrational fear that still drives my art practice. As I consider this fear from my current perspective as a practicing artist, I ask, what it would take for me to stop making

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[21] Agamben, Giorgio. Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. New York: Zone Books, 1999. p. 13.

[22] Agamben 38-39.

work? This question terrifies me. Whatever this thing may be that makes invention impossible, scares me. It drives me to create the video as an external version of the internal portrait if have of Mary, all the time courting the limits of language. I press up against her experience precisely because I can never utter another's experience, any more than I can utter what resides in my own non-language.

In the bell, this is precisely what I aimed to convey and evoke in the viewer, that although the nature of experience cannot be articulated, it nevertheless sings out in our silence. The song moves towards articulation despite the impossibility of becoming fully divulged in that process. The song is the impulse to articulate, to push up against the limits of representational systems—and against death.

CHAPTER 5: MARY: A SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO

I chose to make the video Mary as animation, since animation, as a drawing based form, centres so clearly on touch, and I felt this might help emphasize a question of bodily proximity. I felt drawing emphasized my version of Mary as an act of imagination as animation clearly signals an invented image. It helps me emphasize the gap between representation and what is unknowable.

I then began material investigations into different moving image technologies and drawing media. HD turned out to be too expensive and unwieldy. Current related but highly compressed forms such as HDV continue to have unsightly motion problems based on their MPEG compression scenarios. Most of the animation was shot frame—by—frame with a high-resolution digital still camera on a copy stand, then imported into the editing software as contiguous frames. The two exceptions are the opening sequence that is direct animation on 16 mm film, and the second last sequence, the footage of Saskatchewan, which is 16 mm film. I decided to have a section in 16 mm film as a visual reference to the era of 16 mm film during Mary's lifetime. After many drawing media trials, I chose a 2B Pierre Noir conté pencil on 0.005 of an inch thick Mylar-like plastic as the combination has a peculiarly satisfying feel which is slippery with subtle grit.[23] Haptic regard is central to my process in this animation.

[23] Ironically the pencil I loved was not distributed in Western Canada. I had to have a box of pencils couriered in from Ontario.

After the title "Mary" appears, and then fades, the first subtitle appears. It is simply: "(a lamentation)." This was a late addition to the video. The word has an archaic quality and is intended to call to mind the "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" in the Hebrew Bible, a book of mourning for a lost world. The poet writes, "She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tears run down her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies."[24] I felt it was necessary to give the viewer a sense of the mood and function of the video at the very beginning, and to present it directly. The lamentation is not only for Mary.

I created the opening sequence of direct film animation as a way to exploit that lovely cross-sensory moment where the apprehension of images fails, and we either search for embodied references for the image, or just enjoy the optical play of the image, relinquishing meaning or interpretation. The image was built up from successive layers of black spray paint on clear 16 mm leader.[25] The resulting direct animation was then made into a 16mm contact print, which made the black flecks white, and the clear leader black. It was then transferred to DVCam for post-production, and its speed was manipulated. The first few stray points of light remind me of the white flicks in decaying historic footage, but quickly there are many more points of light, as if the viewer is rocketing through space. Then this explanation is exceeded by even more, and larger points of

[24] Lamsa, George M. The Holy Bible From Ancient Eastern Manuscripts, Containing the Old and New Testaments Translated from the Peshitta. Philadelphia; A. J. Holman Company, 1957. "Lamentations, 1:2.

[25] I am grateful to the media artist Ben Russell for his technical advice for creating this shot.

white, evoking perhaps a meteor shower. Finally, there are so many white dots that all literal associations for the image fail. I wonder if other viewers also find themselves transported into the pure optical delight of the image that is both hypnotic, and somewhat disorienting. The image functions as a metaphor for what is impossible to see, such as travelling in to the irrational space mentioned in the subtitles at the end of this sequence: "cancer in her bones, where the music used to be."

The next subtitles in the video appear after the hypnotic film animation, on a completely black screen. The words read: "cancer in her bones / where the music used to be / Mary, where is your violin? / (silence)." These statements are crucial to shaping the tone of the video. I emphasize them in the surrounding blackness because I want to take the viewers to where their vision fails: here, the story is carried not by the image, but by the subtitles. This mirrors my own machinations, those that invented my version of Mary from stories or imagination, but not from touch, or vision.

In Mary, the following animated sequences are drawn images that appear to be a postcard, photograph, catalogue image, page, or map. I chose to create images that appeal to my sensory memories. They are iconic images rather than the 'documentary' images in my family's photograph albums. The drawings unfurl in time, starting with a few initial lines, and building up until the drawing is more, or less complete. As 'photograph', 'map' or 'catalogue image' they would be frozen instances, referring to an image made at another time. As drawings

'unfurling' in time these animations perform an enduring interval in the moment.[26] We are simultaneously aware of them as both animate and inanimate. The 'time' I am directly representing is the time that the context or the possible meaning of the image takes to sink into a viewer as the drawings evolve, rather than an historical time represented by a classical animation depiction of a trans-Atlantic steamer in motion, chugging across the ocean. As we view the animation sequences we are watching mechanical images being drawn—becoming something from apparently nothing.

As I draw these animation images, I consider that perhaps I am haunting Mary's history. I feel like I am sliding in and out of time. I consider the nature of animation that renders a possible moment of Mary's life into video time, a preserved time outside of the time of our bodily flow. The drawings perform a slippage between life and death, and suggest the lurking of the inanimate within the animate. My audience sees the animator's hand in action, and it witnesses the marks that have been made.[27] In the animation's illusionary magic, an uncanny truth is embedded which is that the image is at once both moving, and seemingly alive, while also eerily still.[28] Animation forces us up against a difficult terrain of uncertainty in our human scale: how can we conceptualize the existence of death in life?[29] Since I first began to imagine my video, animation seemed to be the right medium for this very reason. The problem of time is

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[26] Deleuze 155.

[27] Klein, Norman. "Animation as Baroque: Fleischer Morphs Harlem; Tangos to Crocodiles." The Sharpest Point: Animation at The End of Cinema. Eds. Chris Gehman and Steve Reinke. Toronto: YYZ Books, 2005. p. 30.

[28] Mulvey 54.

[29] Mulvey 53.

animation's central paradox, and through metamorphosis its primary magic. It brings motion and stillness into a shared present. I am making 'stills' through 'movement'—all of which is illusory.

The first drawn animation sequence begins with outlines of a photograph, or postcard, and then draws adhesive black corner angles, as if we see the image set in an old-style photograph album. The image that appears on this photograph, or postcard, is a trans-Atlantic ship. With this image the narrative speaks of a young girl's journey that takes "weeks on a groaning ship." A fictional Mary is introduced as a poor immigrant, with rough clothes. This girl clings to her violin. The next animated image is of an ad for a violin, as if from a catalogue, with a heading that promises a "Genuine Pisani Stradivarius Model" with finer, unreadable print below. I felt the image of a violin was important to emphasize the violin's importance in the story. The specific choice of the ad was to speak to the inexpensive production of violins in central Europe in the early 20th century. I thought the claims of a "genuine Pisani Stradivarius Model" to be funny. This narrative sequence sets up the fictional Mary as in the "new world" yet still inseparable from her violin.

A new animated sequence begins and it appears to be a photograph, and shows adhesive corner angles. The edges of the image are wavy, as if it is an old style photograph. This photograph is of a chicken in a fenced-in yard which stares at the camera, or viewer. I wanted this image to establish Mary as being in a farm life in the new world. It also refers to the photographs I have seen in my family photo albums, pictures taken of poultry, livestock, and farm machines. Its

status as photograph declares the chicken as an important part of Mary's life. The chicken is fairly spunky looking, and this is set to the lines "I wish she had been buried in a black leather case, but it was plain Saskatchewan pine / her Christian husband and eight children witnessed its descent into the black soil." The mention of a specifically Christian husband is a subtle clue to Mary's Jewish heritage. The spunky chicken helps counterpoint the sad narrative, to add more emotional complexity. The first person subtitle introduces me as a narrator with a perspective on Mary's life, wishing for a poetic burial.

The next image is also contextualized as a photograph, one of pigs in darkness—or mud, depending on the viewer. One pig in the background stares directly at the camera, or viewer. This acknowledging gaze from the pig also speaks to their relationship with the fictional photographer, as if it were Mary or someone else that the pig would acknowledge. An image of pigs is important to me in this work, as pigs recur throughout my childhood, family stories, and imagination.[30] The subtitles continue in first person, declaring that I refuse to believe logical explanations as to why the fictional Mary stopped playing her violin. It iterates aspects of farm life in Mary's era: the endless chores, that only men have certain freedoms, that natural disasters like hail can destroy an entire crop. While it risks making the narrator sound naïve, it also implies that there is a secret, tragic, or unknown explanation to Mary's cessation of playing the violin.

[30] Up until I was four or five I lived on a pig farm in East Selkirk, Manitoba. I don't remember images of pigs, but I remember the soft feel of piglets, and to this day, the smell of pig excrement makes me happy. Apparently I went from playing with dolls, to bottle-feeding orphaned piglets.

A new image appears. This is an image of text, as if from a book, and there is a small line in the very top left of the frame suggesting the edge of a page. The letters appear one by one, as if we are witnessing the act of typing or reading. The heading declares "Feminine Names" as if from a book of names. It traces the name Mary as a Greek from of Miriam, which means "sea of bitterness" in Hebrew, or "mistress of the sea" in Chaldaic. I thought of this as a subtle hint of Mary's Jewish heritage, but I also chose this image for the relationship it supports between the young version of Mary who seems young and hopeful in the ship sequence, and the later tragic version of Mary. During this sequence, the silent narrator proposes that if she were present in Mary's life at this time, she would ask Mary where her violin is. The invented answers are increasingly harsher, but impenetrable: "When you bury a newborn, you turn from the grave, and you make lunch for the hired men and the young ones. I don't need a new skirt. I need a butter churn. One bullet equals one fox." These are stray facts I know from my actual grandmother Mary's life: that her youngest child had an identical twin who died at birth; she was extremely frugal and practical; she was known for her keen marksmanship. Together they sketch a portrait of a tough farm life.

The next image is of a young girl seated on a chair, holding a violin. There is no reference to this as a photograph, nor any context as to why we see it as a still image. We aren't given a clear idea of the era, but the fact that she is wearing pants is a subtle hint of it being from a more recent time. The subtitles establish a relationship between Mary and a violin teacher. The teacher is

declared "not brilliant" yet he understands his student. Perhaps she is brilliant? Is she so brilliant as to be instantly recognizable by a "not brilliant" teacher? She and the violin "breathe together"—a literal description of inspiration.

The next image is a hand-drawn map that fills in over time. First we see a river, then small buildings by the river, then roads, a railway, and then two very large buildings. I thought the development of the image was a fairly accurate time lapse of how a farm or village may be described in its development. Most viewers assume this is an image of Mary's farm or of the nearby community. The narrative speaks of "a mad jig" of change that batters the teacher with many problems. After the image fades, in the darkness, the teacher's voice asks Mary to take the violin with her. There is a shocking reality to this image: it is an aerial view of Auschwitz. I doubt few viewers will recognize the image, and for those who do, its weight is unmistakable. This is the ragged hole in Hungarian Jewish heritage. One in three who were murdered here were Hungarian. This is the image that haunts me, and I hide it in plain sight. Despite my Hungarian family's nationalism, had my father been raised in Hungary, he would likely have been murdered as a Jewish child. The 'map' is the ghost in the video that can be neither vanquished, nor redeemed. I can't escape this image as it crystallizes the vague terror of my childhood imagination.

The idea to use this image, this aerial view of Auschwitz, came by accident. In my research I had copied scores of images from a wide variety of sources. As I weighed the options and choices for images in the video, I shuffled piles and stacks of photocopies and sketches around my studio. I glanced down

at this image and thought an aerial view of a farm would be an apt inclusion. As I picked up the image and realized the image source, I was horrified with myself. But also I had to admit that in some way this was the right image, as it is an image of the place that haunted my childhood imagination, which struggled to understand family, culture, and history.

Next we see 'documentary' footage, shot on 16 mm film. It is a long shot of a Saskatchewan landscape, with a crop growing in the foreground, a clump of shrubs in the background, and some sparse cumulus clouds. The image is jumping wildly, evoking a home movie that has been badly made. To get this film image, I loaded 16 mm film into a Bolex, but didn't fully engage one of the pressure mechanisms, causing the film to jump in and out of proper placement.[31] The narrative asks "How could she play even a dirge under this new sky?" I wanted this image to evoke how profoundly alienating one can find a place. It forces the viewer to see this fictional Mary as caught in an untenable present, where the new life is impossible, while the old world is gone. As the image cuts to blackness, the subtitle declares "she fell silent / her violin fell lifeless."

The final animation sequence is the girl holding a violin that we have seen earlier in the video. In it, we see the drawing of a young girl. Yet this time, the drawing actually does begin to move as classical animation, and the girl begins to play the violin. She springs to life. The video is no longer "silent" and, for the first time, we hear the violin. She finishes the song, and gives us one fierce glance, before the picture goes to black. The song is a Bach fragment from

[31] I felt pretty lucky to get this shot, as the process also caused the camera to tear numerous sprockets out of the film, making a lot of it unusable.

contemporary violin training repertoire. To fully address this sequence, I must first address the soundtrack to the entire work.

One of the most difficult processes to work out in the video seems like the simplest: sound. At a certain point in the video's development, I knew the only way the video would make sense to me was as a largely silent work. After all, the video was about Mary ceasing to play the violin. The bulk of the video had to be silent to make the few instances of sound more important. I felt sound would be an effective bridge into, and out of the black and white narrative of Mary. The black and white moving images combined with silence also helped to evoke the era of Mary's life by referencing black and white silent film. Jamie Saft's work, Sovlanut, became a companion to my research process. Its genre is avant-garde jazz from the Tzadik label's series "Radical Jewish Culture".[32] I find the echo-filled dub tracks evocative, and sonorous. The introductory sound in the video, from "Kasha Dub", a distorted guitar sound, pierces like a wail, and this wail transports me to another time and space every time I hear it. It became an accompaniment to the opening shot in order to introduce the audience to another point in time.

I felt a violin was the only logical sound a viewer should hear next in the work, but only at the end of the video. This underscores my concentration in the subtitled 'narrative' on the absence of Mary's violin playing. The final image sequence of the girl playing the violin makes me think of Mary, or myself as a creative girl, or all girls who learn to create. Like all the hand-drawn animation

[32]Saft, Jamie. "Kasha Dub." Sovlanut. CD-ROM. New York; Tzadik, 2000. I am indebted to Jamie Saft's generosity in letting me use his music in the soundtrack of my video.

sequences that have preceded it, this one is also a drawing that develops from a few lines to a full drawing. But then we see the drawing spring to life, as classical animation, and she plays the violin. We hear faulty notes, but it is a little miraculous all the same, having a "drawn" musician produce such sound. Rather than draw separate animation cells for this moving image sequence, I decided to draw and erase each moving line on the same single piece of plastic. Each time I made a mark with the conté, and then erased it with a kneadable gum eraser, the erasure was incomplete, leaving a faint trace of the earlier line. To add to the visual trace of these interpolated drawings, I also added a motion blur filter at a high sample rate, in post-production. Here, the evidence of the prior strokes remains as the girl moves, causing a blur to occur where there is motion. This type of animation strategy creates a portrait of 'time'. The final result exaggerates motion, underscoring violin playing as an activity, and emphasizing the duration of the act. The player lowers her violin, gives us a fierce glance, and the video cuts to black. I end with this image to accentuate the spirit of a feisty girl who played the violin.

At the end of the clip, we viewers are in darkness, and a scratchy, distorted recording comes up, a voice chanting in Hebrew—whether or not the viewer recognizes the language. This too, is by Jamie Saft, from "Mach/Hey" on Sovlanut.[33] As the singing progresses, Saft proceeds to play along with the recording. It seemed apt choice to close the video. It sounds mournful, like a lamentation. It is in the Hebrew language, and is a prayer sung to a traditional

[33] Saft, Jamie. "Mach/Hey." Sovlanut. CD-ROM. New York; Tzadik, 2000.

cantillation mode.[34] The song is slow and funky, and has a feel of closure to me. The reverb on the tracks makes it impossible to hear the words clearly.

At the end of the video, what emerges is not a portrait of Mary, the person, but a portrait of my naïve childhood version of her. In a sense, it is not a portrait of her at all, but a portrait of my crucially necessary construction of Mary. Why did I cleave to this story, rather than attempt the real story of Mary, my adult version? There was a traumatic event in my life that cleaved my childhood apart from my adulthood. I had a boyfriend, and our relationship began amicably. It then spiralled out of my control. He was violent, and began beating, and then, raping me. He was extremely psychologically manipulative. I thought it was my fault, and hid his violence from my family. Until I found out that I had become pregnant. My family was horrified when I told them what I had been through. They were destroyed that they had been unable to protect me. I decided to have the child. I bore a son, haemorrhaged, and almost bled to death in the delivery room. I gave my son up for adoption. It became an awkward, painful secret in my life. Since that time I have tried to find out about my son. I now know a few facts: he was raised Jewish. I considered the strange parallel irony of my unspoken Jewish heritage, and my Jewish offspring, and the absence of both my grandmother and my son in my life. I tried to draw out some thin line of continuity while knowing so few facts of either of their lives. Like many others, it was impossible for me to look at the map of Auschwitz, and not fear at once for my own family, and my own child. I had to draw the map in Mary because it was the

[34] I thank Moshe Denburg for this explanation.

lacuna, like my child, both absent, and in plain sight. I have used the image obliquely, and I hope that my use of the image is not seen as making the image commonplace. It is the unnamed map, the heart of my video. I drop these facts of my life—my lacuna—here, like a bomb because some things should only be felt as bombs. Some things in our lives, in our histories, can only land like this, and fling us to pieces. In negotiating with my personal history I have attempted to find sense where there was none. My childhood version of Mary became more compelling to me as I recognized that, at some point, my adult self had also revised it into a deflected version of myself. My own story emerges as *Nachtraglichkeit*, a traumatic event, previously embedded, triggered by my version of Mary. There was a parallel of absences that defined a before and an after. Mary before, when she played the violin; Mary after she stopped playing the violin and died; Me, before and after my son. In the process of writing this paper, I see my making of the video as an intuitive process, and in that process I made choices that I was not always conscious of. My own story began to bubble up in the maternal body in the bell and has fuelled the creation of Mary. I embrace Mary as my intuitive process of fabulation, my own necessary fiction.

I think of Art Spiegelman's hand-drawn portrait of his all-too-human and cantankerous father, and the generous title of his first volume: My Father Bleeds History. We all bleed history—at least a lot of us do. If I were a grand Olympian judge presiding over the survival of the fittest, I'd toss the whole human race right off the ledger. We do atrocious things to each other. As animals, we have lost our way. I say this, and then I see vulnerability of a newborn, and am undone.

Human: me; one big jumble of everything gentle, and everything gone mad, and awry.

Earlier, I wrote briefly about how drawing returns me to a different part of myself, as the process is both visual and tactile, and an immersive process. When I am engaged in the process of drawing the animation, I can become so engrossed in the process that all other things, such as time, fall away from my consciousness. I am aware only of my senses, engrossed in a creative act. This type of engagement is tiring but also deeply refreshing. I liken this experience to Deleuze's phrase "becoming." The becomingness of the creative interval is the only answer to the seemingly nonsensical question that I repeatedly ask throughout my animation: "Mary, where is music?" There is no answer to this question, as language cannot contain experience. We may witness but we are unable to utter the experience of another. The question is not where does music come from, as that would imply a place like a soul, or an imagination. But to me the creative act comes from the process of its creation. Becoming is the only possible "where" of music, as to be in the "where" of music is to be in its very moment of performance, in its becoming. [35] This challenges the linear order of clock time as it performs an interval, a moment of endurance in itself.[36] And not just music becomes, or a drawing becomes, but in the engagement with the act of creation, I also become. In the act of drawing, I am also in this enduring interval. I feel this is why we need music, or art, and why it outlives generations. Linear time offers me only the chaos of history, and in it I may become caught in

[35] Deleuze 155.
[36] Deleuze 155.

its maelstrom, like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History who I always see as being blown backwards towards a future to which its back is turned.[37] Through becoming I temporarily emancipate myself from the intractable nature of time.[38] It is where I occupy the animate presence of creative change.

[37] Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Illuminations. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. p. 257.

[38] Mulvey 189; Mulvey uses the phrase "emancipation of an intractable reality" to describe the effect of Hollis Frampton's nostalgia (1971).

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