

Summer 2016

The story never ended

Laura Iancu
University of Iowa

Copyright 2016 Laura Iancu

This thesis is available at Iowa Research Online: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2093>

Recommended Citation

Iancu, Laura. "The story never ended." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2016.
<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.vqvq8bhl>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd>

Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

THE STORY NEVER ENDED

by

Laura Iancu

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Masters of Fine Arts
degree in Film and Video Production in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2016

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Michael Gibisser

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Laura Iancu

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Masters of Fine Arts
degree in Film and Video Production at the August 2016 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Michael Gibisser, Thesis Supervisor

Jason Livingston

Steve Choe

James Snitzer

Corey Creekmur

To SquirrelBoy, SquirrelBoy special friend/s and the George's bar

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anna Swanson, Metrah Pashae, Jim Snitzer, Mike Gibisser, Jason Livingston, Sarah Beth Harris, Jesse McLean, Steve Choe, Florina Titz, Michael Darrow, J-Cox, Mike Mills, Helen Roushar, Greg Ongie, Kyle Stine, Dawei Zhang, Corinne Teed, Kristen DeGree, Temesgen Abraha, Awkward Lee.

And

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

Zachary Isom

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Nowhere fast.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
SQUIRRELBOY IS NOT AFRAID	1
CHAPTER	
1. FILMAGINARY FRIENDS	3
Fever	6
Murmur	7
Rattle	12
2. MYTHOLOGY	19
3. 途陌險嶺好意陌瓦處	24
4. 瓦陌陌瓦處好祇途陌陌	25
CODA	26

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. What does the Digidandy Dream Of (made with 123DCatch software)	3
Figure 2. Stills from The Four Exits by Marvin Cone (top), Murmur, Rattle	8
Figure 3. This isn't even my final form	10
Figure 4. Stills from Fever, Murmur, Rattle	11
Figure 5. Plan and new plan	14
Figure 6. Valley Dome	15
Figure 7. Snail Card	18
Figure 8. Labyrinth	21
Figure 9. The Minotaur Card	24

SQUIRRELBOY IS NOT AFRAID

Following the standard tradition of the academic expanse, I am writing the subsequent pages as annex to my thesis film trilogy *Fever-Murmur-Rattle*. Within this little bump-in I've arranged a few stories, some anecdotes, a little tech relay and plenty of sweated out paragraphs about the why and the what of the films.

I understand this type of exegesis to be a common and necessary element of the becoming-professional schema and a fine opportunity to open up, enhance, and elucidate a visual work. Yet (from the middle of the earth where my office is located) I also register it as an ineffectual endeavor for a few reasons. To start with, the fact that I spend most of my time in a production mode which levels up all sorts of categories but the one marked "eloquence" is secondary to the realization that when it comes to things that are as aggressive in their day to day mutations as the aforementioned films are, my understanding can't always catch up. There is also a reflexivity lag in both retrospective and prospective glances; *Fever* was finished three years ago, *Rattle* is still in production. The other hitch is that, since I let my trickster side freely play with styles and narratives for a video, it would be almost too easy to let that attitude leak into using words to either cut something down a size or shamelessly inflate and camouflage a lesser original intent. Recourse to honesty is dubitable at all points so my strategy here will be to foreground a self-seeking rhetoric geared toward salvage and fleeting introspection rather than exhaustive analysis. Flowing from this is a sinuous writing style that touches on attitudes and thoughts as they bring themselves up and pools around loose themes.

Re:SquirrelBoy

I am a visual squirrel working primarily in non-fiction, experimental and animation video forms, with an expanded practice of installation, photography, and graphic design. I am foremost concerned with the impulses behind the digital conservation of matter (an archival tendency) and the problem of mediation as highlighted by the conflicted relationships that emerge between subjectivities on different sides of lenses and screens (attunement, voyeurism). I work with clutter, accumulation, reiteration and similar visual techniques derived from a desire to explore and understand to what degree the micromovements of mind can bear representation within the wealth of possibilities activated by freeform editing and unapologetic digital manipulation. I think of my videos as journals and letters, a form of dialogue with the unknowable future and the fantasy of a past. They help me think through experience beyond the immediacy of sensorial perception and are part of my daily rituals, compulsion included. Their meaning unfolds (when it does) in the movement between overattachment to small, fleeting, things and events (which can feel ontologically large) and the decrease of affective importance of objects and representations that should feel grander. Like, what does it mean that a bug gets more screen time than a human within a film stamped *autobiographical*? Can potentially important events, say a break-up, feel like nothing? Ultimately I wonder what does it feel like to lose one's insertion into the prescribed system named "the good life"¹, or even bare life, and what new potential this disruption can bring, both in the fluctuations of "life as such" and in the forms of visual *illustration*. These are some modes of apprehension that I have identified with and also ways in which I historically

¹ Lauren Berlant – Cruel Optimism.

² Mark Dery – Castle of the Living Dead: Time, Embalmed, www.thoughtcatalog.com

tell myself the story of myself and occupy my inescapably known territories.



Figure 01. What does the Digidandy Dream Of (made with 123DCatch software)

Re:re:Squirrelboy

```
sheanna2003 (10:33:44 PM): Sheanna first connected on Thu Nov 28  
11:23:44 2002 PST. She is 1 year, 10 months, and 17 days old.  
sheanna2003 (10:33:49 PM): :( beaute  
florinaworld (10:34:20 PM): :-/  
sheanna2003 (10:34:35 PM): zia memories..  
sheanna2003 (10:34:38 PM): of old times  
sheanna2003 (10:34:47 PM): first internet conections and..  
florinaworld (10:34:51 PM): i know...  
florinaworld (10:34:54 PM): how it was..  
florinaworld (10:34:58 PM): the excitement and pleasure  
sheanna2003 (10:35:50 PM): ye. au trecut aproape 2 ani...  
sheanna2003 (10:35:54 PM): man..they go fast  
florinaworld (10:36:00 PM): i know.. :(  
florinaworld (10:36:05 PM): fucking fast as hell
```

...

The “past is a frozen forest”² that my morbid desires beg me to revisit. I study the embalmed memories, mine and others, with the limpid recognition that dreams really happen and happenings are but hazy dreams. My recollections mainly subserve the slap-together of everyday identity but I use them to make these dreamworld things as well.

...

In one of the more romanticized versions of myself I attach a *Magic Mountain* hue to my early days and point to an education in perishability as one explanation for the manic way in which I label and jar passing phenomena for my ever-increasing digital archives. I recognize that the spectral summonings, passed and futural, of my work on a whole have partly formed because of this kind of afterlife sense of reformulating observational footage. My friend calls this Digital Necromancy³.

² Mark Dery – Castle of the Living Dead: Time, Embalmed, www.thoughtcatalog.com

³ Term coined by Florina Titz

FILMAGINARY FRIENDS

The making of *Fever* (2 min), *Murmur* (3 min) and *Rattle* (12 min) has been guided by my own personal attachments, fragmentary impulses, and a big knot of all sorts of impudic nuances of what I've been told living is. The films themselves have many faults, with hesitations and recoveries that, image-wise, range from visual luxuriance to digital debris. They are pretty, pretty gothic, kinda' gorey, but mostly pretty. In this vein, one could categorize my work here as an aestheticist endeavor guided by fluctuating moods around a core of anxiety – pleasure for dread's sake, that sort of thing. It is not wrong to think this. It could also happen that these videos could be so particular to a subjectivity that they actually interests no one, like when you tell your best friend a bewildering intimate dream and they yawn with disinterest. The audience I imagine consists of anyone with an Internet connection. This is my default attitude because as a teen in a backward country it is how I accessed rare, weird, and undistributed materials or films which permeated and influenced some of my own making-patters.

...

Sometimes, after my own brain has japed the moralizing stick on me, I think I should make something more... like...useful but at this point my need to hold up a style mirror to the world and see in it a twisted but equally fitting reflection supersedes making an overt work about issues and grabbable histories. This is why I think all three films are in a way foolishly optimistic works and can easily finish as tea party consumables for a wintery day. But all is fine for at the end my thesis is just another place where, I suspect, we never meet, but, in a bout of optimism, could.

FEVER

It presents itself as a combustible array of sparkly ornaments, insects and animals.

Lace has history, the glove has history, the doily used to be a treasured thing. Colonial, bourgeoisie, kitsch, maybe, but precious things nevertheless: marbles, porcelain, mannerisms and customs, pressing flowers in French novels and drinking rose colored tea. And then there's "the abject", the bugs, the toothy nature, the hints of the visceral.

Fever holds together both frills and bug goo by the equal fascination they can produce. It is also pushing a non-commitment to one facet, or rather iteration, of an object/event.

This last sentence in translation means that I have trouble getting over the paralysis of deciding even the smallest things, such as, the color of a house I want in a video. So, this time, I used all the options I had. Five houses, five structures, five backgrounds- similarly framed but cutting into each other as if fighting for supremacy over attention. Same with some of the other things. Variability of indexical references aside, the film also has an overlaid translucent pellicle of strobic color/shape textures which makes it so that with every paused frame the image is vastly different than the previous. When the video plays this is not noticed and all the frames blend into each other.

More importantly, *Fever* is a film about leaving things aflutter and documenting what they do. When editing previous films I did on occasion feel that when objects are placed in proximity to each other, or fragments of footage are sprinkled on a timeline, they tend to combine as if under a foreign will. I think of it as the ouija board effect of filmmaking - you know you are subjected to a psychological trick but it still feels like the occult. Maybe that's where I would also place the "film magic" that people talk about, but you can't read the future in a coffee cup. Cats and grandmothers can though.

MURMUR

Murmur is a four minute spastic video I have shot mostly in, or looking out from, my apartment. There are a few things recorded in the Ozark Mountains and Romania in there as well. For a while it lived in various folders as footage recorded years apart, then my friend Mike left me a Cedar Rapids Museum poster with the Four Exits painting by Marvin Cone which I really liked because I sensed within its claustrophobic territory a faux schema of escape where all variants are equally valid, and equally void and terrifying. But that was just the jumping-off point. This same-ish paralysis of choice mentioned in the Fever part, has produced, within Murmur, a space dream-dissolved and open for objects/images to take ownership of themselves and for events to happen without seeming causally linked. In other words, I thought of Murmur as an open invitation with the possibility of some scary RSVPs --- something like a tea party between a storybook, a projector, bug husks, rocks, furniture etc.

The Romanian band *Environments* produced the sound for *Murmur* and would not accept any money for it knowing I wasn't financially well off and even though they were not either.

“There are no bad mixes, there are only people unprepared to listen” they said.

Much Love.



Figure 2. Stills from *The Four Exits* by Marvin Cone (top), *Murmur, Rattle*

RE:re:re:SquirrelBoy

To put it in context: I was born in Romania, a very backward country that started its transition from communism to hyper capitalism about 25 years ago (after the December 1989 revolution). One of the reasons communism (not the kind you like) had such a long reign there is because the Romanian people (poor, rural and illiterate) have/(had?) a very complacent attitude towards leadership - *the bended head the sword doesn't cut*⁴ - a form of which even today produces monstrous manifestations felt in the deep attrition of current living and in the fact that oppression is not understood as an issue of the deep embeddings of social, cultural and historical forms but as a personal problem one must overcome. Thus, a nation of hustlers who elbow their way towards decent living rather than demand it as a right. My friends and I share perpetual awe at the fact that we are alive despite the stupid stuff we did and the dangers we exposed ourselves to. The fact that the bankrupt default education we received didn't eviscerate our minds is also miraculous, not that it left us completely unscathed. In Romania, the movement towards "modernization" produced surreal mixes of archaic and hypermodern elements. It's the sense of this juxtaposition and the inherent paradoxes that I wanted to preserve when I first started to record images. The camera didn't create a break with the real, it only mirrored the disenfranchised way we already navigated an absurd and brutish environment. We had other tools for escapism.

...

⁴ Romanian Proverb

I am a digital hoarder. I have over 30 tb of information stashed and duplicated on multiple drives, in multiple buildings and multiple continents – in case of fire, WWII etc. When I pull from that information I engage in this sort of digital taxidermy where experiences can be exhaustively analyzed in a way that feels resolved. I take pictures of the items that I shared some time with before I force myself to throw them away, that kind of thing. Another Romanian saying “you laugh so you don’t cry.”

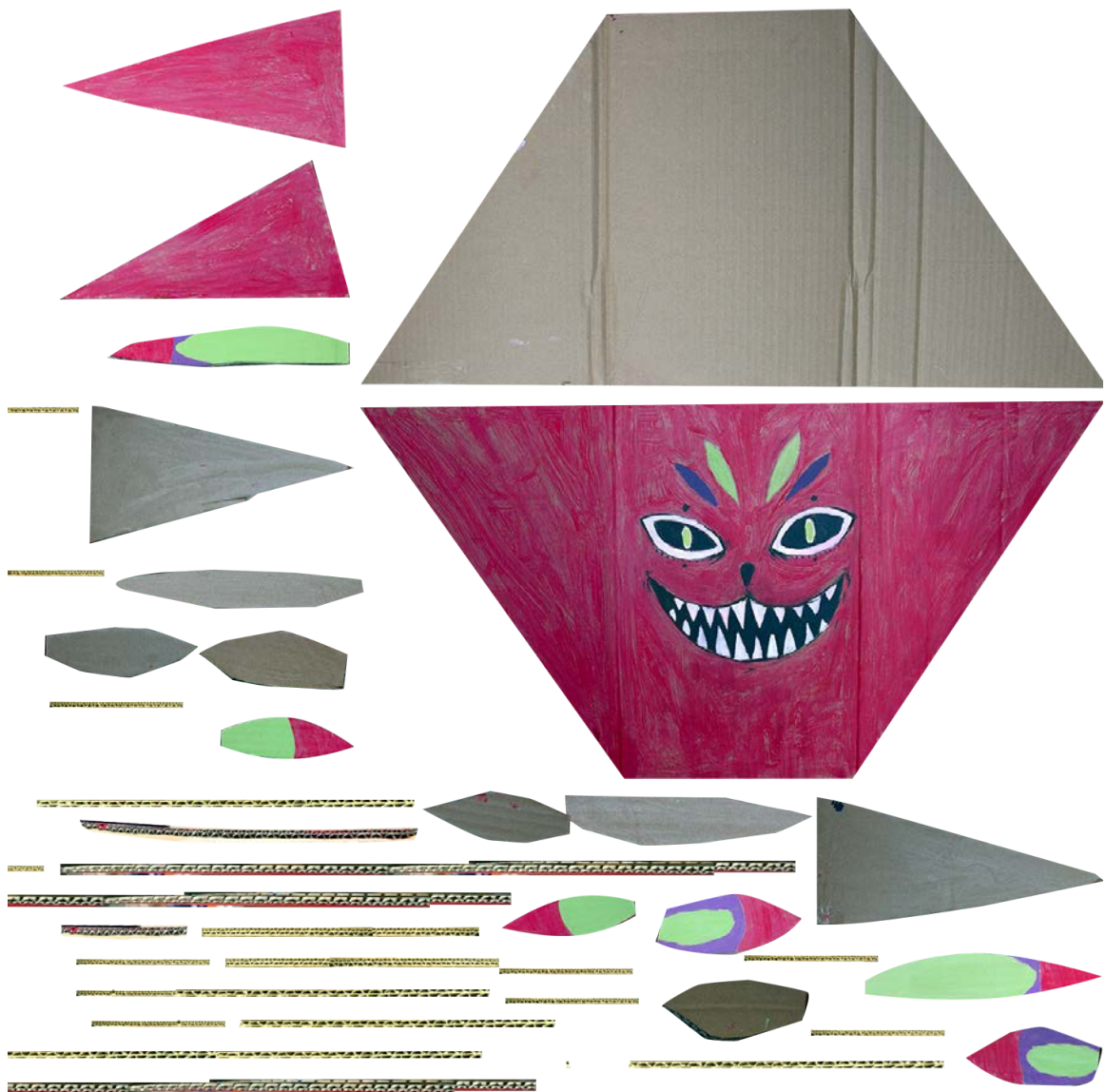


Figure 3. This isn't even my final form.

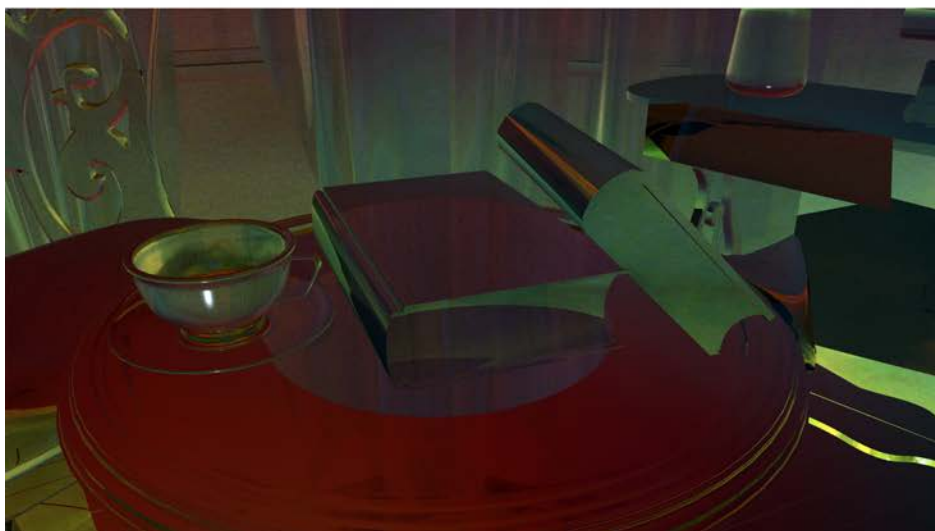


Figure 4. Stills from Fever, Murmur, Rattle

RATTLE

I've been feeding the desire for this film for about five years before — in my 2nd year of my second master's education, and conveniently at about the time when I needed to produce a solid work — it started to growl at me-*like-now-is-the-time* so I immoderately sat in isolated and isolating rooms and made it! - a headless film with a broken spine and mangled ribs - goes rawr-slurp-rawr-slurp down hallways.

Through the mist of recall I can make out an initial plan to make a 2d game, with the mechanics of an old RPG (Monkey Island, Day of Tentacle, Syberia etc) but made out of photographic collages and accessible online. Then I learned how to use 3DsMax which produced an explosion of visual possibilities and at the same time replaced the mechanics of user-decided navigation with a single-channel animation. This is because, while I could program some flash, I knew nothing of Unity, and anyway I thought, it was always meant to be more of a platform-like thing so the new hybrid is bound to still be aligned to my regressive yearnings to construct a thing that lives and grabs, that walks along with me, picks my drinks, selects my readings, gossips and filters out daydreams, enthusiasms etc. *Rattle* has a bit more heft that way. It feels a bit more calculated and self-possessed, as animations usually are because render times are not permissive of much back-and-forth. But it is still very much a freestyle film where one image asks for a particular other image, a faulty frame might convert others to faultiness, the software pulls in some direction, rules change, itineraries modify, the destination becomes opaque. The pre-planned things never work out but I don't expect them to either, or rather I hope for and depend upon their failure because that's how phosphorescent new routes appear.

So I really want to say that I only curated *Rattle*, and that it made itself somehow and it's not at all mine - a side effect of working in solitude but with the feeling of encountering agency from the things themselves, so that, as if processed through a black-box, the way that the final render-output looks is a bit of a mystery.

My job it is to snap all the distortion to a video plane.

Your job might be to find the subject position already inserted into the work.

Which might be a little scary because this particular one is not comfortably curated towards intelligibility. This is why: it mimics the camera movements of a first-person shooter game yet is un-passable as real gameplay because of most other things aside POV. The clumsiness of its modeling and the strangeness of the transitions would cause any current gamer to squint in disbelief, even the ones that, like myself, love games like *Flower*, *Journey*, *Gone Home* etc that don't have clear goals or super comprehensible narratives. But *like* a game it demands an attitude from the viewer.

...

Yet *Rattle* is a video, so when you take away the *gaming* part of a game (as defined by A. Galloway as a system of player-software-machines⁵) one is left with a skin that can be inhabited by all sorts of things. The game interface becomes a mask itself for something that is not quite animation, not quite live-action, not quite machinima or an artist mod(ification), yet it requires someone to know some of the codes of all of them, and the nuances of their subversion, which to me is actually the opposite of a reductive viewership. The lack of console control does not imply a passive one either. The movement of sense-making in *Rattle* is a consequence of puzzling together all the hints of

⁵ Alexander Galloway – *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 2006

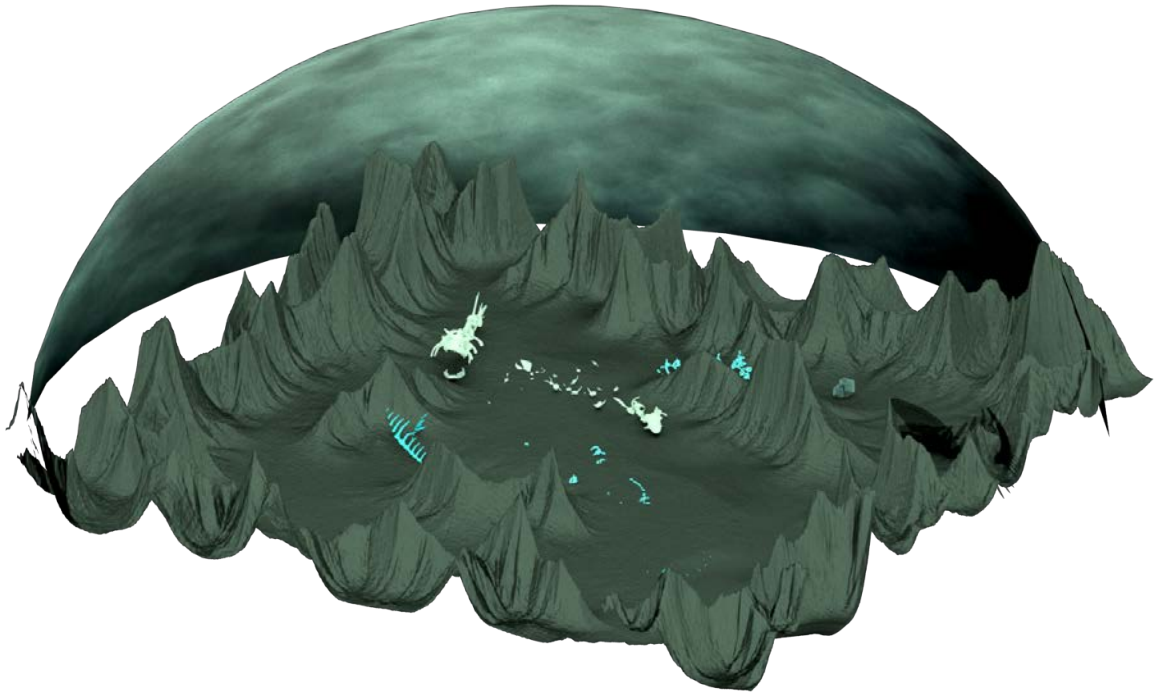


Figure 6. Valley Dome

Afterthoughts:

It was fun to play with limits and limitations of the software and the constructed land.

Traditional filmmaking almost never requires the construction of full spaces. Set designers and carpenters build only the portion of the set that will appear within the frame but with 3D worlds one can build miles of navigable landscape. This is appealing for me because I have no money for building anything IRL⁶ and it also sustains my desire for superfluous and surreal objects. I recognize that I have a propensity to make self-contained worlds - this I blame on reading of Jules Verne - and at the same time I find it very pleasing to disrupt whatever comfort “the box”⁷ might offer. The structure of *Rattle* might be that of a row of apertures, of beginnings. I think this film can be five hours long

⁶ In Real Life

⁷ Sandbox Game - generic term for a type of game in which the player has quite a bit of freedom to explore and choose her own path. Any game has box-like parameters, just ask the render engine.

and it still would not get to an end because the object of desire in the film is unattainable and illusory. Maybe I was thinking about this too a little bit, this weird stubborn search for anything whatever.

“ how do you make choices? “

I find one core sensation, mental scape, fascination and let visual forms fawn around that.

“ how do you make choices? “

Trial and error. Like I made Murrur three times before this. There is almost nothing left of the original but its vibe. The images were too illustrative and storytelly and the 2d/3d composites I was making looked quite unrefined.

“ how do you make choices? “

“ how do you make choices? “

“ how do you make choices? “

As mentioned in some of the abstracts above I don't make logically sequenced choices.

The point is not to prioritize; the point is letting all variables jostle with each other until one sticks to the ceiling of exhaustion. Then another and so on. What I have to do is be

temperamentally aligned with this procession and focus on sensation, energy, and

rhythm. The limitations of my hard skills also have a pull, as any objectively un-fully realized patch of 3D has to have a subjective compensation to restore its effectiveness.

Least importantly I also make choices by shying away from deja-vu experimental film codes, as I understand them, because I like my second-hands to be of some quality.

“ how do you make choices?”

When I was younger my brother and I used to run down steep mountain paths. The feeling of suspension we got from jumping on an incline was intoxicating enough that we trusted some basic and self-preserving functions of our brains to do the instinctual decision for how our feet would safely land and re-propel us forth. Maybe it's kind of like that.

“ how do you make choices?”

MYTHOLOGY

A few weeks ago I was in LA, interviewing for a job at a fancy University. For my artist talk I included a seven minute silent clip of *Rattle*. At the Q and A someone asked me to speak more about “personal mythologies”. I must have had that written down in an artist statement somewhere since it rolls of the tongue nicely, but put on the spot I couldn’t do much but mutter and roll it under the carpet. Not because it’s BS but because it’s a large question, one with many subtle threads that are hard to weave into a clean-cut-answer. But I’ll pick one or two as examples – say snail. Snail image doesn’t even register on a first viewing of *Rattle*, but it’s there and it’s a recurrent and important image thought many of my films (Level I, II, Perfumes and Caresses).



Figure 7. Snail Card

Here is the <personal> aspect.

After the rain I found a big snail in the middle of the street. I picked them (snails are hermaphrodites) up to transport them to safety but by the time I reached vegetation I was too curious about their behavior to let them go. They kept looking at me all this time, and coiling around my fingers, a very un-skittish snail, unlike the ones I played with before. So I took them home and named them Orlando, after a friend of mine whom called himself “the magic snail” and presented me with manifold snail themed knickknacks, including a glass pin which I still have. My friend, the human, crafted this identity for himself on some structure of “slow and wise” selfdom. But we all inhabited characters. Two or three for the day and many more for the night manifestations of drunken roleplaying and white online nights.

Then it was my last year of college and my room was traced with slime from a thousand tiny baby snails and my friend drowned in a lake in France that summer. Not Magic Snail, another friend. This other friend had a dream about phosphorescent snails and said that humans are like snails, you try to get them out of your room but you can’t, they leave behind “trace gluiante d’escargot” French not his.

The Butterfly Card is from a flamboyant poem I wrote in college for a silly class. Then my friend used it in a film of hers where this guy was on drugs and it made sense and now pink juices are a thing in our universes.

Lots of butterflies left their pink juices on my windshield today

Going 90 on the road, 30 on the freeway

Free from tyranny of sentiment

Caring not for causalities.

Direction is irrelevant,

moving on

Chin up, hopes down, eyes broken.

And so on. And so on.

Beyond the mythology part I added a bit of intertextuality, as is tradition. The Blue Cat mask has appeared in two other films of mine, in some photos, and is often part my Halloween costume. Same goes for White Rabbit. They become pleasurable, friendly, companion little gods, defenders against the attrition of the mind and the wear-out of daily routines.

We could dig this Personal Mythology hole 'till the other side of the planet but I think it's important to specify that I do not pretend that any of this last information matters for the film's reception overall. I do however like to think that when things truly carry a symbolic charge under the immediate surface, that weight can be felt without having to be *ex-plicated* at all by the author or someone else.



Figure 8. Labyrinth

I've been attracted to labyrinths ever since I read *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. According to his later taxonomic writings⁸ the figurative labyrinth in *Rattle* is a classic *unicursal* labyrinth. (*In this labyrinth, there has to be a Minotaur, just to make the experience interesting, seeing the pathway through always leads where it has to lead and can't lead to anywhere else*⁹.) Another type of labyrinth is Mannerist (or Irrweg – unfolding like a tree) where there is only one correct way and many dead ends from which one would have to retrace one's steps. The last type indexed by Eco has a form that cannot be flattened to a plane because it moves multidimensionally and has no concrete limits (*it's structure will always be different than what it was a moment ago, and it can be traversed by taking a different route each time. Those who travel in it, then, must also learn to correct constantly the image they have of it, whether this be a concrete- local- image of one of it's sections or the hypothetical regulatory image concerning its global structure – which cannot be known, for reasons both synchronic and diachronic*¹⁰). *Rattle* too lashes to dimensions beyond map-like topography with the metaphorically suggestive figuration of a possible interface/code in front of /as material for it's workings and also through bringing in the live-footage bits.

⁸ *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* – Umberto Eco, Harvard university press may 2014,

⁹ *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* – Umberto Eco Harvard university press may 2014, page 52

¹⁰ *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* – Umberto Eco Harvard university press may 2014, page 54

If anyone asks me what I like to watch or what has had an influence on my itinerary into the visual domain I always say anime. This is why: I watched this film called *Mind Game* by Masaaki Yuasa a little over five times and enjoyed it increasingly without knowing what the director specifically meant with a lot of the sections of the film. It is constructed in such a way as to allow for numerous of audience re-constructions. When I did find out what the authors intent was, by listening to the dvd commentary, it was something completely different from my ideas, yet I was still perfectly happy to think of all the variations because the system of polisemous images set in place was also incredibly fun to navigate – and breathable and genuinely inviting. Within anime it seems to me that thoughts are lively and unfold in their proper form. And one thing that I am certain about is that for me form is essential because it’s key to the “dreamworld.” As Timothy Morton puts it “*you have to get into people’s dreamworlds or else you leave it up to the guy making Orangina*”.

There is also something fiercely resistant to a *certain kind* of analysis about, let’s say, Studio 4C productions. Like *Furi Kuri* is not a way to “start a conversation” and *Dimension Bomb* does not care about the academic paper I might write about it. From anime produced at studios like Madhouse, Toei Animation, Gainax, Production I G, Gibli, I learned that it is ok to overflow and to chase yourself around at the risk of never catching up. I like these certain types of animations for their courage and their proposition of what a world of uncompromising alterity could feel like.

...

瓦听罔瓦德冠磁途听罔

“ Art could be a means of liberating the people, a training to see oneself and the other more clearly. Here is when a film can be very simple too. The film for instance is a combination of the muffledness of wool and the clean echo of glass.” Van der Keuken

I know that my films can't be everybody's everything but I hope that at least they have aperture, some aspect of an invitation. What they have in common for me is a foregrounding of the futility of attempting to fix the ground, of locking into coherence both the immediate and the distant. In a more mundane way, they have also been an education, not only in the becoming-professional sense, but also in expanding my thinking capabilities and speculative powers and, at last, they have been something to try and grow eloquent about.



Figure 9. The Minotaur Card

CODA

sheanna2003 (10:07:59 PM): bbye now goosies

florinaworld (10:08:02 PM): bye snow piss

florinaworld (10:08:12 PM): :))

florinaworld (10:08:26 PM): ergonomic neck

sheanna2003 (10:08:35 PM): stinky lama feet!