Reflections and enchantments: influences of myth, technology, identity and movement in Mirror, mirror perfected

Priscilla A Kessie

University of Iowa

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

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Copyright © 2019 Priscilla A Kessie

Recommended Citation


https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.hka4-dxd8
REFLECTIONS AND ENCHANTMENTS
INFLUENCES OF MYTH, TECHNOLOGY, IDENTITY AND MOVEMENT IN

*MIRROR, MIRROR PERFECTED.*

by

Priscilla A Kessie

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

August 2019

Thesis Supervisor:  Associate Professor Christopher Harris
For Simba Bubba Gump
#botpsiam
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I reach the end of an incredibly long journey to the terminal degree, I would like to give thanks. First, I would like to express gratitude to my chairperson, Christopher Harris. I would also like to sincerely thank my other committee member, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley for her tireless efforts in working with me. Her encouragement and support have been invaluable throughout this process. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee members; Mike Gibisser, Anahita Ghazvinizadeh, and Michael Sakamoto for being a part of this project and providing support along the way. Additionally, I express sincere appreciation to Shereena Honary, Leia Belt, Kai Swanson and Eli Boonin-Vail who in their respective ways assisted tremendously with putting together the written account for the making of this film. I also thank the rest of my Cinematic Arts cohort, professors and fellow graduate students who for the past three years helped me understand myself and voice through challenging critiques and colloquium sessions at the university. I am grateful to the Dance Department for being so welcoming to my research. I am thankful to the production cast and crew. I would also like to thank my wonderful partner, Lane and his family, for their unconditional love, support, and encouragement. I cannot imagine what this would have been like without him by my side. I would like to thank my sweet siblings Jacquelyn, Akwasi Jr., and Valerie. Last, but certainly not least, my parents, Gus and Doris, although saying “thanks” could never possibly be enough. They have given me support and every valuable opportunity to succeed over many years. They have instilled within me the values I possess today, all of which led me to pursue a career as a storyteller, educator and filmmaker. They have encouraged me to pursue my dreams and have modeled hard work, integrity, and diligence throughout my life. All that I am I owe to my mum and dad. I have been blessed with the most wonderful family and friends, and I am eternally grateful.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This production journal acts as a public record of the journey to produce my MFA thesis film, *Mirror, Mirror Perfected*. Operating as a folktale, *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* is a hybrid speculative suspense film looking at our intersect with social media through the eyes of a young dancer in a near-future world. The journal includes notes from research during my time at the University of Iowa in New Media Studies, Sociology and Performance Studies. I explore how, for instance, the Narcissus myth attempts to influence my world through the liminality of instant gratification, technology, and the fragmentation of identity. The journal also accounts for the conceptual, personal, and practical considerations for the development of *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* since 2012.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. vii

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER I: INFLUENCES ...................................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER II: ABOUT *MIRROR, MIRROR PERFECTED* .......................................................... 15

  Screenplay ............................................................................................................................ 16

  Characters ............................................................................................................................. 17

  Locations ............................................................................................................................... 18

    The Fossil Stage .................................................................................................................. 19

    Back Alley .......................................................................................................................... 20

    Bathtub/Dreamscape ........................................................................................................ 20

    Work/Labor ........................................................................................................................ 21

    Bedroom/Haven ................................................................................................................ 21

  Style and Approach ............................................................................................................. 21

  Goals of Production and Intended Audience ..................................................................... 24

  Ethical Concerns ................................................................................................................ 24

    Representation of a black teenage girl ............................................................................. 24

    Representation of obsession/narcissism ......................................................................... 26

  Experimenting with Choreocinema in *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* ..................................... 26

CHAPTER III: PLANNING ...................................................................................................... 28

  Production Schedule ......................................................................................................... 28

    Primary Dates of Shooting Days across three months ..................................................... 28

  Crew ..................................................................................................................................... 28

  Funding ................................................................................................................................. 29

  Potential Areas of Distribution ........................................................................................... 29
Film Festivals (research ongoing) ................................................................. 30
Budget ............................................................................................................. 31
Reconceptualization Before Production ...................................................... 31
CHAPTER IV: MAKING MIRROR, MIRROR PERFECTED ................................... 33
Reconceptualization of Film During Post Production ................................... 38
CHAPTER V: REFLECTION OF PROCESS ..................................................... 40
Pre-production ............................................................................................... 40
Production ..................................................................................................... 40
Post Production ............................................................................................. 41
CONCLUSION ................................................................................................. 43
BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................. 45
APPENDIX A .................................................................................................. 48
APPENDIX B ................................................................................................. 51
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Sissy with her augmented reality glasses or AUGS ......................................................... 4
Figure 2. Painting of Narcissus by Caravaggio 1597–1599 ................................................................. 7
Figure 3. Ekko and Sissy hanging out in an alley .............................................................................. 15
Figure 4. Sissy practices her dance in isolation ................................................................................. 19
Figure 5. Schematic Overhead view of Sissy’s room ........................................................................ 36
Figure 6. Overhead of Sissy dancing in her room with her avatar, SY ............................................. 37
Figure 7. Behind the scenes with Sissy in her haven ....................................................................... 37
INTRODUCTION

“… [This] extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he become the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image.” - Marshall McLuhan, *The Gadget Lover*.1

I find myself religiously observing and making films about the obsessions and addictions of people. An idea from 2012 that became the genesis for this story formulated from observing how, more and more, people were investing so much effort into capturing a “perfect” selfie image. This was before curating, posting and sharing the chosen image on their social media platforms2, such as Instagram, WeChat, Facebook, Twitter and/or Weibo. What fascinated me was how this simple, seemingly harmless gesture began leading to the creation of a hyper individualistic self who becomes increasingly alienated from the physical world but strongly desires validation from friends and strangers elsewhere. Validation received virtually is achieved through obtaining “likes” and comments from within the virtual spaces of the social media platform. At the same time this can initiate animosity from virtual “trolls” and “haters” who might harass the subject by posting hurtful or threatening comments, or directly sending private messages to the person. The term ‘selfie’ developed and initially used colloquially to refer to people taking pictures of themselves with their phones, was added to the dictionary in 20133. The

---

http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/stable/j.ctt1g69z35. Social media defined here as the colonization of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy that they have termed scalable sociality.
3 By November 2013, “selfie” was appearing frequently enough in print and electronic media that the Oxford English Dictionary chose the word as its Word of the Year. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2013
development and trend of branded products acting as an extension in forms of selfie sticks and selfie apps were designed to aid in capturing and projecting the perfect self-image to the world. Celebrities helped popularize the trend, most notably Kim Kardashian, who published *Selfish*, a book composed entirely of pictures she had taken of herself⁴. Further studies acknowledge a common body and weight dissatisfaction between girls and women, and social media has been found to play a significant role for these appearance concerns⁵. The popularity of selfies also came with several reports of fatal accidents, such as falling from a cliff or rooftop, getting into a fatal car accident, or even walking into traffic, due to distractions of getting the perfect selfie⁶. After sharing my observations with a friend, a question arose: “if our smartphones were pools of water, would we have all drowned by now?” Almost immediately the vision of Narcissus seated by a pool, loving only himself so much that he becomes swallowed up by his own love crossed my mind. The selfie is often criticized as merely a form of narcissism⁷. Alternatively, selfies are an important genre for better understanding societal issues of identity, aspiration, and social expectations. These elements support my exploration of such relationships in contrast to self-alienation when the matriculation of my graduate studies program began at the University of Iowa in 2016.

My film asks: if our focus as a society is shifting from a physical, global village and moving into the virtual world with the assistance of augmented devices, are we fated to be absorbed with the extensions of ourselves that this virtual world has created as we project

---

⁴ Kim Kardashian, *Selfish* (New York: Rizzioli, 2016) *Selfish* is a coffee table photobook and features Kardashian’s selfies from various images previously posted on Kardashian’s social media accounts.

⁵ For studies on how the impact of posting images to social media sites effect female body image, see for instance, Brown and Tiggeman (2016), 37; Holland and Tiggeman (2016), 100-110; Tiggeman and Miller (2010) 79-90


⁷ Miller et al, *World Changed Social Media*, 158
fragmented identities? The way we project ourselves to the world is how we believe we are perceived by others. One form of projection is within non-verbal communication practices through acts of body modification. Examples of physical changes include: tattoos, hair extensions, surgical implants, and piercings, or, through the illusion of body modification, using what are known as ‘filters’ on a computer or phone application (app). These alter the image of the face or body to create a modified self. The agency of self-expression using body piercing, cosmetic surgery or app filters becomes a way of connecting with communities.

*Mirror, Mirror Perfected* is a fictionalized yet intimate look at a day in the life of aspiring dancer Sissy Ocheng, played by Nolte Academy trained dancer Sandrah Ochola. The film serves to examine the evolution of real, life-like “avatars”8 posing as the manifestation of one’s fragmenting identity. These identities are disembodied from a physical being, then juxtaposed by connecting with others through this created cyber-self.9 Situated in an alternative near future, Sissy, a seventeen-year-old immigrant resides in a small town and dreams of becoming the perfect dancer so she can join a prestigious traveling dance company. She balances her life with working in an ice cream shop and daily dance practices for company auditions using augmented reality devices. To reach an audience, Sissy shares her performances by transferring them onto her older avatar model, who goes by the name, “Sy.” Sissy uploads Sy into a virtual

---


9 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2016) https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fictionnownarrativemediaandtheoryint he21stcentury/manifestly_haraway----a_cyborg_manifesto_science_technology_and_socialist_feminism_in_the....pdf. Donna Haraway wrote her 1985 essay a “Cyborg Manifesto”, published in the *Socialist Review* and introduces the concept of the cyborg as a rejection of rigid boundaries, especially those separating "human" from "animal" and "human" from "machine". She further explains how the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, and physical and non-physical have collapsed since the 20th century which has allowed for her hybrid, cyborg myth. As evolution has blurred the lines between human and animal; 20th century machines have made ambiguous the lines between natural and artificial; and microelectronics and the political invisibility of cyborgs have confused the lines of physicality.
dance competition platform, called ‘FLUXe’. As payment, Sissy receives tokens from online fans who validate her uploaded dance performances\(^\text{10}\). Sissy’s technophile friend, E, introduces her to a new device that upgrades avatars from the older version. Not only does the upgrade make their avatars look more life-like but the user is able to transfer their actions to their virtual avatar in real time. The upgrade creates life-like 3D avatars that make Sissy’s dance performances appear even more perfected. As a newly enhanced and upgraded avatar, Sy blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, changing Sissy’s life forever.

![Figure 1. Sissy with her augmented reality glasses or AUGS](image)

This film is not as simple as a teenager with an appetite for new technology. The rise of anxiety, depression and lack of in-person social connections are linked to a growing addiction as seen in social validation with receiving “likes” and “followers” rewarded through a process of gamification. Gamification, defined as the implementation of game design elements in real-world contexts for non-gaming purposes, fosters human motivation and performance.\(^\text{11}\) People then create and shift between multiple selves using their avatar as an electronic image that

---

\(^{10}\) In *Mirror, Mirror Perfected*, the multi-user platform FLUXe, is a competitive virtual social media dance platform and provides a space for Sissy to share her practice, chat with fans and make extra cash in the form of tokens.  
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.12.033

4
represents them. This manipulation is done by the user in a virtual space, then interacts with other objects. To deal with her own social anxiety and find a way to connect with others, dance becomes the universal language of expression that Sissy engages in for validation from others. These desires and addictions of the self within social constructs are juxtaposed by embodying new identities in constantly, evolving spaces. The exploration in this paper further supports my understanding of the self in communities, expressed through the making of this film. I take creative freedoms to craft of a narrative depicting a character who falls victim to a self-conflict with technology with a need for perfection, as she watches her “self” fragment into different ‘selves’. My hope is to tell a story that establishes a world where certain technological advances exist, breaking emergent racist, sexist, and classist conventions that constrain our ability to engage with the digital, alongside reframing the ongoing cultural and critical contributions of an immigrant person of color through cinema and dance.
CHAPTER I: INFLUENCES

The myth of Narcissus and human’s fascination with extensions of themselves observed in objects different from themselves sets the foundation for developing my short film, *Mirror, Mirror Perfected*. The film explores an alternative world by following an aspiring dancer with a new technological device that allows her to share the “perfect” self-image with her virtual social media groups and prestigious dance companies. What happens to an individual who moves within spaces attempting to create one or more identities projected to society, which in this case is Sissy’s virtual dance community, FLUXe? Our natural desire in using advanced technology seems to come with it the double-edged sword that is our self-absorption, and perhaps ultimately, what will become our own destruction. *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* uses a contemporary lens to explore how the performance of the “self” is represented on and offline, and how this breaks away from cases of individuals who use social media platforms to create personalities of what they present in public (front stage) against their generated avatar of a different embodiment of self (backstage). Using dance performativity in both the physical and virtual world, Sissy demonstrates how the ‘splitting of her identity’ reflected in the virtual environment becomes reliant on technology through use of daily augmented reality devices and tools. I am interested in how social anxiety and the creation of multiple social media avatars can lead to the fragmentation of one’s identity, viewed as the failure in a person’s thinking to bring together the dichotomy of both positive and negative qualities of themselves into a cohesive, realistic whole.
In the myth, Narcissus isolates himself when sees his reflection in the pool for the first time and becomes drawn to it. The pool, performing as a mirror, allows him the ability to identify himself by means of creating a reflected image through an extension beyond his own reach. He receives and gives validation by staying alone and not only “loving” his reflection, but also becomes frozen in observance of his image. Sissy, just as Narcissus, alienates herself by choice. When her friend Ekko, or E for short, invites her out a couple times, Sissy finds any excuse to rather stay in the comfort of her sanctuary and obsessively practice her dance routines. Sissy is not just practicing but performing. She shares her practice through a series of reflected selves represented by her social media avatar Sy, purposely intended to be seen and validated in a different community. Both Narcissus and Sissy get caught up with the obsession of consuming their own images that they drown within themselves, literally and allegorically.

My film examines subcultures\textsuperscript{12} of social media communities and looks at how identity intersects with elements in sociology, performance, and new media studies. Cultural theorist

\textsuperscript{12} Subcultures such as Black Twitter, Feminist Twitter and other niche groups can be identified based on shared values or geographic locations.
Stuart Hall’s critique of communication theory and methods used to study communication as articulation\textsuperscript{13} uses the field of cultural practices of communication to examine the social, institutional, technical, economic and political forces that are organized into unities that are effective and comparatively empowering or disempowering\textsuperscript{14}. Hall adds that these forces “shape the understandings and conceptions of the world of men and women in their ordinary everyday social calculations, construct them as potential social subjects, and have the effect of organizing the ways in which they come to or form consciousness of the world\textsuperscript{15}. Kimberly J Lau adopts the word articulation for her book \textit{Body Language} (2011). She makes note of the word’s duality in the language of choreography, “where articulation refers to precise body movements as part of the specific language of dance (Lau, 27). As Sissy dances through the landscape of this film, her identity is influenced by her interaction with technology, social class and race.

Outside of filming, I was able to explore the background of the actress Sandrah, by articulating her subtle personal experiences of assimilating as an African immigrant and being a black, female, dancing body in the Midwest. Like many immigrants, one of the first things talked about was how we felt this desire to reject our African identity to ‘pass’ or fit into a certain Westernized idea of self or identity growing up. It was only after losing this identity that we tried to reclaim our sense of descent. American scholar Deborah Elizabeth Whaley defines the term \textit{neo-passing} as “a theoretical concept that can address this problem by arguing for a reconfiguration of identities and the societal landscape that stratifies and marginalizes

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 126
identities”. In my film, Sissy is aware of the other “identities” she creates through her avatar Sy. I portray Sissy’s ‘fractured’ identity through her embodiment of different hairstyles – migrating back and forth from a braided crown, an afro and loose braids, to the dancer’s standard of a ballet bun and long straight hair. Her transformation expresses our conflict with the politics of hair as defined by Eurocentric beauty standards. Sissy’s desire to have long straight hair becomes apparent after using the avatar enhancer to modify Sy’s appearance. Later when Sissy experiences an ‘identity glitch’ in her bedroom mirror’s reflection, her conflicting hairstyles cannot seem to settle on a specific look. Another moment in the mind of Sissy’s created augmented reality appears in the form of a daydream. In the dream during a dance audition, Sissy observes her appearance change while her reflection performs a dance independently from herself.

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), Sociologist Erving Goffman examines how individuals employ modes of dramaturgy and performance in what he calls “front-stage or back-stage actors” in society. He expresses the idea of the individual’s desire to exist simultaneously as both a character and a performer. As we continue to evolve and move through a techno-capitalist society, automation continues to advance the transformative power of communication mediums alongside human relationships. Advancements in evolution, science, and new technology allows us to have control in a given space, to communicate, document, and share conceptual ideas between each other. The definition of "performance" is challenged by Performance Studies scholars, but a consensus transpires around the concept that performance,

---

17 The “front stage” behavior is what we do when we know that others are watching or aware of us while “back stage” is freed from the expectations and norms that shape our behavior when we are front stage.
whether on stage, before a camera, or in everyday life, is an action done for someone, even if that person is the performer themselves. This creates a doubling, a sense of an “Other”, either in the actor taking on a character or in the idea of performance for an audience\textsuperscript{18}.

In the real world, Sissy is a highly-skilled and focused dancer, but this alone is not acceptable or enough for her. She transfers her dance performances onto her created avatar, Sy, and adjusts what she doesn’t like about her movements to how she would like to be represented. Sy is then presented in the virtual world as a modified self. Sissy shares Sy with others for more and more online validation. Feminist and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir states that performance surpasses and eclipses the body as identification with something unreal, both more than life and less than human (Goffman 57-58). The representation of dance in this film goes beyond and overshadows Sissy’s physical body by migrating onto the avatar Sy, who goes beyond physical life, but still is less than Sissy, portrayed as human. According to Goffman, “The degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others” (229), while this self in turn “… is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented (252-253). In this case, Sissy’s fluid movement of mind and body are constantly in a performative state.

Jason Meyrowitz expresses performance in \textit{No Sense of Place} (1985), as being a body or the self in flux further through an exploration of the tendency of electronic media to blur lines in society and displace our notions of what it means to be present, causing fragmentation and

dislocation in our social behavior. This blurred displacement of presence and fragmentation exhibits our virtual and lived performances-as-fluid, particularly as seen in the case of Sissy. With online environments, users enjoy the opportunity to perform and present different identities. The distance between performer and audience of what this physical detachment provides blurs the line to the point it becomes easy to conceal aspects of the offline self and embellish the self that is presented online. During an interaction with the other, the self is split, and we put on different masks. Goffman might consider this as ‘splitting’ or ‘fragmentation’ of the self during interaction (117). His concept of social settings expressing face-to-face interactions as multistage drama are exemplified through media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s description of media as extensions of the senses in his book, *Understanding Media* (1994). By establishing the concept that we live in a global village of people virtually connected to others, McLuhan believed that we should observe 'the ways in which each new medium of communication disrupts tradition and reshapes social life’ (307). Not just the media itself, but the core of this theory is McLuhan’s definition that media exists as extensions of ourselves. If McLuhan expresses tools or clothes as the material extensions of the human body, then technological extensions created from projections, shadows, and amplified sounds present hyper-extended embodiments.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theorization of extensions to the body schema asserts that, "between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system. The other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its
body in its wake.”\textsuperscript{19} Drawing on this theory, Professor of Performance and Technology Susan Broadhurst states, “[i]n digital practices, instrumentation is mutually implicated with the body in an epistemological sense. The body adapts and extends itself through external instruments. To have experience, to get used to an instrument, is to incorporate that instrument into the body. The experience of the corporeal schema is not fixed or delimited but extendable to the various tools and technologies which may be embodied.\textsuperscript{20}” Not only do we find ourselves constantly performing in our environment where performance itself is in a constantly fluid state, but our modern-day media acts alongside us as extensions of our fluid, performative selves.

Virtual worlds\textsuperscript{21} provide room for subcultures of communities to exist. This is a positive trait and reflective of the human tendencies in the physical world to look for villages of like-minded individuals, such as communicating through the “Black Twitter” space\textsuperscript{22}. The virtual space where media exists provide us with some sensory extensions that can transform experiences, both with ourselves and each other. We find ourselves able to move between physical and virtual platforms as human which allows us in becoming posthuman. The self now free from a physical body can be in communication with other unbounded selves in different spaces. I am interested in how technological tools such as augmented reality devices\textsuperscript{23} are becoming a part of our everyday life, influencing our existence in these spaces. Sissy alienates

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, Trans: Donald Landes. (London: Routledge, 2012), 410
\textsuperscript{21} Lau, \textit{Political Lives of Avatars}, 371. Virtual worlds are complex and dynamic expressions of everyday vernacular practices shaped by the technologies that structure massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and other similar multi-user platforms.
\textsuperscript{22} André Brock (2012) “From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation”, \textit{Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media}, 56:4, DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2012.732147. Brock observes that "Tweet-as-signifyin', then, can be understood as a discursive, public performance of Black identity.” He further reframes “Black Twitter as a ritual drama” that “highlights the structure, engagement, invention and performances” of these uses by “employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis to construct discursive racial identity.” 537-538
\end{flushleft}
herself and mostly lives in isolation. Her focus is on creating a bond with her FLUXe community in cyberspace who validate her worth when she shares her dances to engage with others online. Her desire to exist in the virtual world through augmentation and avatars presents her desire to transcend gravity with her physical body exceeding its limits. Media theorist and cultural critic Vivian Carol Sobchack comments that the pleasures of the digital are different and that the kind of transcendent effects digital simulation can achieve are different from the pleasures and terrors that emerge in the presence of analog/indexical cinema. Sissy rejects the physical connection E tries to make with her outside of using technology. Sissy however finds pleasures being alone digitally with her virtual doppelganger and friends.

Finally, in *Alone Together* (2011), Sherry Turkle continues Goffman’s argument that online presentation gives individuals multiple perspectives on themselves to explore their identity. Sissy isolates herself from any real organic social interactions through her constant exposure to illusory meaningful exchanges with her companion. Turkle's central argument follows that the technological developments which have most contributed to the rise of interconnectivity have at the same time bolstered a sense of alienation between people. The alienation involves links between social networks favoring those of proper conversation. Even alone, we still perform for our own sake. Sissy is constantly “on” with her social media feed and in performance mode, even in her daydreams. The demand to be ‘always on’ Turkle continues, especially via social networks, means that the need to expand networks, create connections, share...

---


information or merely be entertained is ever-increasing, and is leading to the growing demand for self-expression and self-disclosure (144).

My use of the public theatre as the analogy for human interactions in *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* therefore strives to reflect Goffman’s idea of front stage/backstage actors positioned in the virtual space of adapting different social roles to fit different social groups with the aid of technology. It is where the individual fragments into many selves and can arrive at an identity crisis. The question of the self and the agency behind the performance in the film is left deliberately ambiguous and unresolved.
CHAPTER II: ABOUT MIRROR, MIRROR PERFECTED

*Mirror, Mirror Perfected* is a poetic and thoughtful take on self-obsession as black narcissism, black woman’s identity and identity fragmentation. It is a unique portrait juxtaposing desires and addictions of the self with social constructs, attempting to embody new identities using technology in constantly evolving societies. The film functions as a hybrid form piece – part narrative, part abstract, part experimental – exploring self-transformation with technology by drawing in audiences to see themselves differently. It encourages viewers to be unconventional and unapologetic within the margins of society.

Figure 3. E and Sissy hanging out in an alley

Sissy transfers her daily dance routines to her avatar, Sy. She moves Sy through the virtual dance community FLUXe using augmented reality devices to reach a wide audience of fans. The more “likes” and validations she receives for sharing content, the more lucrative Sissy’s cryptocurrency wallet grows with tokens that can redeemed as spending credits. Sissy is immersed in the technology to perfect Sy. Sissy’s retro-futurist environment is portrayed by a combination of old and new spaces seen in the locations. Makeup and props design, special
effects animation with simulated camera movements, and soundscapes shapes the mise-en-scene needed to create an illusion within Sissy’s reality. In the film, Sissy rejects E’s physical invitation on two occasions to go out that evening. She also has very little interaction with customers at work. Exacerbated by her choice to remain in isolation, she eventually arrives at an identity crisis as her physical and virtual worlds collide.

Screenplay

In developing the screenplay, it was important for me to create a world where I had control to change and manipulate certain elements. Black Mirror’s episode of Nosedive was a good example of a world created where characters use social media and validation as a form of a “credit rating system” to survive in society. My story explores how I employ Sissy’s use of alienation and isolation in the physical world to feed her desire for connections from validation in a virtual world. I use this film to argue that her loss of physical communication and connections leads to her anxiety and loss in physical language. The survival of human civilization was built upon our need for physical connections with each other. While many argue that social media platforms help in creating better, bigger global villages with no boundaries, there is still a lack in of physical interaction with each other in these spaces. Social anxiety can create a lack of empathy. As human beings we articulate to express context, emotion and subtleness through physical connections to better understand each other. Sissy’s social anxiety and isolation in the story slowly eats into her embodiment of multiple identities through her use of new technology. Her fragmented mind plays against her social relationships, vanity, and

---

26 Joe Wright (2016). Nosedive is the first episode of the third series of the British science fiction anthology series Black Mirror created by Charlie Booker.
desirability. The story is set in a cold climate. This presents me with the opportunity to literally and metaphorically articulate the idea of identity as frozen.

The speculative fiction genre overwhelmingly favors men. The dance world overwhelmingly favors whiteness. As a queer, black, female immigrant filmmaker migrating through a vastly white field in a vastly white space, my film presents viewers with the rare – perhaps singular – opportunity to engage with a narrative centering a female immigrant of color, both in front of and behind the camera through the movement of dance. My film explores how the choreographic and the digital presents a unified cinematic notion of performance as it relates to community, class, consumerism, and gender, intertwined with our evolving thirst and conflict with technology to create the perfect, digital self.

The screenplay casually aims to move the story plot. Dance improvisation, production design, camera, and sound design set up the allegorical folktale of a techno-capitalist society where an obsession with digital tools and systems of social validation, consumerism, and commercialized self-branding can spiral out of control.

**Characters**

I envisioned Sissy as an African immigrant. The film subtly references her immigrant experience, for example, with an African print wrap cloth Sissy uses plus a few other trinkets in her bedroom. She is a hermit in the real world but enjoys validation from people online. Sissy has a one-track mind which is to dance. This is portrayed subtly in the production design that sets up her private living and practice space. I imagined E with an androgynous look. This is reminiscent of images I was exposed to in the media growing up in 1980s London, such as of model/performer Grace Jones, who pushed against gender stereotypes.
In contrast with E’s appearance, the black body often comes along with a racialized, ritualized and sexualized gaze. Most of the conversations I had with Sandrah – who at the time was the only person of color in her dance academy – reflected a realism of lived experience that came through in her performance and interactions with the other characters.

Sissy and E are lower class citizens with access to cheaper, DIY augmented reality devices. These still allow them to engage with other social class groups virtually, despite their class status. In her book, *Women Who Run With The Wolves* (1992), Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that “Psychically, in the most negative sense, winter brings the kiss of death—that is, a coldness—to anything it touches. Coldness spells the end of any relationship. If you want to kill something, just be cold to it. As soon as one becomes frozen in feeling, thinking, or action, relationship is not possible.” (239). E attempts to bond with Sissy by going beyond their shared interest in technological gadgets and inviting her out. Sissy depicts her frozen self with an interest only in dance and declining E’s invitation. Her isolation eventually leads to the creation of her fragmented identity.

**Locations**

Produced and shot mostly in Iowa City, Iowa, *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* poses as a window into Sissy’s desire to become the “perfect” dancer. Empty landscapes are set in contrast to tight angles as we migrate with Sissy through indoor and outdoor spaces.

---

27 Meri Nana-Ama Danquah *The Black Body*. New York: Seven Stories Press (2009), 14. The author summarizes how the black body, whether whole or broken into parts was “-ized” in every single way something could be.
The Fossil Stage

The film opens on an establishing shot that emphasizes my idea of isolation. The frozen rocks provide the isolation of time. The 375-million-year-old ocean floor location is a glimpse into Iowa's geologic time of a frozen past. It was first exposed during the Floods of 1993 at Coralville Lake\(^{28}\), then once more during the Floods of 2008. The fossils and limestone bedrock of the Devonian Fossil Gorge date back almost 200 million years.

In selecting this private location for her practice floor where dance expresses a “collective” memory of the present and past\(^{29}\), I provide Sissy with a space that amplifies her desires to be the “center stage” dancer. Her identity is frozen on this stage as she only desires one thing; to be validated as the perfect dancer. It’s all she daydreams about. “A frozen woman without nurture is inclined to turn to incessant ‘what if’ daydreams. But even if she is in this frozen condition, especially if she is in such a frozen condition, she must refuse the comforting fantasy. The comforting fantasy will kill us dead for certain.” (Estés, 238). When Sissy projects Sy into this space, the stage operates as a future-past-present platform all at once. Sissy’s actions

---


complicate her instantaneous desires to be physically isolated and have virtual social interactions with her group. Her movement across the rocks and throughout the film are augmented through Sy. This contributes to the slow progression of her self-fragmentation.

**Back Alley**

Sissy hangs out E in a secluded grimy back alley in contrasted to moving through wide open and isolated spaces. As the two friends engage with drugs and technology paraphernalia devices, the space quickly takes on another shape by showing the class structure that Sissy and potentially E fall into, one of hiding in shadows and out of the public eye. The main back alley space in the downtown area of Iowa City supported the production design elements of the film. The painted brick walls of reds and purples serendipitously color matched with the actors’ wardrobe while the murals of dancing bodies along the wall lead to the doorway that Sissy stands in. This image created a surreal connection with Sissy’s dreams as she emerges towards E and their upgraded avatar, E2.

**Bathtub/Dreamscape**

Bathtub scenes are often a very recognizable location for the female sex in most films. They become a space carved out for peace, self-care, reflection and fantasy. Bathtubs can also be used for a very different purpose in representing turbulent relationships or carnal desires. I use this place to show a contemplative Sissy as seen portrayed in the dark moody lighting design and music choice. Alone without her technology, Sissy becomes vulnerable to her thoughts, imagination, and dreams. In reiterating how the dance world tends to be a white space, Sissy dreams about being judged by women of color for a dance audition. It is through this space I show how Sissy’s own mind and augmented desires become her nightmare.
Work/Labor

Most immigrant children of my generation, if not born abroad, are often sent from our home countries at a very young age to live with relatives in hopes for a better future. Although in this version of the film I keep Sissy’s living situation vague, she like most immigrants, finds ways to live and survive on her own, financially. In the film, we see Sissy begrudgingly work in an ice cream shop. Her frustrations are captured by the camera as it focuses on her hand movement and gestures in chopping, cutting and mixing up the ice cream on the block. The camera then cuts to her face. This fragmenting of ice cream along with the fragmenting of the camera moving back and forth from ice cream to Sissy, alludes to a metaphor for the fragmentation of Sissy’s identity as she moves through this film. In the virtual world of commerce, or e-commerce, Sissy maintains her lifestyle on FLUXe platform by sharing her dance routines for validation that also offer tokens for spending credit.

Bedroom/Haven

Sissy’s sanctuary comes in the form of her bedroom; a place for solitude and self-care. I built Sandrah a dream bedroom from scratch while constructing a dancer’s haven of a practice space. Sissy’s life is a clutter of accomplishments that surround and contrast the empty practice floor area. The room also reveals two sides to Sissy. It first acts as a dressing room where she prepares for work. Later it functions as a rehearsal space for her dance practice, before finally turning into her abyss.

Style and Approach

In the world of Mirror, Mirror Perfected, the characters use devices made from recycled and repurposed materials. Low tech props have a very do-it-yourself aesthetic. It points towards my belief that we are approaching a time where we will indeed deplete what current resources
we have and be forced to creatively repurpose old, past materials for our survival.\textsuperscript{30} Growing up in Ghana, I was exposed at a very young age by both my grandparents and parents to this mentality of how materials were always recycled and rarely discarded. In 2009, I met William Kamkwamba in Ghana for Maker Faire Africa\textsuperscript{31}. After learning about his windmill creation from recycled materials\textsuperscript{32}, knew I wanted an opportunity to create home-made props as future-present devices in some of my speculative fiction work. This general aesthetic for props and influences from films such as \textit{La Jetée}, (1962)\textsuperscript{33} helped in establishing my future present world. It also shows the difference in the social class structure. The two ice cream customers have slicker expensive looking Augs as compared to Sissy’s pair.

Cinematography aimed to create an uneasy, minimalist and intimate mood. Shot on the Panasonic GH5, the film incorporates handheld shots of Sissy in her daily rituals while stabilized camera movements for her dances project a subtle distinction between realism and fantasy. The cinematographer and I wanted the framing to be slightly surreal. The lensing choices for the film complimented my interest in hyper-real perspectives. The color palette of the world is cold, dark, gritty, heavy and empty. This separates the physical world from the saturated augmented interface. In viewing examples such as \textit{Possession} (1981)\textsuperscript{34} that invoke these thoughts of isolation, we found muted tones shifted to the blue spectrum with a little green really sold it. This

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{32} William Kamkwamba, and Bryan Mealer. \textit{The Boy who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope}. (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2009.) This autobiography is about an enterprising teenager in Malawi who builds a windmill from scraps he finds around his village and brings electricity, and a future, to his family.
\bibitem{33} Chris Marker (1962). \textit{La Jetée} is a science fiction film that uses voice over narration and music to link still photographs into a poem telling of man’s search for an escape through time out of the ruins of a third world war.
\bibitem{34} Andrzej Żuławski (1981). \textit{Possession} is a psychological horror-drama that follows the relationship between an international spy and his wife, who begins exhibiting increasingly disturbing behavior after asking him for a divorce.
\end{thebibliography}
shift allowed the purples and blues to dominate. The avatars were left neutral in color
temperature and saturation to give a nice contrast and make them more inviting. This gave
another level of motivation for the characters.

To distinguish between both Sissy and Sy’s look, we played with exaggerating Sy’s
makeup. The special effects make-up artist and I also worked on creating a special prosthetic
facial mask. The mask was altered to facial modifications that Sandrah had personally desired.
These alterations included having a thinner nose. The goal of this was to add an additional layer
of realism. We did not want to rely heavily on special effects during the post-production stage.

The diegetic and processed sounds evoke a tone of anxiety and uncertainty. We use a rich
blend of sampled and found sounds from the internet, incidental noise from the filming process,
Foley, traditional music scores and various other sound sources. This helps us keep the viewer on
edge. Through juxtapositions of sound to highlight the disorienting modern world in which we
move, the film uses sound to subtly ask: what is real? What is fake? We explored how sound can
be used enhance a world to be more isolating yet influenced by technology. One way we
experimented with sound, was having a subtle buzzing throughout the background of the film as
a wild track. This is especially noticeable in Sissy’s bedroom where her gadgets reside and
charge. Throughout the film, Sandrah’s voice is manipulated into the creation of the social media
notifications, music in the ice cream shop, and the encounters with her mirror reflections. The
opening scene is layered with a digitized voiceover to further explore the modification of voice
with sound.
Goals of Production and Intended Audience

To tell the story of a teenage girl completely immersed in a world of dance and technology, this film allows audiences to form their own opinions on several key ideas. I hope to spark conversation about the following:

- The impact of cyberspace becoming a globalized village
- The relationship between man and technology
- The relationship between social media platforms, social anxiety and the fragmentation of one’s identity in virtual spaces.

The completed film will have a wide audience appeal even though the subject matter may be niche.

Ethical Concerns

As with any film depicting a character’s routine, there may be ethical concerns introduced in making this project. Keeping these concerns in mind, I work diligently to be respectful of the problems that may arise. Through the mentorship of my thesis committee, I hope to be conscious of these while remaining true to the film I strove to make.

Representation of a black teenage girl

The most challenging and rewarding aspect of this film was working with a teenage girl and determining the best way to portray her in a manner that was honest and respectful. I considered casting an older actor to play the role of Sissy. I was apprehensive in heavily featuring a 17-year-old dancer without having to exploit her body. Even though this is not my intent, I am aware there will be some questions that arise regarding body image. Meri Nana Ama Danquah writes in *The Black Body* that, “the black body seems to exist in white space in such a
way that it – white space – has to transform itself in order to receive or reject it”. She explains how music and sports gave the black body a platform to reflect themselves, then further questions, “what is it about the black body that draws people in, makes them so fascinated?”

When the time came to shoot her bathtub scene, I had to treat it with the upmost sensitivity to not fetishize her body. I needed to have Sandrah trust me to not expose her vulnerability without this having any purpose to the story. “The black body” Danquah states “had its own mythology; it had its own language.” Girlhood has been explored through a myth. Fairy tales and princess stories dominate the narrative kingdom. Black girlhood films are increasingly finding a place amongst the popular politics of identity. Following in the veins of films like *The Fits* (2010) my film observes dance performance as a human experience. The emotion in drawing attention to the black dancing body further probes at this question of desirability.

The liminality of black girlhood to womanhood itself is a unique expression of black girl magic. One that can be as dark as that of any Grimm fairy tale—of its own. When E gives Sissy the avatar enhancer, it performs as an enchantment device, much like the apple that Snow White receives. The enhancer magically allows Sissy to virtually present herself as woman and not a teenager. The message of a desired self-identity becomes the transformational ritual of crossing from the innocence seen in puberty into the desirability of womanhood. Famously, one is not born but *made* a woman.

35 Danquah, *The Black Body*, 18
36 Ibid., 14
37 Rikki Beadle-Blair (2010). Set in a hallucinatory, dream- like world *The Fits* is an adapted play of the same name that articulates the transition from young girl to woman, reflecting the duality of black girlhood’s many milestones.
38 James M. McGlathery, et al. *The Brothers Grimm and Folktales*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) McGlathery writes how the Brothers Grimm’s story of Snow White ties back into the myth of the gadget-lover as observed by McLuhan. McLuhan articulates the medium is message as pointing to any new technology that gradually creates a totally new human environment. The medium become a process, not a product, 54
Representation of obsession/narcissism

This film is a result of imaginatively representing the socio-psychic and socio-economic experience of an African diasporic female, then inviting black womanist spectators. In exploring Sissy’s alienation, I used desires for body modification to feed into the narcissism of presenting the self. This plays in contrast to the myth of Narcissus who remains by his reflection. Black characters are rarely represented in film studies. In this film, Sissy adopts the ritual of sharing visual content to project herself to be seen and not erased in the media platform. Social media is one way that black girls have had an opportunity to make their voices heard. My hope is for this film to not single out people with addictions to social media but rather to offer a subjective view into the life of what might be a reason for one person’s desire to be seen. We all have our vices and dark sides. This film presents a modern fairytale of an age-old observation about self-preservation.

Experimenting with Choreocinema in *Mirror, Mirror Perfected*

*Mirror, Mirror Perfected* is my first narrative film that incorporates a dancing body and movement as both character and tone. I produced a series of short experimental dance and movement films before exploring further in research the social and cultural implications of bodies migrating through spaces. During my time in graduate school, I researched more on filmmaker Maya Deren through her work and writings. I also found myself actively taking classes in the dance department to better understand the discipline. Films and musicals such as

---

40 Deren’s work exposed me to her filmmaking approach with dream logic, contextual editing, multiple selves, physical memory and relational gravity, along with her contempt when her films underwent psychoanalysis.
Black Swan (2010)\textsuperscript{41} and The Red Shoes (1948)\textsuperscript{42} are strong inspirations. Both works not only deal with dancing bodies but also the obsession for perfection. Deren’s introduction of choreocinema, where ‘dance and the camera collaborate[d] on the creation of a single work of art,’\textsuperscript{43} allowed me the space to experiment with aerial camera perspectives on Sissy’s dancing body outdoors and indoors, and where both locations presented a different surreal gaze for the viewer. The camera dances along with Sissy’s movements at times in both full-body coverage or in fragmented parts with unexpected angles and what seemed like an impossible camera movement. Sissy also explores the outdoor space very differently from her indoor space through how she articulates her movements with her extremities through the hands, feet and head for her avatar to mirror. We captured Sy’s performances in the green screen room by having Sandrah watch and replicate her movement from previously. The performance was later brought into the edit by layering and superimpositions\textsuperscript{44}. This blurred the lines of illusion and reality, existence and extinction, corporality\textsuperscript{45} and temporality. My editing approach to fragment and splice these images include, but are not limited to jump cuts, speeding up and reversing movements as seen in her bedroom as she practices.

\textsuperscript{41} Darren Aronofsky (2010). Often described as a psychological horror film, Black Swan has been observed as a metaphor in achieving artistic perfection, with all the psychological and physical challenges one might encounter.

\textsuperscript{42} Michael Powell (1948). Based on Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale of the same title, the film is about a ballerina who joins an established ballet company. She becomes the lead dancer in a new ballet called The Red Shoes and is torn between an idealistic composer and a ruthless impresario intent on perfection.

\textsuperscript{43} John Martin, dance critic for the New York Times, as quoted in Deren’s publicity flyer, c.1946, in The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume I, Part 2, 286.

\textsuperscript{44} In graphics, superimposition is the placement of an image or video on top of an already-existing image or video, usually to add to the overall image effect, but also sometimes to conceal something.

\textsuperscript{45} The state of being or having a body; bodily existence, Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam, 1913.
CHAPTER III: PLANNING

Production Schedule

The production schedule was flexible due to the convenient proximity of Sandrah. Because of limited resources, we did not want to be restricted to a very severe scheduling deadline. The shoot was split across fourteen days, with the opportunity for pickups as needed. With the nature of my filming practice, not only were the scenes not shot consecutively, but adjustments kept being made to better suit the schedule of the cast, crew and locations.

Primary Dates of Shooting Days across three months

Week One: January 2\textsuperscript{nd} - 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Bedroom

Week Two: January 9\textsuperscript{th} - 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Sidewalk, Back Alley, Ice cream Shop/back of shop, Fossil Gorge, Ekko’s green screen room work

Week Three: January 16\textsuperscript{th} - 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Bathroom (rescheduled), Dance Audition, greenscreen room work (rescheduled)

Week Four: January 21\textsuperscript{st} - 26\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Bathtub, Log Footage (During the dark week when Sandrah was out of town)

Week Five: February 2\textsuperscript{nd} - 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Pool Scene, Green screen work

Week Six: February 23\textsuperscript{rd} and 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2019 – Green Screen pick ups

Week Seven: March 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 2019 – Green Screen work pick up

Crew

With a limited budget and resources in Iowa City to craft this highly conceptualized film, my skeleton team consisted of a mix of local and graduate student artists including; Lane M Wooder (cinematographer), Tempest Montgomery (Associate Producer), Andrew Perdue (Sound

\footnote{Exact production dates may vary pending scheduling for Sandrah, as well as crewmember responsibilities.}
Recordist & Designer), Lindsey Kuhn (Scenic Designer), Zamora Simmons (Makeup Artist), Roger Phelps (Props Master), and Tyler Horn (Visual Effects). Sandrah Ochola plays the double role of Sissy and Sy, Emma Staff as Ekko, while the rest of the cast comprises of University of Iowa and local theatre actors, friends and supporters. Most of the equipment used on the film as well as the studios for building the bedroom set and green screen room, were provided by the University of Iowa’s Cinematic Arts Department. Additional green screen studio space was provided by Metro Studio in Hiawatha, Iowa.

**Funding**

The main source of funding for this film came from personal savings, grant applications, some credit cards and support from a few family members. With limited access to funds, several adjustments needed to be made to initial concepts such as the need to scale down the size of the bedroom set to be built and abandoning the prosthetic mask. Fortunately, in addition to access to equipment from the University, the film found support with in-kind donations from crew members and locations. A crowd funding campaign will be launched for the film and serves to provide funding for festival entries as well as recuperate smaller post-production costs. The campaign goal will be for a relatively small amount that will be easily met, while setting low-level reward tiers for donators. The intention for this campaign is not only to raise funds, but also build an audience.

**Potential Areas of Distribution**

Audiences for *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* include fans of speculative/science fiction, fantasy, dance and African diasporic films. The film aims to reach its domestic and international audience through some film festivals. I believe it will appeal to scholars of Film, New Media Studies, Performance Studies, and Sociology so I am looking to share this film at academic
conferences and special screenings. I plan to secure distribution into commercial, educational
institutions, and art spaces. I will then seek distribution through video on demand digital
platforms such as iTunes, Short of The Week, and DUST, as well as on local programming like
IPTV47.

Film Festivals (research ongoing)

Dance on Camera

Tribeca

Pan African Film Festival

Dances with Films

African Film Festival

Toronto International Film Festival

Toronto After Dark Film Festival

Fantastic Fest

Science Fiction Fantasy Short Film Festival

Seattle International Film Festival

Ann Arbor Festival

Youth Film Festivals

Boston Science Fiction Film Festival

American Black Film Festival

Chicago International Film Festival

Slamdance

47 Iowa Public Television is Iowa's statewide public broadcasting network providing quality, alternative
programming that educates, enlightens, and entertains Iowans throughout the state.
Telluride Film Festival
Raindance Film Festival
Berlinale
Durban International Film Festival
Carthage Film Festival
Locarno
Africa International Film Festival.

**Budget**

*See Appendix A*

**Reconceptualization Before Production**

In the final rewrites of my script and the casting process, I needed to make a tough call with one of my characters based on resources and feasibility. In earlier drafts of my screenplay, Sissy lived with her immigrant father who ran a small restaurant and where she needed to split her time between helping around and her dance practices. This dynamic was to create tension between Sissy’s desires and family relationships. However, when scouting and casting time arrived, it became strenuous finding talent. I attempted to change the father character to a father figure or older sibling to expand my casting options. It was still impossible to find anyone that fit the part, or someone interested at all. In the end, although it broke my heart, I had to kill the father character. I needed to focus on ways to still tell and show Sissy’s journey.

Another restructure was my approach to the special effects for the film. I always knew I wanted the effects to be subtle and not draw too much attention to itself. Initially I began working with a fellow graduate student who specializes in animation. Unfortunately, with my
small budget, limited time, and highly conceptual ideas, I had to reevaluate my postproduction team. I found someone who had the time to help us make our deadline. The focus of the story became about simplifying and creating content to share for this iteration of the film.
CHAPTER IV: MAKING MIRROR, MIRROR PERFECTED

A producer’s key role is first and foremost to persuade others to believe in a vision that does not exist. This memoir of the journey would be incomplete if the efforts to bring the idea from script to screen were not documented. There is no right or wrong way to make a film. With Murphy's Law being far from absent, what feels like magic tends to arrive from a combination of unyielding pursuit, fool’s luck and good fortune. As the fictional world of Sissy’s techno-capitalist society comes alive, the following shows my effort to bring the film from concept to completion of production with some details of the postproduction process.

Preproduction officially began on August 17, 2018, locking in a shooting script and finalizing a reference ‘visual look book’\textsuperscript{48}. Prior to working with Sandrah, I had been in talks with another performer who initially lived in Des Moines, Iowa but relocated to Milwaukee in the Spring of 2018. I used a summer diversity grant award to help finish the development stages of the screenplay as well as travel to audition with my potential actress. Due to logistics and the time I had left before production, things did not work out with my initial actress. I felt dejected looking for an African immigrant with some dancing or acting experience to play Sissy. It proved to be limiting in and outside the state of Iowa and almost impossible. Couple this with an ambitious concept that proved very difficult to pull off in Iowa City. Other than securing a cinematographer and sound recordist, finding crew and cast members willing to sacrifice their time for experience and credit on a student film for several months seemed unreasonable.

As a producer, I have a strong ‘by any means necessary’ attitude to reach my goal that one might call an obsession. Despite ticking clocks and looming deadlines, throughout the nine-

\textsuperscript{48} In Filmmaking, a look book is a collection of photographs, text and video sources selected as visual references to express the director’s vision for the look and feel of the film.
month preproduction process I was consumed with the notion to get this film ‘in the can’\(^{49}\), by projecting good intentions and a positive work attitude. While my temperament may sound a bit melancholic it was this motivation that gave this film life in the first place. I reached out as far as my network extended. I posted cast and crew calls. I approached local immigrant communities. Eventually, a former dancer whom I had worked with put me in touch with Nolte Academy, a local dance studio. The production, albeit slowly, gathered a few more people, including an associate producer who came on board in September, primarily as a director’s assistant. Sandrah, a Kenyan immigrant who had been under our noses reached out to us for an audition. A response from the scenic designer and SFX Makeup Artist from the University’s theatre department, followed in the month of October.

I spent the whole of October and part of November rehearsing and trying to bond with Sandrah. She had very little acting experience but was very enthusiastic to explore the Sissy character. Both Sandrah and Sissy had so much in common, I was excited to begin working with her. I tried to explore ways to rehearse with her. However, with being a senior in high school, prepping for her SATs/ACTs, rehearsals and dance auditions, Sandrah often appeared distracted and frustrated, shutting down at times. As production dates neared, I quickly realized how much little time we really did have together. Since there was no monetary compensation for her time, it became difficult securing Sandrah for more than an hour or two for rehearsals. There were many days that we were unable to rehearse because of an impromptu dance rehearsal she could not get out of. She pushed through best as she could to prepare as Sissy with the looming deadlines and expectations.

\(^{49}\) A term for an entire film or a subset of shots that are all finished shooting.
In addition to working with Sandrah, I was also working with the rest of the crew and wearing more hats than I would have cared to. It affected the time I wanted to spend with Sandrah. Ultimately, I believe if we had met earlier and spent most of the summer together, we both would not have felt the stress and frustrations that we did during our final school year. With a few more rehearsals and further meetings with department heads, it was evident I needed to simplify a lot of ideas in my script. I had to be open to adapt to changes based on what I could get done realistically with the practical special effects and resources. Nevertheless, I was still ready to try to make a fiction film in Iowa on a low to no budget.

As part of a colloquium class that focused on the relationship of director’s working with actors, I wrote and shot a prologue scene to *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* on November 11, 2018 at the Devonian Gorge in Iowa City. This gave me a chance to have a camera test with Sandrah. The test addressed a few concerns and issues such as the chemistry between Sandrah and who I initially considered to cast as E. After shooting the prologue, then later screening to a group of peers, the story concept was no longer a seven-year collection of notes and ideas. Rather, it became something concrete, physical, and visible to the public eye. From then, what followed was a steady burst of content, such as posting behind the scenes stills on Instagram and Facebook, aimed to have the production process be transparent, inclusive and attract the necessary collaborators to bring the project to fruition.

In the six-year development phase of *Mirror, Mirror Perfected*, I amassed a wealth of photos, articles, films, and music that inspired the project. The concentration of the key materials most relevant was employed as visual and fundraising tools, providing sound and image as visuals for a film yet to exist. It also acted as context that helped to solidify my own understanding of the project. These materials were incorporated into a look book visual guide
(See Appendix B) to attract crew members and grantor funds. The packet contained an acknowledgment of my personal interest to the story, a brief synopsis, biographies of the filmmaker, cast and crew, photographic reference material, selected filmography, a budget top-sheet, and a production timeline along with other relevant material. This information was included with applications to grants, along with a compilation DVD of previous short film work.

The look book was also used to communicate with the cinematographer, scenic designer, prop master and other crew members. The look book guide was distributed digitally and helped to identify the necessary locations, props, makeup, and costumes, as well as illustrate the film’s tone, motifs, and style. Further casting, crewing, location scouting, prop acquiring, costuming and set building continued even as schedules and availabilities forced me to have to schedule the production well into Christmas break. The written record of all contacts, their status and available dates became paramount to the entire production juggling to stay afloat.

Figure 5. Schematic Overhead view of Sissy’s room
Once production dates are near, there comes a feeling when film production has on the face of it little to do with artistic expression. Towards the end of December 2018 as we approached day one of principle photography, the construction of Sissy’s bedroom, the search for an ice cream shop, a private indoor pool location, final script adjustments, storyboarding, coordinating meals, transport and equipment needs all happened simultaneously as I continued to wear more production department hats.

Principal photography began January 2, 2019, in Becker Communication’s Studio A where we built Sissy’s Bedroom. The bedroom set gave me control over the space and location
since this was the most intense part of the story. It also provided an unreal and surreal dancer’s haven where Sissy can remain alienated in. There were elements and props that Sandrah brought, such as her medals that were incorporated as part of the set design. After wrapping the studio, we were lucky to shoot out all our exterior scenes in the nick of time before we got pounded with a huge snow storm. With us experiencing one of the worst winter seasons in over a decade,\textsuperscript{50} production wrapped principal photography of the film on March 2\textsuperscript{nd}, even though we had our shooting days as a total of 14 production days.

At the end of production, it almost felt like the labor and expense outweighed the reward, although the experience can never be measured monetarily. With still, a considerable budget gap to fill for post-production, a crowdfunding campaign on Seed and Spark will be launched for a 30-day effort to raise $4,500 towards completing the next iteration of this film and preparing for festival submission. This requires a tenacious and methodical promotion of content to build a campaign with a sense of increasing importance and urgency.

**Reconceptualization of Film During Post Production**

The post-production stage is where much of my film tends to change conceptually. My attempt to balance out the high-concept script with the lack of time for rehearsals affected most of the performances. A pool party finale scene I had written and shot, for instance needed to be left from this current version of the film. The goal is to include it in the alternative cut of the film that will be submitted to festivals. The pool scene helps push the story in showing more of Sissy’s relationship with E, as well as with other people in public.

\textsuperscript{50} In late January 2019, a severe cold wave caused by a weakened jet stream around the Arctic polar vortex hit the Midwestern United States and Eastern Canada, killing at least 22 people. It came after a winter storm brought up to 13 inches of snow in some regions from January 27–29, and brought the coldest temperatures in over 20 years to most locations in the affected region, including some all-time record lows.
In the edit room, I found myself struggling to reconcile the footage I got. It contrasted with the movie that existed in my head before filming began. This stage has been the most challenging for me because it involved re-imagining a story I had been working on for so long. In a way, I think these things happened subconsciously for Mirror, Mirror Perfected to end up being far better than what I originally planned. Before and during production, I had a very distinct idea of the type of film I was going after. Being challenged to re-invent the film in post has led to some interesting discoveries in how certain interactions play against each other when sequenced using different sensibilities. So far, this stage has been exploratory and rewarding.

In keeping our characters interesting after editing around some of the dialogue and/or performance, I wanted to experiment with the idea that language around Sissy in her world is slowly disintegrating as represented through E’s voice. By having E as genderless, the idea of making E appear more ambiguous to whether they are an illusion or artificial intelligence to Sissy became intriguing to me. The act of manipulating a form of communication as performed through their voice became a metaphor to reflect how I wanted to collapse the communication of language and speech around Sissy as she keeps sinking into her isolation.
CHAPTER V: REFLECTION OF PROCESS

Pre-production

Looking back at the pre-production phase there are several things I should have done to avoid issues later. While I was so happy to meet Sandrah when I did before production, I wish I had met her about six months to a year earlier to spend even more time with her, building up a deeper relationship with her and her family. As dedicated of a dancer as she was, this added to times of her being distracted that made her approach to acting come off as an afterthought. I would have benefited having Sandrah’s mother, who is also her manager, present on set and be part of the production. I initially wanted to trust Sandrah as an adult, but she proved to still be a teenager at heart.

Another thing I wish I had pushed further was to give Sandrah a camera during the rehearsal and production stages to video record herself. Sandrah is very into social media, and could be considered an aspiring influencer, but, when it came to her recreating such a performative act for this film, she grew shy and always had some excuse to not have videos or homework I assigned her completed. This became frustrating for me as I was having to function as both a creative director and logistical producer to keep the production moving and couldn’t always follow up with her. Having her mother on set, as well as not being in our final year of school would have helped.

Production

My team, especially Lane Wooder, has a knack for being patient with me and the cast especially on the bitter cold and tough days. I believe his empathy formed a style that fit well within my film. I have worked with Lane in the past and being able to discuss how I wanted the film to look, he pulled it off well.
I would like to improve my assertiveness. There were times where I was too timid to ask Sandrah certain questions, which I now see as a few missed opportunities. Part of that was a fear that I might drive her away. I wanted her to trust me and in a way be my friend. This was a difficult area for me because the subject-filmmaker relation was a difficult line for me to straddle between being her friend and pushing to get the footage I wanted.

I handled the overall care and planning of individual shoots well. I had to remain adaptable (filming with teenagers is not always predictable) and always made sure my crew and talent were taken care of. I think being an empathetic person is one of my strongest assets. It helps to strengthen those relationships between crew, talents and others involved in the film making process.

**Post Production**

Editing and configuring all the elements of the story is something that comes naturally for me. With my love of writing and crafting stories, the post-production process has always been the part of filmmaking that I enjoy. At the same time, I have a love-hate relationship with it. The editorial process for this film has not been easy. There have been many times when I felt extremely frustrated and could not see the overall picture. In previous works, I usually finish and lock a picture cut and send the files over to the respective editing team to continue. Working with a special effects’ editor in development and preproduction stages for such speculative fiction films is immensely important.

I have the color correction, special effects and sound design all happening simultaneously to meet the deadline of my thesis deposit. The anxiety came in trying to combine my avant-garde style of editing into the high-concept narrative structure created from using the screenplay. Some of the chemistry between the characters fall flat within their dialogue performances. This takes
me back to reflect on my preproduction and how I would have liked to spend more time with my performers to bond. After some recent feedback on the rough cut, I am finding a compromise that allows me to side step the narrative structure a bit to give *Mirror, Mirror Perfected* the ability to become the film it has become.
CONCLUSION

Narrative filmmaking production is a strenuous process. After the completion of principal photography, the experience of producing in Iowa City has left a significant mark on me, mentally, physically and emotionally which I am still recovering. An exercise in visual storytelling, Mirror, Mirror Perfected was devastatingly ambitious in its scope. It attempts to convey meaning and shape a narrative through character, dance movement, and image rather than exposition or dialogue. This stylized, highly conceptual visually-driven work often repressed the experimental relationship I had wanted to create between myself and Sandrah. This was unfortunate, something we agree we would love to readdress on a smaller scale. The opportunity to freely develop characters and improvise was squandered by my devotion to the image. Lack of resources and time consequently added a sense of sterility and strain to the production process that I hope to avoid in future productions.

I work to find a balance in creating imaginary worlds of borrowed elements through production design onto real environments and situations. I intend to continue shaping my filmmaking practices and experiments with unconventional and hybrid models of narrative and cinematic nonfiction film production. The dynamic and always-evolving avant-garde style of Maya Deren, rehearsal methodologies of filmmaker Darren Aronofsky, digital body horror approach of David Cronenberg and imposed limitations of Dogme 95 filmmakers continue to influence me. Logistical aspects of production encourage my adoption of the production triangle. This production model illustrates that among a project’s quality, speed and cost, one of the three factors must be sacrificed at the other’s expense. Depending on what factor I’d be willing to waive to make the entire process more satisfying, I’ve begun focusing on smaller stories for my next project that are driven by character and circumstance. I would like to produce smaller films
over an extended period to reduce cost, retain quality, build a relationship with talent, push the imagination and restore a sense of balance and sanity to the production process before laboring another high-concept project. I am saving the exhaustive, costly and laborious work of production design, set construction, costuming, visual effect and so on for productions that present more reliable resources.

Filmmaking is a craft that I love, a craft that I’m devoted to, a craft and a profession that I work hard to understand. It has enabled me to explore myself, to research topics that interest me most and express myself in the best way that I know how. The opportunity to produce films is a privilege I do not take for granted. I understand how this commitment comes at a high cost. My dedication can be crippling and my unwavering perseverance to the craft is prevalent with sacrifice, compromise, failure, fear and fatigue. I am learning to navigate and circumvent. But it’s those spells of bliss, however short-lived, that keep me observing and looking for more stories to create and share.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Clark, Veve A; Millicent Hodson; Catrina Neiman. *The Legend of Maya Deren*. Volume I, Part 2 Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1988. Print.


Tiggemann, Marika and Jessica Miller. “The Internet and Adolescent Girls’ Weight Satisfaction and Drive for Thinness.” Sex Roles, 63 (2010), 79-90, 10.1007/s11199-010-9789-z


## BUDGET TOPSHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production Co.</th>
<th>Sankofa Pictures</th>
<th>Producers</th>
<th>P Sam Kessie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Title</td>
<td>Mirror, Mirror Perfected</td>
<td>Union/Non</td>
<td>Non Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Date</td>
<td>November 26th, 2018</td>
<td>Prepared by</td>
<td>P Sam Kessie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot Days</td>
<td>14 shoot days between January 2nd - March 2nd 2019</td>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>Iowa City</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ABOVE THE LINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-00</td>
<td>Research and Development Costs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$2,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-00</td>
<td>Story &amp; Rights</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-00</td>
<td>Producer Unit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-00</td>
<td>Director &amp; Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-00</td>
<td>Cast</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-00</td>
<td>Travel &amp; Living</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Above the Line</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$2,892</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PRODUCTION EXPENSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-00</td>
<td>Production Staff</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-00</td>
<td>Extra Talent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-00</td>
<td>Set Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-00</td>
<td>Set Construction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Code  | Description                    | Weeks | Total
|-------|-------------------------------|-------|--------
| 24-00 | Set Pre-rig & Strike          | 2     | $0     
| 25-00 | Set Operations                | 2     | $300   
| 26-00 | Set Dressing                  | 2     | $125   
| 27-00 | Property                      | 2     | $350   
| 28-00 | Wardrobe                      | 2     | $150   
| 29-00 | Electric                      | 2     | $350   
| 30-00 | Camera                        | 2     | $1,200 
| 31-00 | Production Sound              | 2     | $220   
| 32-00 | Make-up & Hair                | 2     | $525   
| 33-00 | Transportation                | 2     | $0     
| 34-00 | Locations                     | 2     | $925   
| 35-00 | Picture Vehicles & Animals    | 2     | $0     
| 36-00 | Special Effects               | 2     | $100   
| 37-00 | Visual Effects - Post         | 2     | $350   
| 38-00 | Film & Lab                    | 2     | $695   
| 39-00 | BTL Travel                    | 2     | $125   
|       | **Total Production**          |       | **$6,365**

**POST-PRODUCTION EXPENSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45-00</td>
<td>Film Editing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-00</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47-00</td>
<td>Visual Effects</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48-00</td>
<td>Post Production Sound</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49-00</td>
<td>Post Production Film &amp; Lab</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Post Production</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**OTHER EXPENSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55-00</td>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>$700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-00</td>
<td>Legal &amp; Accounting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>$450</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57-00</td>
<td>General Expense</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>$360</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58-00</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>$750</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$2,260</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bond Fee</td>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>$515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingency</td>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>$1,717</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GRAND TOTAL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$19,399</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Sample of look book pages