

Emotional Realism and Actuality: The function of prosumer aesthetics in film production,

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Abstract

Studies of film spectatorship and production techniques have rarely ignored notions of Reality. From the psychoanalytical approaches of Baudry and Metz to the auditory spaces of Doane, approaches to film reception have primarily focused on the methods and rationale behind a spectator's investment in the reality of the spectacle. Additionally specific techniques that assist in aligning character with spectator have been explored from both visual and auditory perspectives. Sound and music in particular are able to bring spectators into the emotional 'space' of a character, while ocular techniques that invoke points of view visually align the observer and observed. In essence, these techniques attempt to reflect an emotional 'truth' inherent in the unfolding of the narrative and related to the experience of its main players.

Current trends in film and television production styles have favoured the use of aesthetics associated with prosumer and social media productions. These aesthetics, including handheld shaky-cam, variable audio and open acknowledgement of the camera, have been utilised for their ability to imitate 'reality', to take away a little of the polish of professional film and television production and to inject the raw, ad hoc immediacy of actuality. Yet an emotional connection between a film and its spectator cannot be disregarded, and indeed represents another form of reality in film: that of emotional realism.

Through a close analysis of Josh Tranks' *Chronicle* (2012), this paper explores the function of prosumer aesthetics in the representation these two filmic 'truths' and examines its effectiveness as both a mimic of actuality and conduit of emotional realism.

The definition of realism in cinema, in particular fictional film, has always been problematic; after all how does one account for a conceptualization of the real in the artifice of the constructed?

Art history accounts for this by constructing a style that hid the technique in the representation, aiming for social realism. It then attempted to expose the process of signification by revealing the artifice (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2012). Later photography presented problems by claiming to represent actuality, yet as Metz argues in the act of capturing the image and re-presenting it, even a photograph of a real object is still a reflection of reality, the “perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror” (Metz in Rosen, 1986, p. 250). Thus the medium – in this case the camera lens and apparatus of projection – inhibits claims to reality. The image that is experienced via manufactured processes is by default reality rendered as illusion, a symbolic rather than iconic signifier of reality. It is for this reason that Andre Bazin eschews the convention of coverage – in which a scene is visually fragmented into separate shots and reconstituted in the edit – in favor of minimal camera movement, long takes and wide shots. The presence of the camera and the subjective signifiers of variable shot sizes interrupt the presentation of a reality that, while scripted and fictional can reflect a social realism that “tends to make more reality appear on the screen” (cited in MacCabe, 1986, p. 181).

The challenge of the (capturing and projecting) lens lies in its function between the experiential ‘real world’ of actuality and the perceptual ‘screening’ of mediated reality. Through the camera’s lens reality begins to loose its claim to actuality as it becomes possible to mould, shape, edit and re-contextualize the images of reality into *some other* meaning, thereby fictionalizing even documentary footage which purports to present unmediated fact. Indeed the documentary film’s claim to actuality and an objective reality has been widely discounted by many scholars, who argue the genre’s stylistic conventions are but techniques to support a highly subjective view of the filmmaker’s *version* of reality. As Michael Renov states, “every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier” (1993, p. 7).

Between fact, fiction, and the presentation of reality exists the potential for a variation that includes the lived experience of the ‘real world’, the scripted narrative of fiction, and the mediated appropriation of documentary. Thus while Bazin advocated for the presentation of a form of social realism in fictional film, cultural theorist Ien Ang supports the notion of a different inherent ‘truth’ in narrative fiction. Writing about viewer reaction to the 1980s soap *Dallas*, Ang argues for an emotional realism that connotes rather than denotes, one in which the experiences and emotional responses of characters are judged based on their resonance with spectators’ own lived experiences; the “... ‘true to life’ elements...” (1985, p. 47) of the series. This emotional reality is achieved in part through the functions of plotting and characterization but also through the use of conventional filmmaking techniques, the “last shot of an episode is then nearly always a close-up of the face of the character concerned, which emphasizes the psychological conflict she or he is in.” (1985, p.

53). The close up highlights the emotional nuances of the actor while at the same time signifying to the audience the relevance of the moment of emotion, and with the aid of music and performance, the emotional resonance the moment has for the narrative of the film.

The techniques create a certain emotional authenticity for the diegesis such that, even if the events of the plot are far removed from everyday reality, the emotional resonance they have for the characters in the plot constructs points of identification and empathy for a viewing audience. By becoming invested in the moments of emotion, the spectator can ease into a suspension of disbelief and connect with the narrative on an illusionary level. Spectators gage character responses against their own lived experiences and if they find a similarity of response, are, more likely to find them ‘believable’ and ‘life-like’. Ang thus speaks not of cognitive realism, but a logical and understandable emotional reality constructed from the artificial (1985).

Spectators are invited to invest in the reality of the fiction not as a mirror of actuality but as a constructed ‘other world’ in which the plausibility of the plotted events is closely linked to the emotional truth of the character’s responses to the world, the events within the plot, and to other characters within the fiction. In order to do so the spectator is required to suspend disbelief and, in the words of Richard Allen to “experience projective illusion...” (1995, p. 139). Conventional filmmaking techniques encourages this projective illusion through the use of the aforementioned close up, while Mary Ann Doane’s notion of the three spaces of cinema – the diegetic, screen and theatre – suggests the power of sound design to physically align spectator and character (Doane in Rosen, 1986). Similarly emotional alignment and identification is assisted by the selection of musical score to cue emotional response, as Neil McDonald states “...music can embody aspects of a character or a prevailing mood of pain and obsession” (2000, p. 73). While the sounds used are ‘borrowed’ from everyday reality, they are used to ground the fictional construct and enable the spectator to develop an aural landscape of the diegesis Mark Evans describes as “perceptual geography” (2004, p. 190).

In the process of achieving projective illusion, audiences demonstrate a learned ability to read the cues of conventional filmmaking – continuity and montage editing, sound design and music – as signifiers of a fictional reality. Audiences inherently ‘understand’ that to engage with the narrative they first need to ‘read’ the images not as a reflection of actuality but as a fictional reality, one in which the emotional reality of the construct is paramount to disengaging with their lived reality in order to enter the constructed world. Specifically it is the convention of the technique as relates to the narrative context that cues the spectator to read the presentation as fiction. Audiences are accustomed to seeing the combination of continuity editing, sound effects and music in the construction of fictional reality and indeed come to expect it from all genres of fictional, and occasionally non-fictional, storytelling.

In recent years a series of film have been produced using the ‘21st century’ aesthetic of prosumer technologies that challenges the convention of classical fictional

techniques and blurs the boundary between spectator, character and camera. Prosumer aesthetics are a blend of the raw, gritty and occasionally grainy imagery associated with consumer grade handheld video cameras, described by Lev Manovich as “DV realism” (2001), and the embodied recording and viewing experience of Mark Hansen’s “haptic aesthetic” (2004, p. 11). As a set of technical and stylistic choices, the aesthetic mimics the everyday user’s appropriation of a multi-lens environment in which the self-referential need to record and publish our lives in social media is enabled via lightweight and easily operated digital cameras and smart phones.

In particular the camera lens (and slaved audio – another feature of the prosumer aesthetic) is not positioned in relation to the viewer (Metz in Rosen, 1986), or to itself as an external object viewing a profilmic event (Mulvey, 1975), but primarily in relation to the diegetic character as an acknowledged object of gaze. It also becomes an object of operation within the diegesis as the visceral, mobile and ‘amateur’ stylistic tropes of prosumer-composed images are adopted to suggest a non-professional presence behind the lens. By extension, an authenticity associated with the amateur and the unmediated (perhaps incidental) capturing of reality as it happens is suggested. In application the techniques connote as “indexical, providing some truth-value of their referent...” (Landesman, 2008, p. 34).

The aesthetic is often precisely for its indexical ability to ‘point to’ actuality, a primary reason for its use in the 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project*, a mockumentary that not only challenged the genre’s claims to unmediated ‘reality’, but also efficiently blurred fact and fiction to expose the audiences’ conditioned reading of the techniques as signifiers for the ‘real’. The film was presented as found footage within a narrative framework that accounted for the presence of the lens in the diegesis by establishing three purportedly real film students who disappeared while filming a documentary on the mythical Blair Witch. A mobile, occasionally shaky, and unfocused lens that accepts direct reference, in combination with audio slaved to the image, constructs aural and visual cues towards authenticity that conventional cinematic techniques cannot achieve. Indeed it was the visceral ‘reality’ of the technique that accounts (in addition to a novel online campaign) for the believability of the film’s premise and the perception from audiences that the events had in fact occurred.

The initial aim of the prosumer aesthetic was then to convince the audience to invest in the actuality of the narrative. To achieve that, conventional cinematic techniques were abandoned and along with them the signification of the fictional. It is an aesthetic that serves the blurred fact/fiction narrative well, as is evidenced by the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, however more recent films have likewise adopted prosumer techniques to serve highly fictionalized narratives in the science fiction (*Cloverfield*, 2008) and horror (*Paranormal Activity*, 2007) genres. These genres have specifically benefited from the ability of conventional cinematic technique to generate a subjective alignment between audience and character, relying on emotional reality to convince the spectator of the fiction’s plausibility. In particular, the ability of music to establish mood and excitement, and the effectiveness of sound design to deliver sudden shocks are techniques on which the quality of films within the genre is judged. To diverge from the safety of convention would suggest sacrificing emotional reality

in favor of the apparently ‘real’, however the fictionalized construct of narrative films clearly relies upon techniques that delineate reality from imagination. How then do a set of stylistic techniques that purport to actuality find footing in fictional films?

This essay uses the science fiction film *Chronicle* as a case study to examine the function of an aesthetic associated with the authentic in a constructed fictional context.

Chronicle: An overview

Josh Trank’s 2012 film *Chronicle* adopts the aesthetic conventions of DV realism that characterizes other ‘found footage’ films in the genre. Shot on 35mm, the final vision was treated to give it a DV ‘feel’ however unlike *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, *Chronicle* does not purport to be ‘found’. Rather than establishing a dramatic conceit in which the unmediated record of a cataclysmic event was discovered and presented as the testament of a (now absent) witness, the film contravenes the aesthetic as a stylistic choice not for its indexical signification of actuality but for its potential as a point of identification and observation which serves to (re) enforce the emotional reality of the diegesis.

Following the discovery of a mysterious alien rock three teenage boys; introverted Andrew, blasé Matt, and popular Steve, develop superhuman abilities that enable them to control objects by telekinesis, manipulate electricity, gives them super strength and the power of flight. At first used for fun, the boys are soon confronted by the dangers of their abilities and their own dark natures as their powers grow.

Physical alignment: POV

The opening shot establishes Andrew and the main dramatic conceit of the film. Half hidden behind the eyepiece of his Canon XL1 MiniDV camera, Andrew announces that he will film all events to follow, presumably motivated as much by his fascination with cameras and filmmaking as with the wish to gather evidence of his father’s violent and abusive behavior. From the outset, the camera is associated with Andrew, representative of his view of his everyday experiences and referenced on more than one occasion by other characters Andrew (and his camera) introduces, Matt and Steve among them, to legitimize its position within the diegesis. The ‘professional’ appearance of the shots is also given a plausible explanation: Andrew is an aspiring filmmaker and dabbles in the types of prosumer equipment that the lens purports to reflect. An assortment of accessories in the form of tripods and on-camera lights completes the illusion.

The viewing lens – that through which the audience sees the film – is associated with Andrew, operated it is imagined by the unseen character whose presence is only ‘felt’ behind the lens. However this association is not exclusive. At a party attended by the majority of the school’s student body Andrew is seen in frame, throwing into question

the origin of the lens. The mystery is resolved when Andrew addresses Matt behind the lens, freeing the camera from its submission to Andrew and introducing the possibility of an associative mobility for the lens within the diegetic space. As subsequent characters pick up and operate the camera the lens becomes briefly associated with their viewing perspective, sharing the same physical space and experiential position as the character who carries and operates it, constituting what Jenna Ng calls the “first person lens based POV” (2009). It is not through a character’s subjective POV that the lens sees but through a subjectively laden objectivity. When Andrew’s camera is passed to his friends they cease to be objects of the camera’s gaze and impose their possessive subjectivity on the camera’s objective look.

At the same time, the shared possessive subjectivity of Andrew’s camera is not the only view offered in the diegesis. The party scene also introduces Casey, seen first through the first person lens based POV of the camera-as-controlled-by-Matt. She also operates a camera – recording for her blog – and a quick cut to her lens establishes the film’s second conceit; any lens is accessible. Inter-cutting between the two lenses offers a direct way of accessing the spatial perspective of the characters, and interjects a conventional shot-reverse-shot editing structure.

Through the first person lens based POV, the camera becomes momentarily associated with whomever controls it, aligned briefly with the viewing position of the character whose perspective it shares. However between characters, the potential for disassociation threatens. Ng accounts for this by suggesting the anthropomorphized POV of the camera as viewing object (2009). In films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*, when the camera is turned on the controller and directly addressed, its position as a viewing lens is acknowledged openly at the same time constructing it as a legitimate object of address and viewing within the diegesis. When a character loses control of the camera, as when Hud is attacked and killed by an alien in *Cloverfield*, its continued recording reinforces its independence as a viewing object outside of a character’s control and constructs it as a character in its own right.

In *Chronicle*, Andrew’s camera is given greater spatial mobility due to a dramatic conceit that gives Andrew the ability to levitate it. This allows Andrew to be seen in the camera’s frame while still controlling it. Thus the first person lens based POV becomes turned in on itself. The perspective offered is that of Andrew’s yet it is not his subjective viewing perspective of the diegesis – rather it is the view of the camera-as-viewing object, anthropomorphic but clearly controlled by Andrew. However unlike the restricted view of the operator offered by the limited framing in *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, the viewer is presented with a sweeping, free-floating lens reminiscent of conventional dolly or crane shots. While functionally under the control of the character, the camera becomes free of it in both perspective and physicality. The way in which the films handles this POV addresses some of the critiques of the aesthetics which argues that the technique, while offering the semblance of mobility within the diegesis, actually restricts the range of views offered to an audience. When Andrew floats his camera throughout a scene in which he and Steve have a conversation atop a rooftop, conventional framing techniques are

invoked, as it adopts the slow, serene, push-in effect of a dolly track.

Emotional alignment: Lens as Character

The ability to ‘float’ the camera away from the character gives it an added level of characterization in which its very presence as a viewing object becomes imbued with emotional qualities. As the film progresses Andrew becomes increasingly insular and destructive, cutting himself off from Matt and causing a lightening storm that takes Steve’s life. When his mother’s medical funds run out, he attacks and robs a group of youths before ransacking and destroying a service station. During his increasingly disruptive actions and particularly throughout the attack on the youths, Andrew’s camera becomes progressively removed from his subjective position.

Throughout the duration of Andrew’s assault on the group, his camera hovers above at a distance, seemingly seeking safety in objectivity. It looks down on the action as if to judge the morality of Andrew’s action from afar, only venturing closer when the act is complete and Andrew slumps by the side of the road, dejectedly clutching his spoils. In that instant the camera – or Andrew’s remaining moral core which the camera has come to represent – seems to reach out to Andrew, offering comfort but warning against further violence, its abhorrence manifest in the physical distance between its viewing position and its controller in the preceding action. This is reinforced in the following scene in which Andrew’s accident destruction of a service station is shown only through the facility’s security camera and not Andrew’s own lens. It is as if the camera has abandoned him, signifying a complete disconnection between Andrew’s diegetic experience and the camera’s viewing position.

Thus Andrew’s camera is aligned not only with his perceptive view, but also on a level of emotional alignment. It is at once his confidant, witness and co-conspirator and ultimately comes to represent his humanity. After the incident at the service station, Andrew and his camera are hospitalized. Andrew is confronted by his father who informs him of his mother’s death, and blames him for her passing. Throughout this interlude the action is covered from two perspectives; a security camera inside the room providing a high angle view of the room, and Andrew’s camera set up on a tripod at the foot of his bed providing a mid-two shot of Andrew and his father. As his father becomes more irate, Andrew slowly wakes and with that his camera starts a slow push in. At the height of his anger Andrew’s father motions to hit him across the head and Andrew reacts by grabbing his arm. At the same time the vision of the scene switches to the security camera and through it audiences witness the destruction of the wall and window in Andrew’s room, along with his camera. With that, the last of Andrew’s humanity is destroyed as he rises from his bed and proceeds to drop his father from the side of the building. He assumes the role of the ‘Apex predator’, a concept he had been pondering as his powers grew, and sets about eliminating those weaker than himself.

With Andrew’s camera gone, Casey and Matt are offered as alternative aligning perspectives and characters with whom to empathize. Some distance away, Matt

senses Andrew's distress and travels to the hospital with Casey and her camera – through which the subsequent action is seen. He arrives in time to save Andrew's father, setting up a confrontation with Andrew that quickly deteriorates into an aerial battle.

Without the characterization of an anthropomorphized lens, Andrew becomes objectified as a force of pure destruction, an anti-hero whose destruction becomes the task of the 'new', alterative hero Matt. For as much as Andrew's control of the camera legitimized its position within the diegesis, the camera's presence also reflected an aspect of Andrew's vulnerability and sympathy as a character. Not only was the camera a proxy for his subjective experiences it also became a chronicle of his emotional deterioration. From the outset the camera was physically aligned with Andrew, showing the audience what Andrew wished to represent of his own experience. Andrew is never seen without his camera and even when he is not controlling it, it is present recording him. As the narrative progresses the camera's view is visually, and then experientially aligned with his subjective experience of his life. In an introductory scene at school, Andrew is targeted by a group of bullies who not only attack him but also his camera. The attack is seen from the perspective of the camera in Andrew's hand; as he is pushed and shoved so is the lens, pulling the camera into Andrew's subjectivity. Eventually it physically echoes Andrew's experience as a bully rips it from his hands and throws it to the ground, extending the alignment from the perceptive to the experiential as it receives the same treatment as the character it 'sees' for.

As the film progressed this experiential alignment extends to the emotional. Prolonged screen time suggests an allegiance between character and lens, which becomes increasingly symbiotic as the film progresses. The camera relies on Andrew to enable it to view, and by viewing to exist within the diegesis, while at the same time Andrew counts on the lens to witness for him the stark reality of his life, and by witnessing to help make sense of his domestic situation and his growing super human powers. As he refines his powers he starts to operate the camera by telekinesis, effectively demonstrating the extent to which the lens had become an extension of his physical being. The way in which he relates to camera operation is also reflective of his emotional state; floating and carefree when Andrew, Matt and Steve experience the joy of flying; slow and pensive when Andrew experiments with levitation after an (off screen) admonishment from his father; and fast, visceral and aggressive when Andrew avenges himself on his school yard bullies. At the same time the camera's presence registers as a type of emotional support when Andrew receives his first on screen beating from his father. Having set up the camera, half obscured, on his desk Andrew turns to confront the verbal and physical abuse that had only been intimated thus far.

The camera is not under his control however Andrew's gaze at the lens both before and after the beating draws the object of his gaze into his subjectivity, affirming his experience at the same time agreeing with his moral perspective. It is as if the camera is connected to Andrew on a cognitive and emotional level, and even though he does not control it, it is very much 'on his side': understanding, sympathetic and reflective.

It is a ‘part’ of him. In the final scene of the film, Matt addresses the camera and Andrew simultaneously, reinforcing the man-machine fugue. The audience is invited not to view the camera in alignment with Matt – even though it is he who operates the camera – but to see it as a conduit to Andrew, or his memory at the very least.

In a way this emotional alignment is made possible by the multiplicity of POV offered throughout the film. The destruction of Andrew’s camera at the beginning of the third act of the film allows the film to fully exploit the ability to access and ‘see through’ any camera lens. Casey’s camera, helicopter, news and security cameras are utilized in quick succession as the viewer’s perspective is flicked from lens to lens in pursuit of Matt and Andrew’s aerial confrontation. When they pause at the Chicago Space Needle, an abundance of digital devices are appropriated to give the viewer access to the action. These multitudes of lenses (with the exception of Casey’s camera) have no specific character to whom they can align, instead mimicking the voyeuristic gaze of the general audience as, phones and tablets raised, the (diegetically insignificant) bystander in the film witnesses and records the climatic events.

While serving the function of ‘showing’ the viewer the action, the multiple and fleeting lens based POVs were exploited to delineate the intimate, emotional connection that Andrew, his camera and the audience had established. By presenting the external lenses of the bystanders as cold, emotionless and voyeuristic (interested only in the novelty of the spectacle and less in the human tragedy behind it), Andrew’s camera is established in contrast as a main character in its own right. In contrast to the measured, serene and at times beautiful images captured by Andrew’s camera, these mass POV lenses were fleeting, grainy and harshly pragmatic both in aesthetics and in function, dispensed with once they had served their purpose of tracking the action. The privileged viewing position of Andrew’s camera is thus reinforced as the most legitimate, emotionally truthful camera with which to identify.

Aural alignment: Heard first

For Mary Ann Doane, the placement of speakers in the cinema theatre, and the subsequent distribution of sound through those speakers creates a “sonorous envelope” (1986, p. 343) that recalls the imprinting of the mother’s voice of the infant before birth. In particular, the human voice, endowed with “...‘presence’ guarantees the singularity and stability of a point of audition...” (p. 343). Thus while Andrew’s voice is not representative of the prenatal mother, it is to his voice that the spectator is aligned. The film opens on black and for the first thirty seconds the most immediate and ‘present’, both in proximity and vocal quality, sound is Andrew’s voice as he argues with his (aurally distant) father through his bedroom door. From that point forward, Andrew’s physical location behind the lens constructs him as the most ‘present’ character as the film extends the conceit of self-shot footage to the audio. As the camera operator Andrew’s voice is the closest to the imagined on-camera microphone and thus the clearest and richest in timber.

The film does not strictly conform to the prosumer audio conceit however. For the most part, particularly in the first two acts of the film, the audio is slaved to the image

and shifts abruptly when the visuals change. There is no musical score and the proximity of characters and events to the camera determines the audio quality and strength. However the film does not shy away from the use of sound effects, introducing whooshes (when flying), thumps (when punches are thrown), and high pitched digital distortions mixed with a low hum (when the alien rock is discovered). It adopts the convention of adding non-diegetic sounds to reinforce the fictional reality of the diegesis at the same time conforming to audience's generic expectations of how flying, fighting and alien objects *should* sound. In this regard the film builds in a backdoor, enabling the audio some degree of conceptual freedom and bending the prosumer aesthetic so that a more aurally coherent landscape can be created.

A more flexible approach to sound design also enables the use of sound design to enhance Andrew's emotional experience, adding a level of alignment with his character. The effect is first used towards the end of the second act when Andrew uses his super strength to retaliate against his father. In the silence after the confrontation Andrew floats his camera towards him and a low protracted whoosh-hum is introduced, reflecting the beginning of his psychological decline. In a later scene after Andrew's hospitalisation, the sound is again used to indicate Andrew's control over the camera and his growing emotional trauma. As Andrew slowly wakes from a state of unconsciousness, the camera slowly tracks forward accompanied by the low whoosh-hum subtly mixed under his father's vocals. Outwardly Andrew shows no signs of change however the sound effect signals he is awake and as his father's diatribe reaches its peak a sustained high pitched tone is introduced, reflecting a psychological tension that has reached its limit. When the building finally explodes, the visual and aural release of tension acts as a turning point for Andrew's submission to his role as the ultimate predator.

Conclusion

The prosumer aesthetic is an indexical sign of actuality however in a fictional context the presumptive connotations of reality are challenged by the technique's ability to recontextualize the chronicled events. In this instance an unmediated reality is not denoted, however the subjective experience of the fictional character is enriched by the connotative implications of the aesthetic; the events may not be real, but for the character within the dramatic framework, the *experience* of it is and the aesthetics reflect this reality. By restricting the spectator to the same experiential field as the character, the distance between the spectator's objective gaze and the subjective experience of the character is reduced, thus enhancing an emotional alignment and reinforcing the emotional reality of the film. When the camera lens is constructed as a character in its own right it offers a midpoint of alignment in which the emotional resonance of a scene can be connote through visuals alone. In this way, more so than with conventional techniques, the lens is endowed with emotion independent from music, sound, and the gaze of character or viewer. Constructed as a 'character', it takes on the "lifelike" (Ang, 1985) qualities of an emoting entity within the diegesis. There is no doubt that these technique will continue to be explored and applied in the unconventional telling of conventional narratives that challenge and confront the boundaries between spectral, character and technological gazes, and which aim to blur the line between fictional representation and the indexical symbolism of the apparently real.

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