What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen: Exploring Doubt as a Critical Tool within Artists' Moving Image Practice

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Abstract

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen: Exploring Doubt as a Critical Tool within Artists' Moving Image Practice.

Doubt is a loaded word. There are associations and histories that weave the word through theological, philosophical, political, legal and psychoanalytic thought. It is entangled. However, it is precisely because of the complexity and ambiguity of the term doubt that it holds my interest. The associative relationships that doubt has with truth, proof, faith, belief, testimony, witnessing, fact and fiction are all active components in my practice and research. There are three artworks that act as case studies that explore these relationships: a single screen video (*April,* 2018), a video performance (*The Narrator,* 2018) and a video installation with accompanying performance (*The Unreliable Narrator,* 2019). The written thesis is a reflective text that is structured around the description and analysis of these three artworks.

While acknowledging existing studies that examine the generative potential of doubt or 'not knowing' within creative processes (Cocker, 2013; Herbert, 2014), the aim of my research is to investigate the critical potential of doubt when made manifest *within* an artwork, as an attribute or affect. To do this, my practice-led research pursues doubt as both its subject and as a consequence of the work itself. The latter approach (as consequence or affect) positions doubt as a cognitive or sensory experience that may be produced in a viewer by way of the work. There are various structural methods that I have explored to achieve this, for example the use of repetition in narrative or filmic loops that can be seen in my single screen film *April* (2018) and video performance *The Narrator* (2018).

My investigation of doubt as content is evidenced most explicitly in my video performance *The Narrator* that asks: what if you knew no doubt, held no inconsistencies, had no contradictory thoughts, feelings or urges? By putting these questions into play, *The Narrator* entertains the improbable, perhaps impossible, notion of a narrator whose reliability is absolute. However, *What is Seen, What is Said*

to be Seen also considers the one who sees and what they say they saw. Prophetic sight and stage magic are the subjects central to *April* and *The Unreliable Narrator* respectively; both present moments of uncertain seeing that sit close to the limits of vision and perception and it is this uncertain seeing that the artworks attempt to re-enact.

Preface

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen is driven by doubt. Doubt is embedded within my creative process, written into my methodology, central to the specific subject that each artwork investigates and is pursued as a potential consequence or affect of the fractured forms in the artworks produced. However, the word doubt has also resisted my inquiry.

To doubt whether or not *doubt* is the correct word to describe the subject matter and approach of *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* paradoxically positions doubt as precisely the critical tool that my research pursues. Although doubt can signal fragility and instability, the act of doubting also entails a quest for something more certain. By enlisting doubt as a research method, as an active and intentional mode of questioning, I was able to argue for and against the suitability of the word *doubt* throughout the course of my research. The purpose of this approach, however, was not to necessarily resolve the issue with a conclusive yes or no after which doubt would subside, but rather my intention was to investigate what happens (or could happen) when doubt is considered a provisional or suspended space, one that can hold open an argument or pry apart a theoretical position so that, for however briefly, 'things' are held open, giving cognitive provisionality a discursive legitimacy.

However, a characteristic trait of doubt is that it tends to vanish with articulation. An utterance is an edited enunciation that emits far more than it states. Certain words are chosen over others to describe, interpret and to explain and as such, the act of both speaking and writing involve a commitment to a particular truth; this may only be a provisional or temporary position, but nevertheless, doubt is cast aside. With this in mind, the written component of this thesis is not only a reflective, critical text that accompanies the three artworks produced but it is a text that is shaped by a methodology that posits doubt as not only the subject of this inquiry, but a method in its own right. The question, 'what if the word doubt is held in *doubt* as the named subject, method and concept of this inquiry?' is therefore being put forward as a proposition, a speculative 'what if' that permits the hesitations of the researcher entry

into the body of the text, so that doubt is not artificially cast aside but remains an active agent within this thesis. My intention being to not only utilise doubt as a form of criticality but to also offer this position out to a reader.

The overall form of this written thesis therefore corresponds to the content, which is to say that the form is not intended to simply hold together and present an argument with a clear beginning, middle and end, after which any doubt would subside, but it is a form that incorporates doubt by way of its structure. In a similar manner to the three artworks produced, this written thesis contains loops, repetitions and digressions throughout, a deliberate move on my part to present the given information in a manner that remains faithful to my methodology. This written thesis is therefore proposed as a middle ground that brings practice and research into conversation. It is an attempt to catch doubt mid-air.

Introduction

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen: Exploring Doubt as a Critical Tool within Artists' Moving Image Practice investigates the critical potential of doubt when made manifest *within* an artwork as an attribute or affect. The PhD consists of three main artworks which, together with this written thesis, investigate doubt as a subject, method and, in certain respects, a desired outcome of this body of research. The artworks include *April* (2018), a single screen video; *The Narrator* (2018), a spoken word performance with video and *The Unreliable Narrator* (2019), a video installation and spoken word performance.

Throughout my research, I have pursued doubt as both a method of practice and a potential affect of the artworks that I produce. These two positions engage with quite different conceptions of doubt, both in terms of how it is employed and the way in which it is encountered. There is a certain amount of agency implied when considering doubt as a method or approach, as though doubt is something that one can choose to do at will. In this way, doubt connotes an active state of mind that enables one to selectively withhold assent and temporarily be 'of two minds' until a resolution is reached and doubt subsides. This method of doubt is precisely what philosopher René Descartes did in the 17th century when he asked himself whether he really knows all that he thinks he knows. There is a doubling of doubt that is of relevance here. From the Latin *dubitare*, doubt comes from duo, two: 'with a sense of two minds, undecided between two things.' To doubt is to hold open an argument, to hesitate, reflect, to sit in the space between yes and no.

For Descartes, this act of *holding open* was a matter of withholding assent. His method of doubt was a universal pursuit in which no thought or experience escaped scrutiny; everything that contained "even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty" was considered a false belief. The sky, the air, the earth, colours, numbers and sounds were reframed as merely the delusions of dreams. "I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things."[1]

[1] René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy' (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993) p. 727.

What Descartes found was that he could systematically demolish all of his convictions bar one. A single certainty upon which, he argued all true knowledge could be based: *Cogito Ergo Sum* – I think, therefore I am. This conclusive revelation claimed that the character 'I', who perceives, feels, thinks and doubts is a certain and incontestable fact. In the third *Meditation*, Descartes listed what a thinking thing entailed: "I am a thing that thinks," he wrote, "that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies …, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives."[2] Whether awake or in the midst of a dream, Descartes concluded that it was still he who was thinking, doubting, affirming or dreaming. Even if his perceptions did not correspond to a real thing in the world, they were still his perceptions. Whatever may be the state of reality and of truth as they are given to the senses and reason, Descartes concluded that "nobody can doubt of his doubt and remain uncertain whether he doubts or does not doubt."[3] If nothing else held true, doubt for Descartes was a certainty. He doubts, therefore he is.

However, that one can *choose* to doubt does not mean that one can choose *not* to doubt. There is stark difference between cognitive doubt, where one enlists doubt at will as a form of rational inquiry, when compared to living doubt; the type of doubt that one *feels*, that is impossible to dismiss or ignore. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein described this second type of doubt as 'involuntary doubt', pointing toward the affective, psychological experience of a particular situation. "Just try," challenged Wittgenstein, "in a real case, to doubt someone else's fear or pain."[4] The type of doubt that Wittgenstein is describing is not a matter of the intellect alone, it is not employed or enlisted as a method, but is more akin to an encounter or experience. This sentiment is shared by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who wrote, "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have … Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts."[5] What both philosophers agree on is that although doubt can be a critical tool

[2] Ibid, p. 14.
[3] René Descartes quoted in Hannah Ardent, 'The Human Condition' (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) p. 26.
[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations', trans by Anscombe, G. E. M., Hecker, P. M. S. and Schulte, Joachim 4th edn (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009) p. 303.
[5] Peirce, Charles Sander, 'Philosophical Writings of Peirce' (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 229.

that is voluntarily enlisted as a method of inquiry, there is a certain amount of pretence or self-deceit to this approach that distinguishes it from living doubt: the doubt that we feel in our hearts, in our guts. Living doubt, or 'involuntary' doubt is not understood by either philosopher as merely a cognitive matter but is aligned with structures of *feeling* as a form of embodied knowledge.

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen engages with both of these positions: voluntary doubt as an applied method and involuntary doubt as a structure of feeling. Although these two discrete positions rarely sit apart in everyday experience as neatly as they do in theory, the distinction nevertheless provides a base structure for my research, from which it may digress, respond and return. As a method of research, doubt has been intentionally incorporated into each of the three artworks that I have produced that pursue doubt as both a subject and potential consequence of the artworks themselves. For example, the research themes of prophetic sight and stage magic that are key to *April* and *The Unreliable Narrator* respectively consider modes of seeing and believing, cognition and doubt. As affect or consequence, the artworks seek to produce a sensation of uncertainty through methods of disorientation (and reorientation), laying the ground for an encounter with doubt. There are various structural techniques that I have explored to achieve this such as the use of repetition in narrative or filmic loops that can be seen in my single screen film *April* and video performance *The Narrator*.

By focussing on the structure of film and performance as a method of disorientating a viewer, *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* builds on some of the techniques commonly associated with Structural Filmmaking practices. Within my practice I use filmic devices such as loops, repetition and jump-cuts to focus, redirect and destabilize the attention of a viewer, techniques that position my practice as an extension of Structural Film. In artist and critic Peter Gidal's extensive study, *Structural Film Anthology*, he describes Structural Film as, "a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making,"[6] a definition that foregrounds

[6] Peter Gidal, 'Structural Film Anthology' (London: BFI Publishing, 1976), p. 2.

the movement's insistence on the demystification of the film process that operates as a critique of representation itself. The production of relations (within a film), that Gidal identifies as 'shot to shot, shot to image, grain to image, image dissolution to grain, etc.' is, he argues, "a basic function which is in direct opposition to (the) reproduction of relations."[7] By rejecting the internal relations of film, such as narrative, in favour of film's material qualities, Structural Film aimed to produce an active and critical viewer, one that would be aware of their position as a spectator who is engaged in the activity of viewing a film.

My practice and research employs the methods and techniques that are characteristic to Structural Film with the shared aim of drawing attention to the constructed nature of the work and therefore establishing a critical distance between the viewer and the work itself. However, as Gidal has observed, "One creates a work. One also creates, in varying degrees, a negation of past work, of historically constituted bases for tradition."[8] *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* both borrows from and negates the concerns and techniques of Structural Film. The internal relations within my artworks are not relegated or dismissed but are strategically used to disorientate (and reorientate) a viewer. By integrating moments of illusion (via narrative) inside a formal structure, my aim is to create a tension between the two. There is an ambiguity sought by way of this method that makes it unclear where the self-imposed structure begins and ends. This is evident in my spoken word performances in which the intentional slips purposively sit alongside the accidental, making it difficult to decipher what is being performed and what is not, a technique that is carried into the written thesis.

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen therefore both builds on and digresses from the concerns and techniques of Structural Film, however, it does so by way of other artists and filmmakers such as Lis Rhodes, Moyra Davey and John Smith, all of whom work with narrative within a non-illusionist structure. In an interview with Tate Modern curator Stuart Comer, the filmmaker John Smith is asked whether the element of play

[7] Ibid, p. 2.
[8] Ibid, p. 15.

within his practice allows him to undermine the same rules that he uses to structure his films, to which he responds:

> Oh, absolutely. In every new piece you're creating a new language, and in order to create a language, you have to create rules. So I'm very interested in making work where you set up a framework within which things operate, where the viewer gradually gets to learn the language, gets to anticipate what's going to happen next—and then expectation is thwarted. The rules change. Unpredictable things happen. A new language develops.[9]

Smith's adherence and diversion from the rules that structure his work resonates with my understanding of the ways in which *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* (mis)behaves in its investigation of doubt. Each of the three artworks produced foregrounds its given structure in order to deviate from it, a shift that destabilises the work with the aim being to produce a sensation of uncertainty in a viewer that would lay the ground for an encounter with doubt.

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen is a practice-led inquiry and as such the research commenced with 'practice' by way of the production of *April*. The written thesis reflects this. It is chronological, addressing the three artworks produced in the order that they were created. Each chapter begins with a detailed description of the artwork followed by a discussion that seeks to contextualise, analyse and build on the themes, references and research that surrounds each work.

This thesis opens with an introduction to the subject of doubt that draws from philosophy, film and fiction to both contextualise my inquiry and to propose a framework or structure that might house a working definition of doubt in relation to my research.

9 John Smith quoted in Stuart Comer, 'Funny Games: An Interview with John Smith'. In: Artforum, vol. 49, no. 9, May 2011, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201105> [Accessed 12 July 2021] p. 10.

Chapter one describes, analyses and contextualises *April* (2018) a twenty-one minute single screen video that was produced in the first five months of my PhD. Beginning with a detailed description of *April*, in which the artwork is initially described without analysis, this chapter goes on to introduce the subject of second sight, a prophetic phenomenon particular to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The subject is key to the concept, form and content of *April* and signals themes central to my doctoral project that consider appearance, perception, doubt and belief. *April's* narrative, however, does not address the subject of second sight directly but considers, and through its cyclical structure performs, the sensation of being uncertain of whether what you are seeing and hearing is what was previously seen or heard.

The analysis of this work draws on psychoanalysist Sigmond Freud's theory of the uncanny to address the themes and methods present in *April,* as well as in my wider creative practice, that borrow from the conceptual imagery of the uncanny exploiting the perceptual instability that it can give rise to. For instance, my work performs themes and methods of doubling, repetition and mirroring. A sense of déjà vu is sought in narratives that loop, fold back or fragment. The distinct positions of subject and object are often blurred or dismantled. However, there is a resistance described and discussed to Freud's definition of 'the uncanny' that references feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Alexandra Kokoli, questioning what a reappropriation of this complex psychological and aesthetic mode could bring to my investigation into of doubt as a critical tool.

Chapter two focusses on *The Narrator* (2018), a spoken word performance with accompanying video that I presented at the artist's residency centre and historic house Hospitalfield in Arbroath. The performance was not filmed and the audio was not recorded, a deliberate move on my part, therefore *The Narrator* only exists in its retelling. Written from memory, the description in this chapter stands in for the work itself as a method of documentation that is intended to enact the themes of witnessing, testimony and memory that *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* addresses. The site-specific performance opens with an invitation to imagine a situation in which there is 'no doubt, no contradictions, no inconsistencies, no conflicting feelings, thoughts,

urges, no shades of grey.' It is a proposition that functions as a speculative 'what if?' What if you knew no doubt? By putting these questions into play, *The Narrator* considers the impossibility of a narrator whose reliability is absolute. Although the spoken word narratives common to both *April* and *The Narrator* are equally unstable (both perform imperfect repetitions that deviate from duplication), the scripted narrations differ in the form specific to each work. Unlike the voice-over in *April* that is digitally mastered and edited, *The Narrator* is performed in a single take. The intentional and the accidental sit side by side making it difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. There are various disorientating techniques used in *The Narrator* that build on *April*, for example, the performance employs an imprecise loop that folds the narrative that it tells back in on itself, it repeats phrases, intentionally confuses and complicates the authorial voice, reflecting throughout on the instability of the term 'character'. Such strategies involve a process of defamiliarization, namely uncovering the strangeness of what is assumed to be known, established or ordinary, reframing the familiar as odd, unfamiliar and strange. In *The Narrator*, this perceptual flip is attributed, in part, to a double-sided coin that appears on the fifth page of the script. In contrast to *April*, that considered the lack of materiality associated with visions, spectral appearances and uncertain sights, *The Narrator* was produced in close contact with the tactility of this coin, which through its form talked to ideas of chance, fate, superstition, coincidence and contradiction.

Chapter three introduces my third and final artwork and case study: *The Unreliable Narrator* (2019). *The Unreliable Narrator* is a work in two parts. Part 1 is a video installation that was presented at Hospitalfield's Autumn Season Open Weekend. Part 2 is a staged reading that incorporates spoken word and moving image that was performed at three allocated times during the weekend. Building on the themes of uncertain seeing central to *April, The Unreliable Narrator* engages with the illusions, trickery and duplicity associated with stage magic. In the video installation, the material manipulations of the magician are in conflict with the digital manipulations of the video editor; both have at their disposal the tools to visually manipulate not only what the viewer sees but also how they see it. The tension between the two illusory mediums of magic and film speculates on creative agency; who is responsible for the

illusion, the magician or the editor? With a focus on a magician's complicated relationship to the truth, *The Unreliable Narrator* draws from the unspoken contract that exists between magician and spectator that ultimately permits deception. A lack of trust is insinuated by the artwork's title, but exactly who the title names remains in doubt. In both the performance and video installation, unstable or unsettled subject positions are generated offering a variety of temporary positions. In the video performance identities merge, conflate and confuse the positions of performer, narrator and character. As in *The Narrator,* this is heightened by the second person 'you', an ambiguous identity that conceals or complicates precisely who is being addressed and by whom.

Methodology

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen is a practice-led enquiry, by which I mean my artistic practice is not an object of study but an academic method of research. This distinction is essential in defining not only a methodology that has been shaped *by* practice, but it is also key to articulating the exact nature of my inquiry into the subject of doubt. I am proposing doubt not only as the subject of my inquiry, but as a methodology in its own right.

This thesis is practice-led and as such the research commenced with 'practice' by way of the production of *April*. The written thesis reflects this. It is chronological, addressing the three artworks produced in the order that they were created. Each chapter begins with a detailed description of the artwork followed by a discussion that seeks to contextualise, analyse and build on the themes, references and research that surrounds each work. The aim of the written thesis is not simply to interpret the artworks or identify and assign meaning, but it is intended to expand my enquiry into doubt as a subject and critical tool.

In her essay 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheilmliche (The "uncanny")' French philosopher Hélène Cixous describes her enquiry as "a reading divided between literature and psychoanalysis, with special attention paid to what is produced and what escapes in the unfolding of a text."[10] My thesis follows this mode of enquiry. The detailed descriptions that carefully attend to what is produced lay the ground for an analysis of what, perhaps unintentionally, has escaped. This model of carefully describing an artwork in order to analyse it is a practice familiar to most art school students as a method common to group critiques. To leap immediately into an analysis can often lose sight of the artwork. It is by observing the specific qualities, materials, content and details of an artwork; by being attentive to what is physically there, that it becomes possible to consider what is not there, what is being referenced

[10] Helene Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheilmliche (The "uncanny")'. In: New Literary History, Vol. 7, No. 3, Thinking in the Arts, Sciences, and Literature, Spring, 1976 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468561?seq=1> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2018] p. 525.

or alluded to, what is produced (and what has escaped) as a result of the artwork's form. Following the description, a conversation begins that addresses the particularities of what the artwork is, what it does and how it does it. Conversations about the work lead to conversations around the work, and I would argue that it is precisely in this moment that the artwork begins to work. Associative thinking unfolds, taking tangents that return to the work, contextualising it within a discourse that by its nature, is often a temporary frame specific to the unfolding conversation. The conversations that happen around the edges of an artwork are therefore of interest to me, not only because they evidence what is produced and potentially, what has escaped, but there is a third aspect that observes what an artwork allows or provides access to, that considers where, individually or collectively, the artwork might lead.

My creative practice is multi-disciplinary, bringing together filmmaking, sculpture, writing, installation and more recently performance. I present my work in various formats including gallery-based video installations (that may involve multiple screens or multiple audio sources that are presented alongside sculptural or found objects), single screen presentations in cinemas or galleries, publications and readings. Although there is no intentional model or set of rules, self-imposed or other, that I follow when producing a new piece of work, there are patterns of behaviour that are repeated from one work to the next. These behaviours are articulated from within my creative practice. They are patterns, habits and techniques that I have become aware of as a result of *doing* rather than a set of instructions that I have learned to follow. Identifying and describing my creative process by way of these habits of practice sheds light on my approach, method or structure to practice. My methodology has unfolded as the project has developed, which is to say that the direction and method of the research was determined by practice. What follows is a description of the practice that has led this process.

Each new work that I produce begins with the identification of a question, proposition, theme or concept that will be addressed by and through my creative practice. Often led by a speculative 'what if' (for example, *The Narrator* asked 'what if you knew no doubt?), these starting points must be rich, potentially complex, pertinent to my

practice and must trigger associative thinking. At this stage, my intention is not to pose a question that requires an answer or to set a problem that I will conclusively resolve, but this initial framework is intended to set in motion a process through which the ideas, theories and concepts that are central to my research might be put into play and performed by the artworks that I produce.

The idea of putting into play or performing my research through the production and presentation of an artwork is central to my understanding of practice-led research. On the one hand, I am describing the performative nature of thinking through doing, with the doing being a creative practice that incorporates processes such as reading, writing, note-taking, filming, editing, drawing, while simultaneously reflecting on what it is that is being done. In his essay 'Catch Me If You Can: Chances and Challenges of Artistic Research', Mika Hannula introduces the notion of 'good practice,' offering an analogy of the act of sitting on a bus. He writes, "if you want to become good at the act of sitting on a bus, the only way you can develop and get better at it is for you really to sit a lot on a bus."[11] This might involve sitting in different seats, facing different directions, talking to other passengers or to the bus driver. "The essential point", he concludes, "is that this is thinking while doing, while acting. This is thinking and reflecting in and through the practice – a practice that cannot happen without practice – without sitting on a bus."[12] For Hannula, to improve a practice takes practice; it requires a commitment to continue doing whatever activities the practice involves. This act of practicing is a prerequisite for practice-led research, which means continuing to perform the creative processes particular to a practice and engaging with these activities not only because they are modes of production but because notably they are methods of research.

However, alongside recognising the performance of practice as a research activity, I understand the artworks that are created (as a result of practice) to be performative in their own right. The videos, installations and spoken-word performances that I

[11] Mika Hannula, 'Catch me if you can: Chances and Challenges of Artistic Research'. In: Art and Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods, Vol 2, No. 2, Spring 2009, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/hannula1.html> [accessed 23 Nov. 2020] p. 7.
[12] Ibid, p. 7.

produce are not conclusive gestures aimed at resolving an inquiry, neither are they presentational forms in which research might be *held*, but rather, the artworks offer an active space in which research is performed or *put into play* by and through the given form. The premise that an artwork might actively *perform* research is central to Professor Brad Haseman's definition of practice-led research. In his essay 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', Haseman draws on philosopher J.L Austin's (1962) speech act theory to define his notion of performativity, noting the ways that an utterance, by its very enunciation, can generate effects.[13] Using Austin's founding example of a marriage ceremony, Hasemen notes the ways in which the statement "I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)" is not a description of an action, but is in itself a declaration that enacts or performs what it names. If an artwork is considered as such an utterance, Haseman concludes that an artwork "not only express(es) the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself."[14]

Once the subject, theme, concept or question for a new project has been established, I read widely, across disciplines and genres to gather information on my subject. My aim is not, or not only, to acquire new knowledge, but rather this reading and gathering of information is intended to enrich, refine, complicate, perhaps even contradict my initial question. My research is guided by associative thinking. I begin to film, edit, write and take notes without necessarily knowing what the outcome of these activities will be. This immersive approach is open-ended and involves a willingness on my part to simply see where it leads. Ideas will be overcomplicated, information, footage and writing will amass until it overwhelms, there will be multiple edits with varying narratives accompanied by a distinct sense of disorientation. I question my intentions, my chosen methods and approaches, I doubt the reliability of my intuition and the relevance of my inquiry, yet, despite this, I continue. It is at this stage that my inquiry aligns with the notions of 'not-knowing' addressed by Emma Cocker in her essay 'Tactics for Not Knowing: Preparing for the Unexpected'. She writes, "To navigate an uncertain ground requires some skill, due care and attention. Against

[13] Brad C. Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research.' In: Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy, theme issue "Practice-led Research", No. 118, 2006 <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/3999/> [accessed 6 Aug. 2016] p. 102.
[14] Ibid, p. 102.

logic, it is necessary to *know* how to not know."[15] A willingness to linger in this space, despite the lack of comfort, is an essential part of my creative process, not only because it can generate "an encounter with something new or unfamiliar, unrecognizable or unknown,"[16] but that by encountering doubt, uncertainty or 'not-knowing' *through* practice, the hope is that these states of mind will be translated into the artworks that I produce. This desire for a transferal of doubt (from process to work) coincides with Cocker's notion that "within artistic practice, the possibility of producing something new is not always about the conversion of the not known towards new knowledge, but rather involves the aspiration to *retain* something of the unknown within what is produced."[17] The potential for an artwork to "*retain* something of the unknown" is central to my research methodology, but it is not simply a matter of allowing an artwork to remain ambiguous, or to hold uncertainty (although these qualities are certainly present) but rather it is to explore how an experience of doubt (within a process) might go on to inhabit an artwork in such a way so as to potentially be re-experienced by a viewer.

There is a certain stage in my creative process when it is necessary to pause, take stock, to establish some critical distance, readdress my original intention and begin to reflect on the processes undertaken so far. This is more often than not a process of stripping the research back, occasionally disregarding all of the footage that I have shot and filming again with a clear intention. The experience of practice, by which I mean the experience of thinking *through* doing, provides me with a complex and nuanced method of research that unfolds in an unexpected manner. Reflecting on this experience is more often than not a generative tool; it is an activity that is folded back into the resulting artwork. When I say that I take stock, what I mean is that I look back at the activities that I undertook, the encounters that I had, the paths that I strayed down, the ways in which I tried to push the idea into one form or another, the techniques that I used to try and think things through. I assess what I have done and how this compares to what I had been trying to do. This moment of taking stock is

[15] Emma Cocker, 'Tactics for Not Knowing: Preparing for the Unexpected.' In: 'Not Knowing: How Artists Think' (London: Black Dog Publishing) p. 131.
[16] Ibid, p. 129.
[17] Ibid, p. 127.

largely accompanied by a familiar realisation that what the work requires is that I simply tell the truth. An example of this can be found in the production of *April.* As the research progressed it generated an overwhelming and varied selection of video footage, research materials, and writing that pursued overlapping narratives exploring the subject of doubt in relation to second sight. However, it became clear that what the work required was to tell the story, to a certain degree, 'as it happened.' The majority of the video footage that I had shot was set aside, choosing instead to focus on the month spent on the Isle of Lewis. The lived experience of practice, however, is not disregarded, but is woven back into the artwork's final form. By folding the experience of practice back into the work, critical reflection not only influences the resulting artwork but becomes an intrinsic part of its concept and form.

In 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', Haseman's description of the alternative methodologies adopted by performative researchers suggests that practice-led research deviates from more traditional research approaches even at the very early stage of problem setting, noting that what drives the research may not be a solvable problem with associated research questions to be answered but, he writes, it may "be led by what is best described as 'an enthusiasm of practice.'"[18]

> Practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in', to commence practising to see what emerges. They acknowledge that what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic. This is not to say that these researchers work without larger agendas or emancipatory aspirations, but they eschew the constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project.[19]

Hasemen's notion of 'diving in' is an apt description of the creative practice that has led my research, but it is also applicable to my research as a whole. *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* has been driven by doubt. Doubt is embedded within my creative process, written into my methodology, central to the specific subject that each artwork

[18] Brad C. Haseman, op. cit., p. 100.
[19] Ibid, p. 100.

investigates and is pursued as a potential consequence or affect of the fractured forms in the artworks produced. However, the word doubt has also offered resistance to my enquiry. It is a loaded word. Doubt is personal, political, strategical, methodological. It is unsettling. Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce describes it as an itch, an irritation[20], or as scholar Leslie Friedman notes in her essay 'Doubt and Inquiry: Peirce and Descartes Revisited', as a "'state of stimulation' accompanied with a 'peculiar feeling' of uneasiness, distress, pain, which has 'grades of intensity, …varieties of quality.'"[21] Doubt is directed. It points toward the thing in question, designating a relation between knower and object, be this a belief, an argument, a policy or position, another's account, statement or claim to truth or fact or inversely doubt can flip back in and on the self. It is nuanced. It can describe a feeling of uncertainty or lack of conviction, a deliberate suspension of judgment, a lack of confidence or distrust in some one or some thing, after which only a short step is required to reach a loss of belief or the dissolution of faith. There are associations and histories that weave the word through theological, philosophical, political, legal and psychoanalytic thought. It is entangled. However, it is precisely because of the complexity and ambiguity of the term doubt that it holds my interest.

[20] Charles Sanders Peirce, op. cit., p. 10.
[21] Leslie Friedman, op. cit., p. 730.

To Hold

My intention here is to talk about doubt in relation to my research as precisely as possible. By which I don't mean, or only mean, with as precise as possible a definition, of which there are many, but the precision that I am after relates to the type of grasp, hold or grip in which a word might be proffered. (If a word resists a single definition, then what other ways can it be held?) The references that I draw from cross disciplines and historical time frames and as such my aim is not to define doubt itself, but rather to provide a framework or structure that might house a working definition in relation to my research.

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In the first chapter of philosopher Julia Kristeva's book, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, there is a transcript of an interview between Kristeva and her editor, Carmine Donzelli, in which she is asked, "Can one speak of the need to believe from a secular point of view?"[22] Her response acknowledges the complexity of the question by describing the interwoven arguments in philosophy, anthropology and psychoanalysis that position and reposition belief in relation, as well as in opposition, to religious thought and practice. "To believe…", she writes, "This is not the 'I believe' in which I often hear an 'I suppose,' as in the sentence, 'Reading these e-mails, I don't believe he loves me: hearing his voice, I believe he loves me,'"[23] but rather the belief that Kristeva is addressing is that which cannot be logically demonstrated or scientifically proven, one that cannot be calculated. It is a belief more akin to 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal who she quotes, "The mind believes naturally, and the will loves naturally; so that, lacking real objects, they have to cling to false ones"[24] or the belief demonstrated by 18th century writer Voltaire when he writes, "My interest in believing in something is not a proof of this things existence".[25] The belief that Kristeva is addressing is not knowledge. It is not a verifiable truth qualified by indisputable

[22] Julia Kristeva, 'This Incredible Need to Believe' (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009) p. 1.
[23] Ibid, p. 3.
[24] Blaise Pascal quoted in Julia Kristeva, op. cit., p. 3.
[25] Voltaire quoted in Julia Kristeva, op. cit., p. 3.

facts, but neither is it a state of mind unique to religious thought. As Kristeva argues, the speaking being is a believing being, regardless of religious affiliations. Whether agnostic, atheist or belonging to a religion, when she states that she believes, what this philosopher means is, "I hold as true."[26]

There is an impermanence associated with the act of holding, which is to say that if a thing is held onto then it can also be let go of. As an inquiry into doubt, *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* attends to this proposition.

To Doubt

In her book long study, *The Human Condition*, social theorist Hannah Arendt argues that it was with philosopher René Descartes' *de omnibus dubtiandum* (doubt everything) that the philosophy of doubt began. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, whose philosophy was concerned with 'the articulation of wonder,' since the arrival of Descartes, Western philosophy's focus was the "articulations and ramifications of doubting."[27]

Descartes' call to 'doubt everything' did not stop at the limits of human understanding, it was not simply a nod of acknowledgement to the limits of the senses, but it was a doubt that doubts whether such a thing as truth exists at all. Descartes' quest for certainty was a universal pursuit in which no thought or experience escaped scrutiny; everything that contained "even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty" was to be considered a false belief. The sky, the air, the earth, colours, numbers and sounds were reframed as merely the delusions of dreams. "I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things."[28] The spiralling thought experiment was an intellectual pursuit for which a certain amount of self-deception from Descartes was required. "Anything which admits even the slightest doubt I will set aside just *as if* I had found it to be wholly false;

[26] Ibid, p. 3.
[27] Hannah Arendt, op. cit., p. 274.
[28] René Descartes, op. cit., p. 727.

and I will proceed in this way until I recognise something as certain…*I will suppose then,* that everything I see is spurious."[29] (italics added) Doubt for Descartes was not involuntary or instinctual, but it was a method that relied on a wilful and directed suspension of belief.

There is a significant difference between declaring one's opinions as false and actively believing this to be true, between behaving *as if* and believing it to be as such. There are experiences in everyday life for which this practice of self-deception might offer some form of respite. For instance, on leaving the bus I may realise that my red scarf is not around my neck, but neither is it in my bag. The doors close and the bus leaves and I glimpse a flash of red through the window that suggests that my scarf is still scrunched up on the seat where I left it. I may choose not to affirm the proposition *I have left my scarf on the bus* and act instead *as if* this had not happened. An act of wilful disbelief might allow me to pretend, despite all evidence suggesting the opposite, that the scarf is safely at home. What I suspect to be true and what I choose to affirm and believe may temporarily be rearranged for the purposes of erasing the absent scarf from my mind. However, for Descartes, the propositions that he chose to renounce such as the existence of his hands, his senses, the earth and sky were less easily forgotten. These convictions were so deeply entrenched that to withhold assent demanded more than simply an act of will or imagination.

To behave *as if* these things were true required a further step from Descartes, namely the invention of a 'malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning' who had employed all his energies to deceive him. Coupled with the distinct possibility that he may, at any given moment be asleep and merely dreaming that he was awake, his invention of a malign demon leant a logic to the exercise by providing him with a reason *why* he should doubt that which otherwise appeared certain: 1. He was asleep and dreaming or 2. He had been tricked by an evil demon that had falsely led him to believe in an external reality. There is a sense that Descartes was constructing a fiction to house his theory, one that validated his suspicion of reality with plausible reasons as to why things may not really be as they appear, however, as scholar Lesley Friedman

[29] Ibid, p.727.

points out in her essay *Doubt and Inquiry: Peirce and Descartes Revisited,* simply noticing these reasons to doubt or distrust reality was not enough to impel Descartes to shed his convictions entirely. What was needed, argued Friedman, was a strategy of self-deceit that allowed him to turn his will in "completely the opposite direction and deceive" himself by "*pretending* that these opinions are utterly false and imaginary."[30]

Descartes' strategy of self-deceit has an air of the childhood game 'let's pretend' and 'make believe' that nothing is really real that tips the whole inquiry into the territory of the absurd. However, it is this act of self-deception that sparks my interest. Descartes becomes an unreliable guide in the search for a reliable truth, a doubted character who does not doubt that he doubts but neither does he doubt that he doesn't. As an artist and researcher, Descartes' method is appealing *because* it is absurd. *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* is not a research project that seeks to contribute to the field of philosophy, but the knowledge produced by way of this body of research contributes to both practice led research (as a method that incorporates doubt) and artists' moving image (that presents, performs and pursues doubt). Which is to say that although my research engages with the philosophy of doubt, the focus of my inquiry is not to present an argument that sits within this field. This distinction is of note because I would argue that as an artist it may well be my misinterpretations of a theory that produce the most interesting work. That Descartes' appeal is that his sincerity topples his theory into the territory of the absurd is not a dismissal of his findings or a misappropriation of his method but it is an acknowledgement of the various ways in which an artistic practice is shaped and influenced by academic disciplines out with the visual arts.

Descartes' method of self-deceit appealed to me as an artist and researcher because it resonated with my inquiry into both doubt as a critical tool *and* my research into unreliable narration as a method for generating doubt. Another example of this can be found in a series of lectures that I attended in 2014 by artist and writer Jalal Toufic as

[30] Lesley Friedman, 'Doubt & Inquiry: Peirce and Descartes Revisited'. In: Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, vol. 35, fall 1999, pp. 724 - 746 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40320795> [Accessed 7 July 2019] p. 726.

part of arts organisation Ashkal Alwan's *Home Workspace Program* in Beirut. Each lecture combined fiction, critical theory and local history to explore the title's theme *Creating and Dispersing Universes*. As the series of lectures progressed, the overlapping strands of Toufic's research became entangled making it unclear which parts of the presentation were drawn from fiction and which parts were fact or opinion. In the fifth lecture titled *Creating and Dispersing Universes that Include Ruins*, Toufic referenced mythical narratives of the undead to consider notions of haunting and unsettled histories in relation to the remaining ruins of the Lebanese civil war. As poetic or analogical references, the imagery used was apt. The haunting return of the undead allowed for an insightful critique of the construction of a singular chronological history. However, what is of note to this discussion is that Toufic was not presenting fiction as a method of reimagining or reframing the 'real' but rather he was insisting on the reality of his fictions (vampires *are* real). By presenting myth, fiction and belief as objective truth, the lectures had a surreal, albeit slightly contentious quality that appeared to permit contradictory statements. This approach to fact and fantasy did not go unchallenged by the audience, but any questions or counterarguments that could not be logically resolved were either dismissed, ignored or perhaps just accepted by Toufic. In a manner akin to Descartes' self-deceptive *as if*, the success of the lectures depended on a suspension of disbelief not only from the audience, but from Toufic himself. What was (and is still) of interest about these lectures was that by presenting the unverifiable *as* fact Toufic did not appear to be arguing for an alternative shared reality in which the undead do continue to haunt the living, but rather he was methodically constructing a fiction in which his theory could be housed, or in reference to his title, he was *creating and dispersing* an imagined universe in which his logic held true.

He doubts, therefore he is

In conclusion to his experiment, what Descartes found was that he could systematically demolish all of his convictions bar one. A single certainty upon which he argued all true knowledge could be based: *Cogito Ergo Sum* – I think, therefore I am. This conclusive revelation claimed that the character 'I', who perceives, feels, thinks

and doubts is a certain and incontestable fact. In the third Meditation, Descartes listed what being a thinking thing entailed: "I am a thing that thinks," he wrote, "that is to say, that doubts, affirms, denies …, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives."[31] Whether awake or in the midst of a dream, Descartes concluded that it was still he who was thinking, doubting, affirming or dreaming. Even if his perceptions did not correspond to a real thing in the world, they were still his perceptions. Whatever may be the state of reality and of truth as they are given to the senses and reason, Descartes concluded that "nobody can doubt of his doubt and remain uncertain whether he doubts or does not doubt."[32] If nothing else held true, doubt for Descartes was a certainty. He doubts, therefore he is.

The philosophical argument against Descartes' method of doubt is that his instructive call to doubt *everything*, without discrimination, failed to doubt the very essence of his experiment, in other words what he failed to doubt was doubt itself. His unwavering belief in the logic of his approach appeared to blind him from the compromising fact that his method was based on his faith in doubt. In his book *On Doubt*, Philosopher Vilém Flusser argues that by maintaining an authentic faith in doubt, Descartes failed to follow the Cartesian thought experiment to its logical end. If everything *had* been doubted, including doubt itself, the final truth would not have been the indubitable existence of the reflexive self, argues Flusser, but Descartes would have ultimately reached an intellectual impasse, an irresolvable encounter with nihilism.

Flusser's argument builds on his belief that doubt is inseparable from thought and thought is inseparable from doubt; the two are synonymous and as such there is no object of doubt out with thought itself.

> Doubt, that means thought, is therefore an absurd process. It doubts in order to cease to doubt, and as it advances, it transforms the dubious, (that are its objects), into the doubtless, (which is doubt itself). Doubt is therefore doubly absurd: it is absurd, because the aim of thought is self-destruction; and it is

[31] René Descartes quoted in Jennifer Michael Hecht, 'Doubt: A History' (New York, Harper One, 2003) p. 317.
[32] René Descartes in Hannah Arendt, op. cit., p. 279.

> absurd because thought tries to reach this absurd aim by transforming everything into doubt.[33]

According to Flusser's logic, if doubt is synonymous with thought, then anything that is doubtful is transformed into thought, which means that it is transformed into doubt, which Cartesian thought claims to be undoubtable. To define doubt would therefore be to transform it into thought, which transforms it into doubt (which is undoubtable) in order to find a definition that would (by definition) end all doubt. The riddling logic of Flusser's argument concludes that, "the definition of the doubtful, though absurd, is the aim of thought," adding that:

> (...) in fact it is the ultimate aim of the process of thought in its entirety. Should thought ever reach that aim, should it ever define the doubtful, this would mean the end of the doubtful, but also the end of thought, which would have nothing left to doubt, and therefore nothing to think about."[34]

This is the intellectual dead-end to which radical doubt would ultimately lead, it is an impossible mental state to maintain. It is the theoretical side of radical doubt that, Flusser argues, 'could be thought, but not existentially lived.' I may theoretically doubt that I am, and I may also theoretically doubt that I doubt that I am, but neither statement holds true without the intellectual frame of theory to support it. It cannot be translated to the level of lived experience. If one was to pursue Descartes' method of doubt through to its logical end and doubt *doubt* itself, the systematic argument would implode. To live a life of radical doubt would be to doubt the intellect itself, which for Descartes was the final refuge that housed the possibility of truth.

[33] Vilém Flusser, 'Thought and Reflection' In: Flusser Studies 1. <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/thought-reflection01.pdf> [Accessed 21 July 2021] p. 4.
[34] Ibid, p. 4.

On Certainty

The opening line of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* reads, "If you do know that *here is one hand,* we'll grant you all the rest."[35] The hand in question belonged to philosopher G. E. Moore whose anti-scepticism and anti-idealistic argument of 1939 involved his holding up a hand in order to prove the existence of an external world. Simply put, Moore argued that if we all agree to know that here is a hand (we can all see it, touch it) then we can all agree that we know there is an external world. Published as a series of numbered points, Wittgenstein's response (that appears as number 2 in a list of 676 entries) gently tips Moore's proposition on its head. He writes, "For its *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so."[36] *On Certainty* is a serious text that argues both for and against common sense, following the reasoning of an anti-relativist and relativist position simultaneously. These positions weave into one another's logic resulting in an absurd and fractured text that has doubt at its core. After tipping Moore's proposition on its head with his counter argument, "For its *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so" he writes, "What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it."[37]

The question posed by Wittgenstein as to whether it makes sense to doubt what appears to be certain, which in this case is a hand held in the air, could quite easily be laid to rest. The hand was unquestionably there, the men and women in the auditorium saw it, and although it is conceivable (not impossible) that what they saw was not in fact a hand, there seems little reason to doubt what is right before your eyes. Wittgenstein's point is that just because we *do not* doubt it does not mean that we *could* not. What is at stake is not whether or not Moore's hand is certainly there but what Wittgenstein's text asks is what does it mean when we say we are certain?

[35] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'On Certainty' (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969) p. 1.
[36] Ibid, p. 1.
[37] Ibid, p. 1.

In his essay 'No Doubt About It', philosopher Ronald Hall describes Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* as an investigation of the logic of certainty.[38] In contrast to the Cartesian logic of certainty that focuses on discovering and establishing indisputable truths, Hall draws attention to the logic of the ordinary. The word *certain* is used quite differently in everyday speech and language when compared to the ways that it is used in philosophical discourse. Ordinarily, one would not say 'I am certain' of this or of that unless it was also possible to say of the same thing, 'I am not certain' or 'I doubt.' Hall argues that to say that I am certain only makes sense if certainty is not a given, in other words, without the possibility of doubt the question "are you certain?" would merely be a grammatical filler. The two terms rely on one another for their intended meaning to make sense: if there is no possibility of doubt then there is no need for the concept of certainty to do its work.

To say 'I am certain' therefore requires a possibility of doubt, but as Wittgenstein has observed, in everyday speech certainty is not necessarily a declaration that we make but is an insinuation in what we say. Wittgenstein thinks that the way that we talk *shows* that we are certain about many things and that collectively we believe in the world in which we live. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes, "My life shows that I know or am certain that there is chair over there, or a door, and so on. – I tell a friend e.g., 'take that chair over there,' 'shut the door,' etc."[39] What Wittgenstein is demonstrating is that the language used in everyday life does not *state* a belief in that chair but *shows* such a belief is held. In other words, to ask someone to 'move that chair over there' would be an absurd request if you doubted the fact that there was a chair there that could be moved. But although the request to move the chair shows that there is no doubt as to whether or not there is in fact a chair there, it does not show that a doubt could not be raised. What *On Certainty* reiterates over and over again is that everyday speech *holds* things as certain, despite the possibility of there being an error, perhaps even because of it.

[38] Ronald L. Hall, 'No Doubt About It: Revisiting Wittgenstein's Concept Of Certainty'. In: The Philosophical Forum, Volume 51, Issue 3, 2020. Published by Wiley Periodicals LLC. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12266> [Accessed 1st February 2021] p. 281.
[39] Ludwig Wittgenstein, op. cit., p. 5.

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen does not challenge the notion of a shared, objective reality. It is not necessary that I doubt whether or not there is a window behind me despite being unable to see it from where I sit. I am willing to believe that the window is there and hold that idea as true. However, what is of interest to me is the act of holding in and of itself. Whether encountered through choice or happenstance, an experience of doubt can not only loosen this hold's grip causing the certain to be less so, but doubt can also be the catalyst that draws attention to the status of 'hold' in 'hold true'.

An example of this can be found in the ethnographic documentary *Land Before Bread* directed by Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Released in 1932 during the era of surrealism, *Land Before Bread* is a documentary portrait of the region of Les Hurdes, a remote, mountainous region of Spain where a small community live in what seems to be impoverished conditions. Shot in black and white, the twenty-seven minute film is narrated in voice over by a flat, judgemental male voice who describes the harsh existence of the people depicted in the film. "Though the Spaniards as a race are naturally given to song," states the narrator, "never once did we hear anyone singing in these dreary streets."[40] The film script is far from neutral, however, despite this, the authoritative tone of the narrator initially maintains its rhetorical weight telling the viewer what to believe, and because what is seen coincides with what is said, the image seems to provide proof of the film's argument. However, as the film proceeds the voice-over gradually peels apart from the image and the narrator's description begins to contradict what is being portrayed on screen. For example, the well-groomed children seen on their way to school are misdescribed as 'uncombed kids.' These inconsistencies are notable but because they blend so seamlessly into the narrator's script it remains unclear whether it is to be understood as irony or a case of misreporting. As film historian Jeffrey Ruoff notes in his essay 'An Ethnographic Surrealist film: Luis Buñuel's *Land Before Bread'*, "Bit by bit, the voice over strains our credibility to breaking point. While the commentator initially serves as our surrogate guide for this tour of Las Hurdes, *Land Before Bread* eventually undermines our

[40] Luis Buñuel, 'Land Without Bread', 1932, black and white film with sound, 27 minutes.

confidence in him."[41] What this lapse in confidence does is open up the possibility that *Land Before Bread* is not the straight-forward ethnographic documentary that it first appeared to be.

But if *Land Before Bread* is not a straight-forward ethnographic documentary then what is it? This is the question that sits at the heart of the work and part of the success of *Land Before Bread* is that it prompts a viewer to ask it. As Ruoff notes, *Land Before Bread,* "sows the seeds of its own destruction," offering what he describes as, "an open space of an engaged critical viewer."[42] It is by causing a viewer to doubt the documentary's unspoken claim on truth that the film begins to fall apart opening up the possibility that rather than being a straight-forward ethnographic documentary *Land Without Bread* may be a critique of the conventions central to its form. By challenging the validity of documentary film as historical representation by blurring fact and fiction, recording and interpretation, *Land Without Bread* capitalises on doubt as a method of generating criticality. The 'hold' on representational truth that is associated with documentary film is subtly revealed to be just that: a hold, one that structures the ways in which we see and interpret such imagery.

What interests me about Buñuel's method is that despite prompting a viewer to doubt the status of *Land Without Bread* as documentary, he does not offer a resolution. *Land Without Bread* may be read as a parody that seeks to critique documentary representation but it may also be taken at face value as a scathing documentary that contains errors. Regardless of the position that its viewer assumes, by raising doubts as to its integrity *Land Without Bread* compels criticality. However, it is not simply a matter of resolving the matter with a yes or a no that might click things back into place and put an end to all doubt, as in 'I thought it was a documentary but now I know it is not,' but rather it is an extended process of disorientation and reorientation, in which one loses one way of seeing things and struggles to find another.

[41] Jeffrey Ruoff, 'An Ethnographic Surrealist film: Luis Buñuel's 'Land Without Bread'. In: Visual Anthropology Review, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring-Summer 1998 <https://www.academia.edu/5318363/An_Ethnographic_Surrealist_Film_Luis_Buñuels_Land_Without_Bread > [Accessed 1 August 2021] p. 50.
[42] Ibid, p. 53

This process, or struggle, of doubt is described by writer and film maker, Chris Kraus in her auto-fiction novel, *Aliens and Anorexia* as an experience of groundlessness; a moment when the 'things' that are held as true begin to fall apart. "So yes," she writes, "by that time things were adding up to one of those moments where you can no longer count on any of the mythologies you've believed in and you don't have any new ones to replace them. Things don't come out. They fall apart."[43] The etymological root of the term 'doubt' is 'duo', suggesting a divide or a split that led to the phrase 'to be of two minds.' And yet the experience of doubt that Kraus casually describes as 'one of those moments' is not one of indecision – she is not caught between two competing certainties, a predicament that could be settled by choosing one over and another. They are 'mythologies', a word chosen by the author that suggests that she believes that her beliefs may well be fictions. Just as *Land Without Bread* employs doubt to challenge the 'hold' on truth associated with documentary film, by naming her beliefs 'mythologies', what Kraus appears to be suggesting is that what belief 'holds as true' is just one version of any story. However, regardless of the status of belief, whether it is considered a fictional truth or The Truth, when a belief no longer holds true, a search commences for 'new ones to replace them.'

Kraus' choice of the phrase, 'one of those moments' is quite telling here. It is a casual, almost throwaway phrase that insinuates that the reader knows exactly what 'one of those moments' is and feels like. Like a form of camaraderie, Kraus' prose suggests that there is common ground, a shared sensibility between the reader and writer; a rhetorical quality that casually inquires, 'do you know what I mean?' The phrase 'one of those moments' suggests that a personal encounter with doubt in which things 'fall apart' is an experience that her reader can most likely relate to. While philosophy largely treats doubt as a merely cognitive matter, the appeal of Kraus' writing is that focuses on the way that doubt can commonly make one *feel.* Unlike cognitive doubt, where one enlists doubt at will as a form of rational inquiry, the experience of doubt that Kraus describes as 'one of those moments' addresses living doubt; the type of doubt that one feels, that is impossible to dismiss or ignore.

[43] Chris Kraus, 'Aliens and Anorexia' (California: Semiotext(e): 2000) p. 110.

Wittgenstein refers to this type of doubt as 'involuntary doubt', pointing toward the affective, psychological experience of a particular situation. Unlike Descartes, who voluntarily enlisted doubt as a method of inquiry, Wittgenstein regarded doubt as a secondary position, a form of thinking that comes after belief; it is an encounter with doubt that is not engineered at will. "Just try," challenged Wittgenstein, "in a real case, to doubt someone else's fear or pain."[44] This sentiment is shared by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce whose critique of Cartesian doubt challenged Descartes' belief that his inquiry should begin with complete doubt, arguing that such a method would be nothing more than 'mere self-deception, and not real doubt'.[45] Instead, Peirce argued, "We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have … Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts."[46] What both Peirce and Wittgenstein agree on is that although doubt can be a critical tool that is voluntarily enlisted as a method of inquiry, there is a certain amount of pretence or self-deceit to this approach that distinguishes it from living doubt: the doubt that we feel in our hearts, in our guts. Living doubt, or 'involuntary' doubt is not understood by either philosopher as merely a cognitive matter but is aligned with structures of feeling as a form of embodied knowledge.

Kraus' need for a new mythology to replace that which no longer holds true is an example of such an encounter with doubt, one that connotes an active state of mind. A characteristic trait of doubt is that it cannot be at rest and it is here that I would argue doubt differs from the connected term 'uncertainty'. Doubt is unstable in the sense that it pushes for a resolution. Although doubt gives rise to uncertainty, and uncertainty can lead one to doubt, doubt is an uncomfortable, if not impossible state to maintain. Doubt is described by Peirce as, "an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief (…) With the doubt, therefore, the struggle begins, and with the cessation of doubt it ends."[47]

[44] Ludwig Wittgenstein, op. cit., p. 303.
[45] Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Philosophical Writings of Peirce' (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 256.
[46] Ibid, p. 229.
[47] Ibid, p. 229.

Chapter 1: April

You are invited to watch the film *April.*

https://vimeo.com/258643793

Password: April

April

April is a 21minute single screen video with audio that was produced in the first five months of my PhD. As a practice led researcher, it was of paramount importance that *What is Seen, What is Said* was led by 'practice,' with the intention being that the development, production and eventual analysis of *April* would be generative, informing and influencing the direction that my research subsequently took.

This chapter opens with a brief introduction into second sight, a prophetic phenomenon particular to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. This subject was key to the concept, form and content of *April,* to which I was bringing questions central to my research that consider appearance, perception, doubt and belief. The film's narrative, however, does not address the subject of second sight directly but considers, and through its cyclical structure performs, the sensation of being uncertain of whether what you are seeing and hearing is what was previously seen or heard. Following the introduction to second sight, there is a detailed description of *April* that describes the artwork without analysis. This detailed account acts as a point of reference to reflect on the themes and methods in *April* in relation to my investigation into the subject of doubt.

April performs a looping structure that folds the narrative that it tells back in on itself. Its form is repetitious, both visually and structurally, using a limited palette of imagery and sound. The work is set and filmed on the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles of Scotland, and it is this island's landscape that is seen for the majority of the film. Voiced by a Scottish woman, the film's text tells a story that shifts from one female character's perspective to another, following the journey of an unseen but verbally described photograph. There are moments within the spoken text where the narrator slips, shifting from 'her' to 'I' midsentence, blurring, merging or conflating her own identity with the women whose story she is telling. These are subtle, slight spoken slips. There is a doubling at play, or there is a play on the double seen in the images that repeat, the story that restarts and in the characters who at certain moments fall

silent, startled by the synchronism of their shared gestures. There are tensions present in *April* that seek to destabilise the ordinary boundaries between inside and outside, illusion and reality that link the work to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's concept of 'the uncanny'. The video evokes uncanny themes and methods of doubling, repetition and mirroring, as well as the presence of the strange or unfamiliar within the home.

In *April,* not all of these elements are resolved and are therefore difficult to analyse with complete conviction. However, by focusing on this specific piece of work my intention is not to demonstrate or qualify its success but rather to push myself back into those places that I find difficult and to read the work from this position.

Second Sight

> The Second Sight is a singular faculty of seeing an otherwise invisible object, without any previous means used by the person that sees it for that end; the vision makes such a lively impression on the Seers, that they neither see nor think of anything else, except the vision, as long as it continues: and then they appear pensive or jovial, according to the object which was represented to them.[48]
>
> An impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived, and seen as if they are present.[49]

Commonly known in English as second sight, *An da shealladh* literally translates from Gaelic as 'the two sights': the first being the objective, or everyday vision of the 'world of sense', ordinarily possessed by all, the second an extra-sensory vision, whereby certain individuals see and perceive future or distant events. These events are traditionally understood to be entirely independent of both the person whose semblance they bear and to the person, or *seer*, perceiving it.

The English term 'second sight' is on record from the seventeenth century, a time when there were mythological characters of note, such as the infamous Brahan Seer who predicted numerous events significant to Scottish history, including the Highland Clearances ('The sheep shall eat the men')[50] or the North Sea oil ('A black rain will bring riches to Aberdeen')[51]. However, the characters and narratives that hold my interest were those known to my mother: domestic seers from her village who saw

[48] Hilda Ellis Davidson, 'The Seer in Celtic and Other Traditions' (John Donald Publishers LTD: Edinburgh, 1989) p. 13.
[49] Ibid, p. 1.
[50] Ben Johnson, 'The Brahan Seer: The Scottish Nostradamus'. In: Historic UK <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Brahan-Seer-the-Scottish-Nostradamus/> [accessed 19 January 2020] para 13.
[51] Ibid. para 9.

events that affected her immediate reality such as the future death of a friend, or the specific croft where an abandoned baby would later be found. This juxtaposition, that held my imagination as a child, where the weird and eerie is spliced almost imperceptibly into the everyday and domestic is a recurring trope or technique, utilized in *April,* present in my wider practice and of significance to my doctoral project.

There are several reasons why I was drawn to the subject of second sight as a focus for *April*. As an artist and filmmaker, the conceptual draw of a subject with such an explicit relationship to film, as a mode of seeing immaterial things *as if they are present* was significant, as was the narrative structure inherent to prophetic sight that unsettles conventional notions of linear time. Both qualities have the potential to disrupt or destabilize a narrative and I was keen to carry this into the work. However, the personal significance of this subject as stories told to me by my mother was also an influence and is of importance to the conceptual development and content of the resulting work that sees a story pass from one woman to another.

April: The Description

LOOP 1

April opens with a view of the sea, out of focus and accompanied by the opening bars of Baccara's 1977 hit *Yes Sir, I can Boogie,* an upbeat disco track that combines strings, bass, synths and a melodic, breathy female vocal. Seagulls swoop and the sea stretches out to meet the horizon that is luminous against a grey-blue sky. The camera is hand-held, it rises and dips as it attempts to hold the horizon line in place and the scene that is slightly over exposed is never quite brought into focus. As the music progresses, the strings, bass and melodic female vocal build toward the lyrics, propelled by the track's driving beat but the music is stopped short by an abrupt jump-cut. The long shot of the sea is replaced by a close up of a small green plant seen amongst rocks and dark red seaweed through the surface of a loch. This is followed by four tightly framed views of reeds, plants and pond-life. In contrast to the sea, these images are tonally rich and unlike previously, where the movements, gestures and focus of the handheld camera signalled an attempt to hold still, they now suggest an explorative gaze. There is no sound other than the background hum of recorded silence, and an intermittent click (taken from a digital clock ticking) that punctuates selected cuts.

The short silent sequence of the loch and its pond-life ends and is replaced by an interior shot. It is a bright yellow flower in bloom that fills the frame. The camera moves around its edge, revealing a desk, a chair, the edge of a mug before it cuts, looping back to its beginning and repeating the short clip. Spoken by a Scottish woman, the voice-over narration begins with an 'unremarkable' photograph that is 'slid across the table in an unmarked envelope from a woman insisting that it was mine.' The photograph is described by the narrator as a standard sized print, black and white showing a sofa, two cushions, the edge of a plant, however, despite the reappearance of the image throughout the film, it is notably never seen within the film, only verbally described.

Another click and the image is the landscape: a dark rock slick with water in the grass, tightly framed and seen through the lens of a roaming camera across three or four cuts before returning to the sea, out of focus, as seen at the start of the film. Other than the audible click that punctuates the edit, the soundtrack is silent until the voice-over narration recommences. It is at this point that the spoken story appears to begin. The narrator provides the time of year (April), the duration (one month) and the setting (an island on the west coast of Scotland), before letting the audience know that she is alone in a house that is being renovated. A scene is being set. The narrator tells us that the house is remote, isolated at the end of a dirt track road, in a small village, it is tucked away in a cove, and with 'no car, no mobile reception and no WiFi', she has none of the devices required for communication with the outside world.

A woman mysteriously appears in the narrator's kitchen, slightly behind her, just over her right shoulder, wearing 'blue jeans, white trainers and a dark purple Gore-Tex coat.' Although the visitor claims that the door was open, the lights were on and that she had knocked, the narrator's description hints at the sinister: 'I hadn't heard her come in,' she tells us, 'and I hadn't seen her walk past.' Visually, the images accompanying this encounter combine the repeated sequence of the loch's pond-life with a new image of a reed blowing in the wind. The camera travels up the stem and holds the image. The scene ends with a view from a window of snow falling over the landscape. The image cuts back to the exterior landscape. The falling snow viewed from the window is replaced by an image of a grey rock covered in long grass. After a pause the voice-over continues, offering no explanation as to who the woman was or how long she stayed. The images pan along telephone wires lined with starlings, the camera follows a bird of prey until it leaves the frame, the repeated views of black rocks are seen again, slick with rain. The introduction of these new images, followed by a repetition of those previously seen, adds no content of significance to the unfolding narrative. At some points, the images appear not to matter. Structurally they perform repetition, a cyclical pattern that is echoed in the narrator's daily routine. *Most days* she would walk, *usually* she would turn around halfway. It was after one of these walks that the woman appeared a second time:

> I was sitting at the table, untying my boots when again something flickered in my peripheral vision. I didn't hear her come in and I didn't see her walk past. But slightly behind me, just over my right shoulder was the woman, in black jeans, white trainers and the same dark purple Gore-Tex coat.

The verbal description of this scene is close, but not identical, to the original encounter with the woman. The narrator provides details that were previously absent or that have been altered slightly in this version of events. Small details have changed: the woman's jeans are no longer black, but blue. The scene is almost, just not quite, the same. The image returns to the interior reveal shot of the flower in bloom that fills the frame. The camera performs the same loop, revealing the desk, the chair, the edge of a cup before looping back to its beginning and cutting to black. The narrator tells us that the woman was holding an envelope that she slid across the table towards her, a detail that, along with the image, echoes the beginning of the film. She opens it and tips out its contents to find a photograph: *'*a single print, standard sized, black and white. A completely unremarkable image; a sofa, two cushions, the edge of a plant.' The image cuts to black.

LOOP 2

The film appears to restart. The same view of the sea is accompanied by the same music. It is the same audible click and abrupt cut to the four tightly framed views of plant life moving in the loch. As before, there is a click and the image returns to the flower in bloom that fills the frame. The camera circles, revealing the desk, the chair, the edge of the cup before it loops back to its beginning. It is a complete echo of the start of the film that is also present in the narration, 'It all started with a photograph that was slid across the table in an unmarked envelope from a woman insisting that it was hers.'

There are slight but notable changes in the narration. The narrator has shifted from first person to third and rather than telling her own story, she is recounting the tale told to her by the woman in the Gore-Tex coat. In this version, the same

‘unremarkable’ photograph is slid across the table, featuring the same ‘sofa, two cushions, the edge of a plant,’ only this time it is not ‘I’ but ‘she’ that received the photograph from a woman called K who ‘lived alone in a house at the edge of the village.’ The description of K’s village is identical to the village that ‘I’ inhabited, however, in this second version of the story details are lost causing sentences to end abruptly.

LOOP 1:

> The house looked out over a small loch that sat inland just before the sea, separated from what appeared from the window to be a slip of grass but was actually far wider. From the loch there was a path that led to the cliffs that I would take most days. It disappeared at the top of the hill, but the cliffs could still be followed all of the way to the next village, although usually I would turn around half way.

LOOP 2:

> The house looked out over a small loch …
>
> … just before the sea.
>
> From the loch there was a path that led to the cliffs that she would take most days.
>
> It disappeared at the top of the hill.

There is a marked shift in the images at this point. They change from exterior views of the landscape, to a series of interior views, looking out at the landscape through a window. The first of these is a durational shot of a boat travelling across the horizon line. The introduction of these new images is accompanied by a new character, S, an old friend who K bumps into during a walk along the cliffs. The two women spend an

afternoon together in K's house, reminiscing and catching up. The narrative repetition and filmic loops are seemingly embodied by the two women who mirror one another's movements: 'To their surprise they still shared certain gestures, certain turns of phrase, however at moments their synchronism was startling, and the two women would fall silent.' The second loop ends with S leaving the island and the two women agreeing to keep in touch.

LOOP 3

The image cuts back to the same view of the sea, out of focus and accompanied by the opening bars of Baccara's 1977 disco hit *Yes Sir, I can Boogie.* The edit is far shorter, the image and music are stopped almost immediately. The narrative repeats the encounter on the cliffs between K and S and the image returns to the same durational shot of a boat travelling across the horizon line. There is no indication as to how much time has passed since the two women last met, however, the repeated act of walking along the cliffs, a routine each woman adopts, operates like a further fold in the narrative that interrupts the story's relationship to linear time. Again, the two women return to K's house, where they spend an afternoon reminiscing and catching up. The duration and sequential order of images here is identical, however, the level of detail in the description provided by the voice-over has diminished further. The third loop ends with K sliding an envelope across the table toward her friend and telling her a story about 'a woman who came to the island.'

LOOP 4

Cut to the same view of the sea, out of focus and accompanied by the opening bars of Baccara's 1977 disco hit *Yes Sir, I can Boogie.* As in loop 3, the image and music are stopped almost immediately. The film jumps back to the initial sequence of images as seen in loop 1 and 2. It is the same four tightly framed views of plant life moving in the loch with selected cuts accentuated by an audible click. As before, the image returns to the flower in bloom that fills the frame. The camera circles, revealing the desk, the chair, the edge of the cup. The voice-over narration brings the story back to the very

start: ‘It was April, and she was spending a month on an island…’ In the original version of the story (loop 1), the narrator presented this sequence of events in the first person, as a personal experience. In the second loop ‘I’ has been replaced by ‘she’ and the narrator talks about these characters in the third person, from an extradiegetic position. The third loop removes the character ‘she’ completely describing the interactions between K and S from a distance. In the final iteration of the story, the narrator appears to be lending her voice to S, who is now narrating a story to K.

Unlike the previous loops that maintained the pace and rhythm of the imagery, this final version disrupts the visual sequence. For example, the familiar ‘reveal shot’ that circles the plant is now interrupted with images taken from other established sequences. The dark rocks, slick with rain break momentarily into the circling movement of the flower in bloom. The black screen, or absent image punctuates the edit. Coupled with a vast reduction in the information provided by the voice-over, the film appears to stutter. Sentences awkwardly stop short. The narrator describes the village and house with the minimal amount of detail required for a viewer to identify the repetition at play, and therefore perceive the deterioration of the original script. Similarly, the images continue to break the sequential order and rhythm that has been established throughout the film.

After these details, the anticipated flicker in ‘her’ peripheral vision occurs and a woman, wearing blue jeans, white trainers and a dark purple Gore-Tex coat appears. The narration that follows flips back to first person: ‘The chair *I* was sitting at scraped, all high pitched, against the stone floor and was pressing into the back of *my* knees.’ Before immediately returning to third: ‘*She* had to balance *her* weight against the table. Neither of them moved.’

The film cuts to black before returning to the same view of the sea, out of focus and accompanied by the opening bars of *Yes Sir, I can Boogie.* Unlike in the previous loops, the music continues beyond the introductory bars. This release from the loop is accentuated by the introduction of previously unseen footage of the landscape that is edited rhythmically along to the music.

Mister, your eyes are full of hesitation.
Which makes me wonder
If you know what you're looking for
Baby, I wanna keep my reputation
I'm a sensation, you try me once you'll beg for more

Yes sir, I can boogie but I need a certain song
I can boogie, boogie boogie all night long
Yes sir, I can boogie
If you stay you can't go wrong
I can boogie, boogie boogie all night long

No sir, I don't feel very much like talking
No neither walking, you wanna know if I can dance
Yes sir, already told you in the first verse
And in the chorus, but I will give you once more chance

Yes sir, I can boogie but I need a certain song
I can boogie, boogie boogie, all night long
Yes sir, I can boogie if you stay you can't go wrong.
I can boogie, boogie boogie, all night long

The music stops abruptly and cuts to black.

The Uncanny and *April*

The introduction to Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003) opens with a description that weaves its way in and around the sources and sensations associated with the term from which his book takes its title. "The uncanny," he writes:

> ... entails another way of thinking about the beginning; the beginning is already haunted. The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny invokes feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced...[52]

This description continues over the first two pages of his book, touching on the familiar tropes of home, déjà vu, dismembered limbs, dolls, death, identities lost or blurred beyond their limits. It is an evocative text that despite failing to pin down a definition delivers a sense of what the uncanny might be or feel like. Paradoxically, it is often through this very lack of definition that the uncanny is theorized and understood. "A question of a concept", suggests French theorist Hélène Cixous in her reading of the uncanny, "whose entire denotation is a connotation."[53]

The theoretical concept of the uncanny that Royle draws from comes from psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's article of the same name first published in 1919. In the opening paragraphs of this essay, Freud places the uncanny within the field of aesthetics claiming it as an unexplored concept that relates to the theory of the qualities of feeling. Aesthetics, he argues, is ordinarily concerned with feelings of a positive kind, 'feelings for the beautiful, the grandiose and the attractive'[54], and not with those emotions we associate with the uncanny, such as 'repulsion and dread.'[55] These less positive emotions belong to the realm of the frightening, to a sense of

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[52] Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.
[53] Hélène Cixous, op. cit., *p. 527.*
[54] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', trans by Alex Strachey. In: On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion, ed by Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) p. 123.
[55] Ibid, p. 123.

unease, however, what is frightening or unsettling is not automatically uncanny. There is something else at play and it is this ambiguous *thing* that Freud's text attempts to ensnare.

Freud begins by exploring the linguistic roots of the German term *unheimlich*, which if translated literally, means *unhomely*. It is the standard negation of *heimlich* and so logically should remain as opposite, however, as Freud demonstrates this is not strictly the case. Through a lengthy linguistic discussion *heimlich* is revealed as holding two oppositional meanings; it can mean homely, comfortable, warm and intimate or it can mean secretive, treacherous, magical, or occult. This repetition, or folding back of the word into its opposite opens a new space of shared meaning, in which the unfamiliar, strange and concealed merges with the known, comfortable and intimate. For Freud, this haunting of one term within another, "says something quite new – something we certainly did not expect – about the meaning of *unheimlich*, namely that the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich)* applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open."[56] The uncanny, Freud concludes, is something well known and deliberately forgotten, a phenomenon rooted in the repressed. This proclamation, however, is regarded by Cixous as precisely the moment of revelation: where all that *should* have remained hidden has come out into the open, that the text insinuates a lack of modesty, a sexual threat:

> But it had always been there latently, in the coupling itself and in the proliferation of the Heimliche and of the Unheimliche; when one makes contact with the other, it closes again and closes the history of meaning upon itself…[57]

The threads, she writes, have been pulled and Freud continues on his way, tracing the uncanny back to the dread of castration, locating the source of the familiar in the repressed memory of the mother's body, the womb and tomb, the beginning and end. Although central to Freud's understanding of the uncanny, these gendered details sink

[56] Ibid, p. 123.
[57] Hélène Cixous, op. cit., p. 530.

below the surface of the text as it continues to unfold and Freud follows another thread of thought:

> Just as the reader thinks he is following some demonstration, he senses that the surface is cracking: the text slides a few roots under the ground while it allows others to be lifted in the air.[58]

In the quote above, the evocative image of an ideology submerged, suggested by Cixous as the roots that sit below the text, is precisely the point at which my own hesitation with the uncanny as frame or reference within my own practice and research begins. Yet despite this, within both *April* and my wider creative practice, I continuously borrow from the conceptual imagery of the uncanny, exploiting the perceptual instability that it can give rise to. I employ themes and methods of doubling, repetition, mirroring. A sense of déjà vu is sought in narratives that loop, fold back or fragment in the work that I produce. The distinct positions of subject and object are often blurred or dismantled. For example, the destabilizing effect that an uncanny experience can have on the borders of identity is thematically explored in *April,* triggered by details such as the narrator's momentary slips that substitute her 'I' for 'you'. As a concept, the themes and affects of the uncanny underpin a large majority of the work that I produce, and yet I hesitate to address the concept of the uncanny as a tool or reference within my work.

However, it is this hesitation that led me to include the concept of the uncanny in my analysis of *April. What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* positions doubt not only as the subject of my inquiry, but as a methodology in its own right, therefore rather than cast aside the concept of the uncanny due to my ambivalence in an attempt to marginalise doubt, I have chosen to address the concept of the uncanny *because* of my hesitation. Doubt is described by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce as "an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief."[59] He has described it as an itch or irritation; an uncomfortable state that

[58] Hélène Cixous, op. cit., p. 526.
[59] Charles Sanders Peirce, op. cit., p. 10.

precedes belief, after which the struggle will end. My research considers what happens, or could happen, in this moment of feeling unmoored.

My hesitation to address the concept of the uncanny can be linked to some of the themes explored in theorist Alexandra Kokoli's recent book *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice,* in which she writes "the feminine is woven through the psychoanalytic uncanny from its inception."[60] This is apparent not only in the gendered associations traditionally aligned with notions of the home and the domestic, but also in Freud's reductive insistence on the castration complex as the conclusive root or cause of the uncanny. "For Freud," writes Kokoli, "it was not just femininity that was a dark continent; rather it was darkness, the unknown, the unrepresentable that were feminine."[61] In the simplest terms, Kokoli's extensive study seeks to build on "a distinctly feminist exploitation of the already established links between 'woman' and the unhomely 'strangeness'"[62] associated with the uncanny. However, as she demonstrates in her book, despite being inarguably established these links are often sidestepped, muted or ignored in the concept's multiple appropriations and interpretations across a range of disciplines.

In the introduction to this chapter, I detailed a desire to push myself back into the spaces within my own work and practice that I find difficult to resolve, and that I would attempt to read the work from this position. *April's* relationship to the uncanny is therefore of interest to me, however my aim in addressing the presence and influence of this complex psychological and aesthetic mode is not to frame my work and research practice by way of this, but rather to unpick what an appropriation of the uncanny does and could do, both in *April* and my wider practice.

[60] Alexandra M. Kokoli, 'The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice' (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) p. 21.
[61] Ibid, p. 27.
[62] Ibid, p. 19.

Loops and Lost Details

April was produced specifically for the cinema and as such the film was preceded, and in many ways shaped, by the expectations, associations and history of this context. Limitations were not imposed as to the format of the commissioned film, deviations from the traditional single screen format would have been welcomed and accommodated, however, the template that cinema offered me, whereby a film occupies a screen for a specific unit of time with a specific start and end point, provided a structure against which *April's* repetitive and fractured form might operate. *April* does not follow a chronological line but is a digressive, circular, multiple narrative that resists the linearity and irreversibility of time, however, it can only do so because it retains the idea of a line or sequence from which it deviates.

April's looping structure contains a nested narrative that repeats and morphs, progressively losing (and occasionally gaining) details as it does so, a technique that both mimics and tests the limits of memory. The filmic loops in *April*, however, are not perfect repetitions. The story morphs as it repeats and the limited selection of images deviate from the sequence that had been established. The narrative's details may be doubled but they are misplaced, so that when they do return, they find themselves in an alternative scene or situation.

April's fractured form responds to the subject of second sight, an oral tradition where stories that have been passed down from generation to generation continue to be told. The narrative structure of *April,* with its shifting mode of address as the narrator moves from first person to third, as well as the loss and occasional gain of descriptive details, responds to this tradition from which the work draws, that relies less on written accuracy than it does on the memory, character and intentions of the storyteller. The filmic loop that loses its details reflects on the distortions of memory to consider what is lost through repetition or reproduction. Unlike a book where you can turn back the pages, pause and check details, the relentless nature of moving image means that as a viewer, you travel at the pace of the film. *April's* repetitious form folds back on itself, however, the only reflective device that the viewer has with regards to the film's

uncertain duplication, is their memory. Unlike a gallery installation where a film may be left to loop eternally, April was produced for the cinema where the time frame is given. There is a clear beginning and a certain end, the audience arrive, the film plays and then it ends.

In *The Psychoanalysis of Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, film theorist Christian Metz unpicks the illusory qualities of cinema, suggesting that the sensory cues of sound and vision are perceptions of something inherently false. "Or rather," he writes, "the activity of perception which it involves is real (the cinema is not a phantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica …"*[63]

Where cinema reanimates the shades, phantoms or doubles of what has already been, second sight reverses this relationship causing the animated phantom or double to appear before the fact. There is a temporal reshuffling that occurs, one that complicates the usual order of things by offering a situation in which the copy precedes the original. In this way, second sight tampers with the expected sequence of events by drawing the future into the present only to later be folded back into the past, from where it replays as if looped in an eternal repetition. In her book long study on second sight, cultural historian Elsa Richardson comments on the consequences of this reordering with regards to narrative time and the loops that it must perform. She writes, "second sight is antithetical to linear formations of time, conflating the present with the future, so the effect is ascertained before its cause comes into existence."[64] However, this conflation of past and present requires time to continue on its course irrespectively; the forward reach of a prophecy is inseparable from the backward glance of confirmation. As Richardson notes, "the narrative structure of these localized prophecies encoded a kind of pre-determined verifiability: a vision that claims to forecast future events is after all, remarkable only after its version of the future is confirmed."[65] Without confirmation prophecies are simply stories told and perhaps

[63] Christian Metz, 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier' (London: Macmillan Press, 1982) p. 46.
[64] Elsa Richardson, 'Second Sight in the Nineteenth Century: Prophecy, Imagination and Nationhood' (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) p. 42.
[65] Ibid, p. 43.

forgotten, left behind. It is only when they are confirmed, only when the future *conforms*, that prophecy can be named as such.

Although time is not altered by the occurrence of a prophesy; it marches on regardless, the ways in which we inhabit and experience time are rearranged. There are parallels that can be drawn here between the time-shifts and loops of second sight and those performed by film and video. In her article 'I Think Sebastion, Therefore I … Somersault', film theorist Lesley Stern notes that although cinema gives us the experience of time, it temporalizes it playing "*all the time* on a series of indeterminacies: here/there, appearance/disappearance, life/death, past/future." *April* performs jump-cuts, flash backs, repeats and reorders imagery and events, producing a discontinuous and disorientating sense of time.

Beyond Doubling

Beyond the filmic loops and repetition there is an internal doubling in *April* that is observed in the symmetry of the character's gestures. About a third of the way through the film, two women named K and S spend an afternoon together reminiscing and catching up:

> To their surprise they still shared certain gestures, certain turns of phrase, however at moments their synchronism was startling, and the two women would fall silent.
>
> K took some photographs in the house. They both sat on the sofa and smiled, they both uncrossed then re-crossed their legs, they both sat forward, they both laughed and leaned back.

The uncanny synchronization performed by the characters K and S draws from the myths and stories that are associated with second sight. There is a traditional belief that holds that anyone, seer or not, may see the fetch or 'resemblance' of a living person. In his essay, 'The Seer in Gaelic Tradition', John MacInnes notes that this

belief may have led to the notion of a 'co-walker', or *dopplegänger* in Gaelic tradition, which he describes as being:

> … apt at any given time to be roaming around unknown to its 'owner', creeping up on people in order to frighten them, and generally behaving in a disorderly manner. To that degree, the 'co-walker' is not so much an exact replica of a person as an alternative personality of a much more anarchic nature. Just as a seer may see himself or herself (normally a presage of the seer's death), so anyone may see his or her own 'co-walker', who is recognizable even at a distance because it moves as a mirror image of the watcher.[66]

The dopplegänger narrative was a prevalent theme for Scottish literature of the nineteenth century, a celebrated example being author Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Stevenson's narrative is a sinister exploration of duality that presents a man who lives a double life; a detail that is not revealed to the reader until a confession appears in the final chapter of the book that reveals the murderous Mr Hyde is in fact, Jekyll himself. Preceding Stevenson's fictionalisation of the double was author James Hogg whose novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* featured two estranged brothers, Robert and Gil-Martin, whose volatile reunion after many years apart saw the two men come into conflict with one another. The narrative is a haunting tale that folds together their characters in an ambiguous manner, making it unclear whether they are autonomous individuals or two co-existing personas emanating from a single mind. Common to the theme of the double, as demonstrated by both Hogg and Stevenson, is an investigation of duality as a binary construct that cleanly cuts a persona across the oppositional poles of good versus evil. Although both Hogg and Stevenson entertain slippages between the two categories, the dual poles of a personality are largely upheld.

Although *April* draws on the uncanny imagery and effect of the double, the film also expands and exceeds this duality through the introduction of multiple, and at times interchangeable speaking positions. *April's* narrator shifts from first person to third,

[66] Hilda E. Davidson, op. cit., p. 19.

lending her voice to a character S who is narrating a story to K. There are moments within the spoken text where the narrator slips, shifting from her to I mid-sentence, blurring, merging or conflating her own identity with the women whose story she is telling. *April* pries apart the two poles of the dualism, presenting instead a multiple and nuanced sense of self that is not bound by the categories of 'I', 'she' or 'them'.

In an interview with art critics Jörg Heiser and Jan Verwoert, artist Susan Hiller described a desire, proposed as a method, to open and inhabit the spaces 'in-between' such static categories, observing that "you have to figure out what the two poles of your dualism are, and you have to push them until you actually see them clearly, because you can nestle in the middle somehow and create a space there."[67] The in-between space that Hiller proposed is not bound, limited or edged by the duality from which it is formed, but rather it is a space for that which exceeds it.

Light Reading

In artist and filmmaker Lis Rhodes' film *Light Reading*, this duality is challenged as a mode of resistance to the power of language and the trappings of meaning. *Light reading* is a twenty-minute black and white film that begins in darkness, with a black screen over which a woman's voice is heard reciting a script that begins with the line, 'who turned the light away, the light away from her.'[68] The script speaks of a woman reading, a woman who is not seen and cannot see herself reflected, 'she could only glimpse the shadow, the faint reflection of the fading image, stumbling in the traces of her knowing, sinking in the ruts of her experience, slipping amongst the shadows of history, she couldn't reach herself.'[69] The film image remains black for the duration of the spoken script, after which a fast paced and constantly shifting collage of photographs, film script and text fills the screen. It is black and white and in contrast to the previous section in which the sound sat against an absent image, the film images play out in silence. One photograph, that appears to show a blood-stained bed is

[67] Brian Dillon, 'Second Sight'. In: Frieze, Sep 2007 <https://www.frieze.com/article/second-sight-0> [accessed 8 April 19] para 8.
[68] Lis Rhodes, 'Light Reading', 1978, B&W film with sound, 20 minutes.
[69] Ibid

repeatedly seen and seen again; sometimes at a distance, sometimes magnified for a closer inspection. In the final section the woman begins to speak again alongside the images, this time describing not only (third person) 'her' thoughts and actions, but also the materiality of film and the processes involved in its production.

In the initial section, against the black screen, the script spins in circles that unsettle the onward march of chronological time. In a similar manner to *April,* beginnings and endings reappear and repeat throughout but the act of starting again is not to be mistaken for an act of erasure. The story before sits inside the story after; history cannot be removed but perhaps, suggests *Light Reading*, it can be reframed. "This venture…both originates from, yet refuses containment by, existing discursive structures,"[70] writes artist and writer Nancy Woods in her essay 'On Light Reading'. To reframe, however, is not to hold her subject still. Rhodes' script continually shifts in time and shifts its focus, composing and recomposing itself so that 'she' is never held in place as a singular subject. 'She watched herself being looked at, she looked at herself being watched, but she could not perceive herself, as the subject of the sentence, as it was written, as it was read, the context defined her as the object of explanation.'[71]

There is a continual play on words throughout the film, puns that layer one meaning over another as seen in the film's title, *Light Reading*, that refers to the act of filming wherein the camera aperture is set according to the measure of light, but equally *Light Reading* is associated with a text that is not difficult to understand. The same could be said of the sentence to which she could not perceive herself as subject. Is 'she' sentenced or is it that the sentence misrepresents 'her'? For a viewer of the film there is little time to disentangle the script and opt for one meaning over another. The woman continues to speak, 'and now she wrote, and now…', and the film continues to roll meaning that both meanings run together in tandem as two takes on the same sentence.

[70] Nancy Woods quoted in Peter Gidal, 'Materialist Film' (London: Routledge: 1989) p. 70.
[71] Lis Rhodes, op. cit.

Although *Light Reading's* play on words prompts multiple readings and produces layers of meaning it is not indirect. For a listener, Rhodes' steady voice holds the script together so that the multiple strands of her story produce and inhabit an intangible space, one that feels like thought. It is nuanced and resists a singular reading but by doing so it draws attention directly to the way that words work to produce meaning. The 'existing discursive structures' described by Woods are, she argues, "easily recognised as that of narrative – the imperative of a beginning, middle and end seemingly justified by the cause and effect relation it constructs."[72] Woods' argument, that the linear structure of a narrative is the 'privileged discursive mode' is precisely what *Light Reading* seeks to unsettle because it is a structure that omits that which does not conform. The narrative's 'she' cannot see herself reflected in the given structures of language, 'the violence of sequence,' states *Light reading*'s narrator, 'tears at the threads of her thoughts.' As filmmaker Felicity Sparrow observes in her essay (written in collaboration with Lis Rhodes) 'Her Image Fades as her Voice Rises', recognising that this is a dead-end, "She searches for other clues and other means of finding her own reflection. But she seems to be framed everywhere she looks."[73]

When the film image finally begins the screen fills with letters, blown up, reversed or inverted and often blurred, scraps of photographic imagery are ripped up and reassembled, there are lenses, measuring tapes and a small cosmetic mirror that returns a gaze, all of which appear in a fast moving and fragmented montage. The image of the bed with a stain that could be blood is seen again and again, sometimes in close-up other times a distance. There is a sense that this image is being scrutinized, as though searching for clues but there is no resolution; the imagery appears to be concerned with communication but refuses to cohere.

Just as the script does not produce a singular subject who is held in time, the film image enacts different temporalities – the time of constructing, filming and editing is incorporated into the image aligning *Light Reading* with structural/materialist

[72] Nancy Woods quoted in Peter Gidal, op. cit., p. 70.
[73] Felicity Sparrow and Lis Rhodes, 'Her Image Fades as her Voice Rises'. In: Lis Rhodes, 'Telling Invents Told' (London: The Visible Press, 2019) p. 90.

filmmaking practices prevalent at that time. Filmmakers such as Peter Gidal, Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, all of whom were associated with the movement, were presenting experimental moving image work that sought to demystify the film process by presenting 'film as film'. Anti-illusionist and materially driven, structural film was theorised by American film critic Adam P Sitney as film that "insists on its shape and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline."[74] The material production of a film, rather than the reproduction of an image, was prioritised so as not to represent a record of something else, but rather to make film itself present, as a process that is present *as* process. As Peter Gidal argues in his book *Structural Film Anthology,* "This is how 'record of its own making' must be understood. A *radical* sense of Realism. Such a film is not about some other real, but is its Real."[75]

By foregrounding the process *as* process and presenting film's materiality or its 'Real', *Light Reading* draws attention to the way that filmic conventions, such as representation and illusion, structure the way that we see and interpret an image. Familiar patterns of looking, patterns that have in many ways become second nature to a viewer are interrupted so that as a structural film, *Light Reading* acts as a critique of narrative cinema. However, it is important to note that these learned habits of viewing, with regards to cinema or narrative film are in fact learned. As film theorist Alan Nadel points out in his essay 'Second Nature, Cinematic Narrative', a viewer is accustomed to seeing a seeing a story on screen, so much so, they have learned to, "comprehend and to naturalize, among other things the proportions of the cinematic shot, the demands of the mobile frame, the disruption of the cut, and the interplay of edited moving images,"[76] noting that when we say we have 'learned' something (instruments, languages) what we mean is that we no longer need conscious deliberation – it has become second nature, a practice that 'passes as perception'. If learning is considered in this way, as a form of forgetting, whereby a film viewer gives little thought to the complex processes of viewing, understanding and interpreting a

[74] Adam P. Sitney quoted in Bruce Jenkins, 'A Case Agaibst Structural Film'. In: Journal of University Film Association XXXIII, 2 (Spring 1981) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20687560> [Accessed 1 August 2021] p. 11.
[75] Peter Gidal, op. cit., p. 73.
[76] Alan Nadel, 'Second Nature, Cinematic Narrative, the Historical Subject, and Russian Ark'. In: 'A Companion to Narrative Theory', ed. by Phelan, James and Rabinowitz, Peter J. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) p. 428.

film, then structural film could be considered a catalyst for remembering, one that reminds us that what we are seeing is a composed and mediated representation.

What sets *Light Reading* apart from many structural filmmaking practices is that it employs the methods of structural film to not only demystify the film process (film as film) but also to perform a feminist critique of language and representation with regards to gender. A focussed critique that Woods argues, "exceeds the present political boundaries of structural/materialist filmmaking in harnessing this 'presentational strategy' [of the processes and materials of the film's construction]"[77] (brackets author's own) to confront the underlying misogyny within language. Where structural film highlights the persuasive hold that cinematic conventions have over a viewer's reading-out process, *Light Reading* also points out the problematic ways that language has historically held women. 'She' is held, states Rhodes' script, 'by the presence of a past, not passed.'

Just as the codes and conventions of narrative cinema are often absorbed by a viewer so that the act of viewing, understanding and interpreting a film appears 'natural' and not a learned skill, there are ideologies built into the way that language is written, spoken, heard and read that repeat and reaffirm the biases and hierarchies of patriarchal thought; a past, *Light Reading* argues, that has not passed that sits below the surface of language. Turning her attention to this problem, Rhodes' film does not seek a final resolution or fix that would rearrange language into its optimum form, but I would argue that *Light Reading* is a proposition, one that begins with the act of beginning again (and again). This should not be mistaken for an invitation to repeat but rather it is a form of renewal.

In the opening lines of Wittgenstein's unpublished essay, 'Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough', he states "I must plunge into the waters of doubt again and again,"[78] in order

[77] Nancy Woods quoted in Peter Gidal, op. cit., p. 70.
[78] Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted in Andrew Norris, 'Doubt in Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough'. In: The Wittgenstein Studies, Volume 6, Issue 1 (2010) pp. 1 – 18 <https://www.academia.edu/33753285/Doubt_in_Wittgenstein_s_Remarks_on_Frazer_s_Golden_Bough_> [Accessed: 1 February 2021] p. 1.

to find his way from error to truth. However, as philosopher Andrew Norris notes in his analysis of this text, Wittgenstein does not appear to do this. "Instead of questioning various claims of Frazer's in a doubtful uncertain tone, he makes a series of extremely confident assertions critical of Frazer and his methods." Written by Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer, 'The Golden Bough' is a study in magic and religion, a text that Wittgenstein fundamentally disagreed with but despite this, he recognized that within it there were partial truths; claims that were held true by the logic of Frazer's argument. However, as Norris points out, Wittgenstein does not employ doubt as a method of critique to challenge Frazer's views, in fact doubt is not mentioned by Wittgenstein beyond the essay's opening lines, and neither was his call to plunge into the waters of doubt an invitation offered out to his reader but it was he, himself, the 'I' who was writing, who was being addressed. By continually renewing his own doubt by 'plunging into the waters of doubt again and again,' Wittgenstein enacts an endless baptism, a transformative act that allows him to reorientate himself in relation to the persuasive truths embedded in Frazer's logic.

The proposition presented by *Light Reading* to begin again (and again) is therefore a method of doubt, one that invites its viewer to disorientate and reorientate themselves in relation to the way that language is written, spoken, heard and read in order to unpick the ideology that, as feminist theorist, Christine Delphy notes, "does not appear as ideology but as the reasonable presentation of reality, as reality itself."[79]

The Slip of Grass

About a quarter of the way through *April,* the narrator describes the scene below:

> The house looked out over a small loch that sat inland just before the sea, separated from what appeared from the window to be a slip of grass but was actually far wider. From the loch there was a path that lead to the cliffs that I would take most days. It disappeared at the top of the hill, but the cliffs could

[79] Christine Delphy quoted in Peter Gidal, op. cit., p. 70.

> still be followed all of the way to the next village, although usually I would turn around half-way.

In this scene, there is a subtle shift in the narrator's position from an exterior view *of* the house to an interior view *from* the house. By focusing on the 'slip of grass' as seen from the window the text plays with discrepancies between how things appear and how they actually are. The slip of grass is actually far wider, the view from the window was wrong, appearances deceive. During this sequence, the images pan along telephone wires lined with starlings, the camera follows a bird of prey until it leaves the frame, the repeated views of black rocks are seen again, slick with rain. The introduction of these new images, followed by a repetition of those previously seen, adds no content of significance to the unfolding narrative. At some points, the images appear not to matter. Structurally they perform repetition, a cyclical pattern that is echoed in the narrator's daily routine. *Most days* she would walk, *usually* she would turn around half-way.

For *April*, the final editing process of the imagery was led by a visual rhythm that corresponded to the voice over. There is a minimal palette of imagery used throughout the film that shows the landscape of the Isle of Lewis as well as one interior shot of a yellow flower in bloom. During the process of production, I amassed a wealth of additional footage, both of the island and additional footage shot back in Glasgow, but as the project developed it became clear that conceptually and methodically, the work would be structured around the idea of a loop. The small selection of footage that made it into the final cut was chosen to situate the narrative within a given landscape, but alongside this, the choice to use a minimal palette was to serve the function of the loop itself.

In the editing process I began to establish patterns and rhythms with the sequences of imagery. I responded to the aesthetics of each clip to consider the way that it might either flow into the next or sit uncomfortably alongside it. Jarring cuts, such as the abrupt jump-cut in the opening scene that shows the sea accompanied by the introductory bars of *Yes Sir, I can Boogie*, was intended to cause a moment of rupture

that would disrupt the flow of the film sequence. The jump-cut jolts the viewer out of the upbeat scene, both visually and audibly. It is intentionally disruptive so as to create a distinctive and memorable moment that would be immediately recognized in each repetition. In a similar manner, sequences that were established in the early stages of the film were intended to form a pattern that would be recognisable were it to repeat. The purpose of this patterning was to set up a sense of anticipation for the film's viewer who would grow to recognise the order but be unable to say with any certainty whether the repetition of the sequence was a precise duplication or a repetition of what is *almost* the same.

Objective *and* Odd

On two separate occasions within the film, a woman mysteriously 'appears' in the narrator's kitchen, wearing 'blue jeans, white trainers and a dark purple Gore-Tex coat.' Despite the woman's claims at the end of this short scene that the door was open, the lights were on and that she had knocked, the narrator's description has an air of mystery to it. 'I hadn't heard her come in,' she tells us, 'and I hadn't seen her walk past.' Throughout this scene the voice over remains steady offering no audible clue as to the character's emotional state however, the combined details of a woman alone in an isolated house, without phone, car or WiFi has the borrowed tone, tropes and trappings common to ghost stories or uncanny tales. By appropriating imagery associated with the uncanny, the text that the narrator voices sets up certain tensions and expectations. The voice-over tells us that she has not seen a soul, not spoken a word, and this information, despite being unsupported by the narrator's emotional tone, insinuates that her judgment may be compromised. People's minds play tricks when they spend too much time alone. This information does not serve the narrator well. If anything, by suggesting a heightened sense of perception, the voiced text compromises her authority as a reliable witness to the events.

However, the narrator's focus on the objective details in the voice-over that follows is void of emotion. Any suggestion of what the narrator feels is to be found in her interaction with the phenomenal world. The high-pitched scrape of a chair that

presses into her knees, forcing her to balance her weight against the table is an image of a response as seen from the outside. The external gaze and lack of access to the narrator's interior state of mind is repeated in the freeze frame that follows: *For a moment neither of us moved.* The description objectively details something odd without registering its psychological affect.
The enigmatic nature of the woman's arrival hints at the supernatural but without committing to such a source the woman's presence (or lack of) remains ambiguous and open to the interpretation of a viewer. However, by connotation, *April* brings the natural and the supernatural into the same narrative space as two distinct possibilities.

The uncertainty as to whether something is 'all in your head' or part of an objective shared reality is the driving force behind filmmaker John Smith's, *The Black Tower* (1985-87). The twenty-four minute film tells the story of a man who is haunted by a tower that he believes to be following him around London. In the film, the ominous black tower is seen in several settings from various angles – in a churchyard, a prison, a housing estate, and so for a viewer of the film, the reality of the black tower as a filmic fact is not in doubt. However, like *April*, the narrative is provided by a voice-over that draws the viewer into an alternative version of events that does not always coincide with the images that are presented. The narrator's description of the inexplicable and geographically impossible reappearance of the tower throughout his day does not undermine the veracity of the image, but neither does the image confirm the narrator as delusional. What is seen is not in doubt, neither in the image nor in the telling, and yet despite this, *The Black Tower* presents an uncertain sort of seeing, one that acknowledges that 'what is said to be seen' is often merely a matter of perception.

An Out-of-Date Reality

The potential for an artwork to elicit uncertainty and provide a context in which doubt might be activated as an involuntary response is explored in each of the artworks that I have produced as part of my practice led research. In *April,* this appears as a form of disorientation whereby a viewer might lose their footing and become lost in the narrative that loops and the film imagery that morphs and repeats. *April's* spoken

narrative opens with the line, 'It all started with a photograph that was slid across the table in an unmarked envelope from a woman insisting that it was mine.' The information given in this initial narration is slight, however, there are verbal cues indicating thematic concerns and narrative conventions that suggest a structure will be followed throughout the film. For instance, the narrative's ubiquitous opening, 'It all started with…' implies that a story will be told and that the telling will reveal the nature of the 'it' that has been 'started'. The narrator's use of 'I' and 'mine' positions her as intra-diegetic, both teller and subject from whose point of view the events will be given. The opening 'It all started with' places the story in the past, however, 'it all started with' doesn't strictly promise an end. There is an implication that the story that is being told will remain unresolved. This lack of resolve is central to *April.* It is a method of holding the artwork open so that the film's narrative does not offer closure but remains caught in an ongoing present by way of its own temporal loop.

In his book *Scott's Shadow*, historian Ian Duncan reflects on the work of Scottish novelist James Hogg whose fiction engages with the traditions, beliefs and myths prevalent in Scotland in the late 18th and early 19th century, with second sight being among the subjects that Hogg's writing explored. Duncan describes Hogg's literary treatment of the mythical and supernatural as an active engagement that allowed such beliefs to haunt his work. Rather than offering a representation of the supernatural, Hogg's writing had the power to re-enact it. These beliefs were not simply presented as stories but were treated as active forces that operated within the work, unsettling the idea that history (or belief) follows a chronological timeline. Commenting on Hogg's approach, Duncan wrote, "It may not be possible to close down or step outside some stories, since they may have no afterwards or outside. They may not be dismissed to the other time of the past."[80] The lack of closure that Duncan describes reflects Hogg's refusal to situate the supernatural as a belief resigned to the past. Hogg's writing breached the cognitive space between the rational and the irrational so that rather than offering a safe distance from the supernatural as an outdated belief, he held it open as an ongoing possibility.

[80] Ian Duncan, 'Scott's Shadow' (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007) p. 206.

The uncanny notion of an 'out of date' reality composed of residual structures of feeling was a formative element in the production of *April* that relates to my research into the subject of second sight. While filming on the Isle of Lewis I attended a talk by historian Catriona Murray that traced the histories of belief and folklore in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.[81] She spoke about witches, fairies and second sight. What was interesting was the type of reception each part of her talk elicited from the local audience. When malevolent fairies were talked of there was a sense that this was an old superstition that had been left in the past, and although witchcraft could not be laid to rest as easily it appeared held at a distance, as something that sat outside of everyday life. However, when the presentation turned to second sight stories began to fill the room. The stories were all told at a remove. It was someone's second cousin, their neighbour, a friend of a friend who had the faculty or had seen the vision and yet despite this distance, the stories were not dismissed as second-hand tales or rumours but were held open as possibilities; an ongoing belief that in Duncan's words, "may not be dismissed to the other time of the past."[82]

[81] Catriona Murray, 'Witches, Fairies and Second Sight', April 2019, Tiumpanhead Community Centre.
[82] Ian Duncan, op. cit., p. 206.

Chapter 2: The Narrator

The Narrator is a spoken word, site-specific performance with video and audio that I performed in September 2018 as part of an event curated by artist Neil Bickerton titled *WHAT YOU DO, I LIKE.* The two-day event took place at Hospitalfield in Arbroath, an historic stately home that once functioned as a residential art school and is now an artists' residency centre that commissions exhibitions and events.

This chapter opens with a detailed description of *The Narrator* that leads to a discussion of the themes and concepts that informed the performance, reflecting on the surrounding research, processes of production and context in relation to other artist's work. The performance was not filmed and no audio recording was made therefore *The Narrator* only exists in its retelling. Written from memory, the description in this chapter stands in for the work itself as a method of documentation that is intended to enact the themes of witnessing, testimony and memory that *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* addresses.

There are various disorientating techniques used in *The Narrator* that build on *April*, for example, the performance employs an imprecise loop that folds the narrative that it tells back in on itself, it repeats phrases, intentionally confuses and complicates the authorial voice, reflecting throughout on the instability of the term 'character'. Such strategies involve a process of defamiliarization, namely uncovering the strangeness of what is assumed to be known, established or ordinary and therefore reframing the familiar as odd, unfamiliar and strange. In *The Narrator*, this perceptual flip is attributed, in part, to a double-sided coin that appears on the fifth page of the script. In contrast to *April*, that considered the lack of materiality associated with visions, spectral appearances and uncertain sights, *The Narrator* was produced in close contact with the tactility of this coin, that through its form talked to ideas of chance, fate, superstition, coincidence and contradiction.

The description of *The Narrator* that opens this chapter is written from my own perspective as not only the artwork's producer, but as its performer. Unlike *April* (for

which I was also the narrator), that was described by observing and meticulously attending to the artwork's details – a precise and verifiable account made possible by the existing video – without digital documentation to refer to, the accuracy of the written account of *The Narrator* relies instead on an act of memory in which details are recalled, transcribed, collated and edited. While writing the description it became evident that although my aim was to present an accurate record of an event, this was tempered by an acknowledged desire to write something that simply felt convincing; an account presented with verisimilitude; a technique that author John Cheever notes in an interview in *The Paris Review*, writers exploit to assure a reader of the truthfulness of what is being told, stating, "If he truly believes he is standing on a rug, you can pull it out from under him."[83]

[83] John Cheever, 'The Art of Fiction No. 62'. In: The Paris Review, interviewed by Anette Grant, Issue 67, fall 1976. Para. 12.

The Narrator: The Description as Document

I performed *The Narrator* five times over the course of the weekend to groups of no more than twenty, a number chosen to ensure that the audience were physically comfortable in the small space as well as to create an atmosphere that felt intimate. With twenty people I could address each individual personally. I could make eye contact and have my voice heard without necessarily raising it beyond a level that felt conversational.

The performance took place in Hospitalfield's old coach house. This small outhouse is attached to the rear of the main building and is accessed via the cobble stone courtyard. It still contains the old coach: an ornate 19th century horse drawn carriage that has been parked up and stored at the back of the room. The room is longer than it is wide with a high ceiling, stone walls and a paved floor and although the carriage has been pushed back it still occupies roughly one third of the given space. There is only one small window on the opposite wall from the carriage that lets in very little light; once the large wooden doors are closed the space is dimly lit. All five performances took place during the day and I chose to use this window as my only source of light.

Before each performance the audience were gathered and held in the courtyard so that once they collectively entered the space the large wooden doors could be closed behind them with no latecomers admitted. As well as the carriage, the room contained a small wooden desk and chair that had been positioned below the window facing out toward the space in which I imagined the audience would stand. On the desk was an open laptop, a glass of water and small pile of white A4 paper. Other than a pair of speakers positioned at either side of the desk, the remaining space was empty. Unbeknown to the audience, I was seated inside the closed carriage and so I saw each group enter and orientate themselves. All but once this involved a brief inspection of the carriage followed by the formation of a semicircle around the table that had been set in place. Only once did an audience member press their face against the dark glass of the carriage and see that I was there.

After the doors had been closed I waited until the audience had settled before opening the carriage, descending the steps and passing through the audience to take a seat at the desk. My outfit was ordinary; I had on a pair of jeans, a jumper and a woollen overcoat. I picked up the sheets of A4 paper and allowed myself a few moments to calm my nerves, to steady my hands, to catch my breath and perhaps most importantly, by holding the silence a little longer than comfortable I was reassuring myself and the audience that I was in control of the pace of the performance. When it felt appropriate, I began to read from the printed script, opening with the line, 'You are sitting in a darkened room waiting for the audience to settle.' At this stage, the text implied that the 'you' to whom I referred was a second person point of view – that the audience was the character being described. In describing what 'I' was doing, however, just whose point of view was being invoked became doubtful.

The first page of the script was short, with only three or four sentences that appeared to address the immediate setting and situation of the performance itself. These sentences described the room, acknowledged the audience and listed the actions that the narrative's 'you' performed. They were simple things, like leaning forward in a chair, taking a sip of water, pausing briefly and then 'you' says the word 'imagine.' On finishing the first page I let the paper drop to the floor.

Before resuming the reading, I enacted the actions that I had described. I sat forward in my chair, took a sip of water from the glass that had been left in preparation on the table just in front of me before saying the word 'imagine,' after which the repetition was complete. What followed was a list, a proposition of sorts that played out as series of negations that the audience were invited to entertain. 'Imagine,' I said, leaving a brief pause, 'No doubt, no contradictions, no inconsistencies, no conflicting feelings, thoughts, urges, no shades of grey, no indecision, no ambiguity, no confusion. No conflicting belief, no inner turmoil, no disbelief, no hesitation, no uncertainty, no split, tear, crack or fissure you are complete….' The list continued in this way, offering further examples of absent qualities or modes of doubt after which a consideration of the flip side was voiced, 'you are decisive,' I say, 'you are certain, you know what you

like, you know what you want, you like it. You know that you like it.' On finishing the second page I let the paper drop to the floor.

An instrumental cover version of AC/DC's 1980 rock hit *Shoot to Thrill* then played loudly into the space. The music was cut short. It stopped abruptly in the middle of the track. In each of the five performances, this jarring moment felt uncomfortable but not entirely unenjoyable. It was awkward and being unsure what to do with my body I attempted to casually do nothing, to appear relaxed, to simply hold still and wait it out while this incongruous and overtly macho music blasted into the polite space of the performance. However, I also recall finding this lack of comfort productive. The music served the purpose of producing a pause, a moment for the audience to reflect on the proposition that they had been enlisted to imagine, but it also forced an uncertain tone onto the performance. The rock band AC/DC occupy an ambiguous place for me, one oscillates between heart felt sincerity and self-knowing irony. The unsettling response that this type of uncertainty can elicit, when it is unclear whether the audience should laugh with you or at you or not laugh at all, was a productive device for unmooring the mood of the performance, making it doubtful exactly where humour begins and sincerity ends.

The musical interlude also acted as a break, as in a split, cut or fracture in the direction of the narrative that followed. Where the first page of the script described the immediate situation of the performance ('You are sitting in a darkened room waiting for the audience to settle') and the second page enacted and then expanded on this description, the third page of the script strode into a story that opened with the line, 'You were told recently that something that you had done was out of character.' Before I read this line, I took off my coat and hung it on the back of the chair, relaxing physically into the role of the storyteller. My language and gestures were less formal, more familiar and in keeping with the jarring musical interlude, the story that I told hovered ambiguously in the linguistic territory that both signals and structures a joke. The audience were informed that it was a man who told 'you' that something they had done was out of character, and that this was odd because 'you' had only met said man twice. After this I said, 'The first time that you met this man was in a bar,' which is a

place where jokes are told but in the telling the bar is told as the place in which they begin. 'A man walks into a bar…' is so familiar that it comes with a punch line attached, or at least anticipated. Although my delivery of the script here had a more relaxed tone, there was no specific indication of humour in my inflections, gestures or the pitch my voice; if there had been, I am almost certain that the performance would have failed. The humour is dry. It is slight and steers clear of the punch line; a joke is being proposed rather than told, anticipated but not delivered. In both *The Narrator* and in my wider practice, humour operates within that uncertain pause; in the beat before laughter.

Over the following four pages of the script the story about 'you' continued to unravel. On reaching the end of each page I let the paper drop to the floor using this gesture to both punctuate the performance and signal a shift in the narrative itself. This shift was either a change in the position of the narrator (from being the subject of the text to the one who is telling the tale), a shift in time (where a back story was provided) or a shift in content (for example, page five redirected the narrative to consider superstition via the double-sided coin). By the time I reached page six I only had one piece of paper left in my hand. The reading was coming to a close but rather than offer a recognisable end point or conclusion, the script returned to the start describing the same darkened room in which 'you' waited while an audience settled. The final two sentences echoed those of page one with the only difference being a substitution in the tense that shifted from the present - 'you pause briefly/you are nervous…' to the past, 'You paused briefly for effect and also partly because you were nervous.' After reading these lines I let the final page of paper fall to the floor. After a brief pause I started the video on the laptop, turning it around so that the small screen faced the audience and then I walked out of the room closing the large wooden doors behind me.

On the small screen of the laptop was a view of the sea filmed with a handheld camera. This initial silent shot tracked a gull sitting on the uneven surface of a breaking wave. As the bird moved out of the frame the same AC/DC instrumental cover version of *Shoot to Thrill* began to play through the speakers as loudly as before. The short silent shot gave me enough time to exit the space so that when the music kicked in the

audience were left alone with the three-minute film. Filmed on the beach, cliffs and coastline of Arbroath the imagery was a medley of shots of the sea that were edited to cut, collide, roll and crash in time with the driving beat of the soundtrack. The handheld camera framed the sea tightly so that rather than presenting a settled horizon with crashing waves the close-up images followed floating debris, breaking waves or the lines left by the sea lapping on the sand. The sea bobbed seductively but also crashed aggressively. The drama of this was emphasized by the AC/DC soundtrack. Waves break in synch with the crash cymbal, water splashes back off the peer and swirls along with the guitar riff. This all has the effect of producing a film that sits somewhere doubtful, as if parodying genres, calling to mind amateur music videos, television title sequences, or documentary footage that had been given an emotional kick via a dramatic soundtrack. The purpose of this was to stop what may have been a contemplative, perhaps poetic image from offering any respite. Instead, the audience were left alone with a three-minute film that offered them the time to process the story they had been told but withheld any real sense of resolution.

When the film ended the screen of the laptop went black and the large wooden doors were opened allowing the audience to leave the coach house.

Tails and Tales

In the opening section of *The Narrator*, I invite the audience to imagine a situation in which there is 'no doubt, no contradictions, no inconsistencies, no conflicting feelings, thoughts, urges, no shades of grey.' It is a proposition that functions as a speculative 'what if?' What if you knew no doubt? Sitting at the start of the script, this simple question that frames the following narrative also prompted the process of production. *The Narrator* grew from the notion that in order to understand what something *is*, it might be useful to look at what it *is not*. The point of departure for this work was quite simply, 'what if you knew no doubt?'

Unlike *April*, that considered the lack of materiality associated with visions, spectral appearances and uncertain sights, *The Narrator* was produced in close contact with a double-sided coin that I fabricated shortly after finishing *April*. The double-sided coin was not to be or ever become an 'artwork' but rather it was fabricated to be an object that I would work *with*. In her book *Evocative Objects*, professor of social psychology Sherry Turkle argues that while theory can defamiliarize objects, objects can familiarize theory. "The abstract," she writes, "becomes concrete, closer to lived experience."[84] The coin, in many ways, was intended to perform both of these positions simultaneously – to be made strange by theory and to make theory less strange by finding a form that not only represented abstract thought but also held it within its form.

The cast coin is a ten pence piece with tails on either side. It is sitting next to me as I type this. It could easily be mistaken for a genuine coin; I have done many times before picking it up and realising my mistake. The aluminium counterfeit is lighter in weight and being less robust than nickel-plated steel, its surface has softened causing the lower relief design to erode in parts. After it was fabricated, I kept the coin on my person at all times; I mostly carried it in my pocket but if my jeans were loose I would carry it in my hand. There were certain habits that quickly took hold, for instance, I would tap my thigh to check that it was still in my pocket, sit it next to my laptop when

[84] Sherry Turkle, 'Evocative Objects: Things we Think With' (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011) p. 307.

I was working or at my bedside when I was sleeping. I would roll it between my fingers when I was trying to write, or I would fiddle with it, rubbing my thumbnail over the ridges of its raised design when it was in my pocket. These habits are not in themselves significant, but the repetition of these gestures, both in the script for *The Narrator* and here and now as I hold the coin and write this text, mark the coin's significance as a prop, prompt and character central to the work's production.

In her novel *Days of Abandonment* (2015), author Elena Ferrante writes, "Habitual acts, they are performed in the head even when you don't perform them. Or you perform them in reality, even when the head out of habit has stopped taking account of them."[85] Habits are what tend to stick, repeated patterns of behaviour for which thought is no longer necessary. 'Trouble savers' is how feminist scholar and writer Sara Ahmed describes them in her essay 'Wilful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character', noting that once actions have become habitual, subjects are free to attend to other matters. If the body does what it does without thought then the mind can be elsewhere. Ahmed compares the attainment of habit to the process of becoming a character, she writes, "The acquisition of character could be understood as a means of saving trouble: to have a character is a preferred route (there is a route in routine), which allows a subject to make their way in the world without having to think about their way."[86] The routines that we form and the habits that we follow build over time until it is difficult to separate what we do and how we do it from who we are and how we are seen.

The narrative that flows through *The Narrator* is driven by a single sentence found on page three of the script that reads, 'You were told recently that something that you had done was out of character.' Following Sara Ahmed's thread of thought that proposes character as an expectation of consistency, to be out of character could simply be a failure to fulfil that expectation; to repeat that which is not typical. It is this premise that is explored in *The Narrator* by way of an inconsistency that does not go unnoticed

[85] Elena Ferrante, 'Days of Abandonment' (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), p. 59.
[86] Sarah Ahmed, 'Wilful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character'. In: New Literary History, vol. 42, no. 2, spring 2011, p. 235.

by the protagonist ('you') who had, 'become aware of certain mannerisms, specific gestures, ticks and traits that seemed at odds with your own habitual repertoire of gestures, ticks, mannerisms and traits.' By prying apart the relationship between habit and character, *The Narrator* interrupts the 'route' that leads to 'routine', presenting instead a character whose habits and gestures are at odds with their own sense of self. The repetition and habituation of gestures through which a continuous and consistent character coheres is externalised, as though the embodied habits were imposed from out-with rather than generated from within. 'You were repeating something', reads the script, 'but it wasn't déjà vu. You were repeating *someone.'*

In *The Narrator* it is suggested that these changes were triggered by a double-sided coin that the protagonist found in their purse. When I fabricated this coin, prior to writing *The Narrator,* I initially imagined it to be an object of deceit (*a fraud, a phoney, a counterfeit*), a duplicitous object that simultaneously, and perhaps ironically, was, and is, the most certain object that I could think of. This notion of certainty arose from the double-sided coin's form: without a head to counterbalance tails, chance is eliminated. As an object it is reliable, repetitive and predictable, there is no doubt as to which way it will fall, and it cannot deviate from what is expected because it is fixed. However, it is precisely this property of being fixed that marks the coin's fate. It cannot *not* be a duplicitous object with an inherited history of deceit. Like a loaded coin, its fraudulence can perform in its favour by discretely eradicating the odds. It is a counterfeit coin, and if undetected would communicate monetary value, albeit illegitimately, and would be treated as if this value was true. If the disguise was to fail and the coin was exposed as a fake, the illicit copy would lose its symbolic value and revert back to its material form. For philosopher Jacques Derrida, counterfeit money only truly exists, *as such,* if undetected. "As soon as it is what it is, recognised *as such*, it ceases to act as and to be worth counterfeit money."[87] To be successful the coin must appear to remain in character. As art critic Paige Sweet notes in her essay, 'Making Again, Making Against', the counterfeit inserts doubt into circulation, once exposed, "the fake shakes the faith that structures monetary and other social exchanges…The failed counterfeit challenges the secure core of value itself: the legitimacy of the "true"

[87] Jacques Derrida, 'Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money' (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 87.

object becomes suspect once the counterfeit exposed as such brings doubt in to play."[88]

In *The Narrator* the coin appears on the fifth page of the script. It is dropped into the performance ambiguously as an object that may or may not have agency; a possibility that remains unresolved throughout the narrative. Appearing inexplicably in the character's purse, the coin's arrival is described in *The Narrator* as having coincided with the changes in behaviour that 'you' had been experiencing, changes that saw 'you' embody mannerisms, gestures, ticks and traits that were unfamiliar. 'It was always small things,' reads the narrator, 'subtle, slight slips, like your toothbrush feeling unconvincing in your hand as it zigzagged across your teeth. And there was something happening with your knees, a sort of involuntary clench.' In the script this information is prefaced with the statement, 'You are not particularly superstitious,' followed by a countering, 'but' – a sentence structure that signals there will be a contradiction between what is said and what is actually felt. By introducing the coin as the cause of this split in the self between what one may reasonably believe and what one may suspect, feel or doubt grants the coin a sense of significance, one that exceeds its material form. Superstition here is offered as an opening, a portal of sorts, that transforms chance into logic.

In his review of John Lanchester's novel *Mr Phillips*, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes superstition as "one way of not feeling so alone in the universe."[89] To be superstitious is to believe on some level that there are other powers that control cause and effect, a belief that Phillips comments can, "make life seem more like something going on inside a novel
than the random, intractable thing that we have to go through unassisted."[90] By comparing superstitious belief to an authored novel, Phillips alludes to the lack of agency associated with such beliefs where, for instance, a double-sided coin may be

[88] Paige Sweet, 'Making Again, Making Against'. In: The New Enquiry, Sep. 2015. <https://thenewinquiry.com/making-again-making-against/> [accessed 10 July 2018] para 5.
[89] Adam Phillips, 'On the Run'. In: London Review of Books, volume 22, no. 5, March 2000. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n05/adam-phillips/on-the-run> [accessed 6 August 2019] para 5.
[90] Ibid, para 5.

held responsible for a chain of events, but there is also a suggestion that, like fiction, superstition relies on a suspension of disbelief. Reading fiction functions as a pact of sorts, one that is renewed each time you pick up a book. It involves a willing suspension of disbelief, like a form of disavowal whereby you know that this *is not* how things really are, but you will continue *as if* it were. The affective potential of all fiction means that it can move its audience and make people *feel* feelings that are real, despite the fact that by definition, fiction is the opposite. "I know these are only words but all the same… (I am moved as if these words were uttering a reality)"[91] wrote Roland Barthes in his book *The Pleasure of the Text* (1990), but although Barthes clearly believes in what he *feels*, this is tempered by the knowledge, or belief, that it is 'only words', only fiction that he treats *as if* real. Superstition contains a double logic akin to that of reading fiction. As the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, superstition is an "irrational or unfounded belief; an unreasonable or groundless notion",[92] but nevertheless, once it has taken hold, superstition can be hard to dispel. The point of difference is one of belief. Where a reader of fiction may believe in a story and behave *as if* things are real, superstitious belief twists things slightly through the incorporation of doubt. Rather than behaving *as if* things were real, superstition asks 'what if'?

In *The Narrator,* I tell the audience, 'You are not particularly superstitious, but the adoption of these mannerisms coincided with the arrival of a coin.' By stating, 'You are not particularly superstitious, but…' *The Narrator* acknowledges that a dominant discourse exists while also subverting it, placing the character 'you' in a double bind of rational argument (you are not superstitious) and irrational impulse (but what if…). As a method of doubt, superstition inhabits the contradictory 'but'; a conjunction that lets loose an alternative logic as a destabilising possibility. There is a dissonance produced in moments such as this, where two opposing beliefs or contradictory positions are simultaneously held, that cannot easily be resolved. When asked if she believed in ghosts, French author Germaine de Stael replied, "je ne les crois pas, mais

[91] Roland Barthes, 'The Pleasure of the Text' (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc: 1975) p. 47.
[92] 'Oxford English Dictionary', 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

je les crains."[93] (I do not believe, but I am afraid). This unsettled state of suspension, in which disbelief and belief are concurrent, is in many ways, what doubt permits.

Narrating Loops

The Narrator is structured both formally and conceptually around the idea of a loop. The story begins and ends in the same darkened room, with the same character known as 'you' taking a sip of water from the same glass. In the narrative, things are repeatedly seen or said again but the return is never a perfect repetition; details shift producing moments that deviate from duplication and slip out of the hermetic loop. This formal approach to narrative that performs and employs imprecise loops builds on the cyclical structure that is central to my film *April.* In *April* the viewer is returned to the same opening shot of the sea accompanied by the same distinctive music several times throughout the film; a disorientating technique that disrupted the onward march of a linear narrative. Where the cyclical structure of *The Narrator* differs from *April* is not in the story's looping form: both works coil back on themselves, morph and repeat, but the essential difference in the loop's behaviour is to be found in the form specific to each work. Both *April* and *The Narrator* are scripted narratives that I read aloud, both are structured by methods of return and repetition, but their point of difference is to be found in the relationship each work has to the moment of their presentation.

"Performance's only life is in the present," writes feminist performance theorist Peggy Phelan in her book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance,* it "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[94] As an ephemeral form, it is the *duration* of a performance that marks its existence; it is the time of doing, of looking, of listening, of simply being. For Phelan, when a performance ends it "disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the

[93] Theodore Foster, 'The London Quarterly Review: Volumes 132 – 133' (New York: The Leonard Scott Publishing Company 1872) p. 88.
[94] Peggy Phelan, 'Unmarked: The Politics of Performance' (London: Routlege, 1993) p. 146.

unconscious where it eludes regulation and control."[95] My decision to document *The Narrator* as a written text based on my own memory (as opposed to documenting the performance digitally) was an acknowledgement and attempt to remain faithful to the transient nature of performance. However, beyond this, by relying on the inaccuracy of my own memory as a method of documentation (and presenting this an objective account), the written description is also intended to enact the themes of witnessing, testimony and memory that *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* addresses.

Although film is a format that is essentially repeatable, in cinema the viewing of a film is framed as an event, one that has a clear duration that will begin and end at a certain time. However, unlike performance, a film exists prior to and beyond the moment of a screening. It may be received or perceived differently from one screening to the next, but the content remains the same and details can be checked, loops retraced and disentangled. The final film is a fixed thing, an edit that has been composed and constructed with intention. The fractured, repetitious form of *April's* spoken narrative will repeat from one screening to the next. As film theorist Sarah Kozloff notes in her book *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, film dialogue "has been scripted, written and rewritten, censored, polished, rehearsed, and performed."[96] Once a film edit has been locked there is no possibility for error. When I was producing *April,* I recorded the voice over several times until I found a version that I was happy with, after which it was digitally remastered; unwanted parts were removed, a soft background hum was added. Any hesitations, interruptions or repetitions, any audible coughs, sighs or stutters that remained in the final edit were a deliberate and considered inclusion.

In *The Narrator*, the intentional and the accidental are less clearly defined. In a live reading there are things that escape – a trembling hand, a quivering voice, a breath breaking into a sentence, but these incidental acts nevertheless play a part in the overall reading of the performance. Other than a live editing of the self where one might, for example, repeat a mispronounced word or rephrase a sentence, there is no opportunity to revise or reshape the resulting content. The inescapable singularity of

[95] Ibid, p. 146.
[96] Sarah Kozloff, 'Overhearing Film Dialogue' (California: University of California Press, 2000) p. 18.

the live moment means that the intentional and accidental sit side by side and because both originate from the same performing body there is often very little way to know where one ends and the other begins.

In an interview with fellow artist Iman Issa, Moyra Davey describes the relationship between the staged and the unrehearsed in her film *Les Goddesses* as one of accommodation. As the film's onscreen narrator, Davey is both seen and heard and so the delivery of the script is a performance to camera. Although it is staged, she leaves room for accidents and surprises *in* the staging, allowing 'slip-ups' to interrupt the flow of the work so that the performance is not completely within her control. And it is these accidental moments that Davey seeks out in the editing of her work, "the ones where there is something weird, something out of place, an unconscious slip."[97]

In *Les Goddesses,* which is filmed almost entirely in the artist's New York apartment, Davey switches between autobiography and historical inquiry, weaving together her research into the life and family of eighteenth-century writer and woman's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft with her own personal history and familial experience. There is a simplicity to the film that shows Davey move from room to room, leafing through photographs, blowing dust off the covers of her books, all the while talking out loud, narrating her script to the empty rooms. Based on her essay, 'The Wet and the Dry', the script recounts the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft, her daughters Fanny Imlay and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Mary Shelley) and their stepsister Claire Claremont which Davey intersperses with reminiscences about her own family, in particular her five sisters. There are loose connections between the two groups of sisters, coincidences such as overlapping names (Davey's sister is also named Claire) or shared birthdays that are described by writer Jessica Weisberg as having "a superstitious quality—they follow a code too internal to be logical."[98]

[97] Moyra Davey and Issa Iman, 'On Using "I" and First-Person Narration'. In: Feminisms, April 2016 <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/on-using-i-and-first-person-narration> [accessed 10 February 2021] para 18.
[98] Jessica Weisberg, 'Can Self-Exposure be Private'. In: The New Yorker, May 2, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/can-self-exposure-be-private> [accessed 10 February 2021] para 2.

There is a tension in *Les Goddesses* between the internal and the external, the private and the public and the telling and not telling of or about the life that is lived in the apartment that we see. The film image shows the artist's home interspersed with photographs of herself and her sisters that she took in the late nineteen seventies, we see the artist casually inhabit this space in her socks, jeans and a t-shirt. Autobiographical details pepper the film script informing the viewer that Davey suffers from multiple sclerosis, that her father died when she was only sixteen, she has a young son, Barney, who hates museums and yet despite this, *Les Goddesses* is not a film in which we 'get to know' the artist. There is a coolness maintained throughout that keeps Davey at a distance, but this distance is one that holds the viewer in a manner that *feels* intimate. Just as the camera can only reveal what it is shown, the film script can only tell us what it has been told and Davey's restrained and precise telling seems to withhold as much as it offers.

In the interview with Issa, Davey describes a desire to write about "unspeakable memories" and her hesitation to do so without the distance that fiction or story telling allows. In *Les Goddesses*, Davey attains the distance that she feels she needs by blending together the historical and the personal with her focus set on the lives and stories of other authors that she then interweaves with her own. The emotional and critical distance that this method provides is described by Davey as "something of an enabler; a way to create parallelism and give the 'muck' a foil."[99]

However, the foil that disguises the chaos and complexity of the 'I' who speaks is not only on account of the script, but it is also down to Davey's delivery or performance of speech. Rather than memorising the script, *Les Goddesses* is narrated via a method of repetition. With one earphone in and the other dangling, Davey listens and attempts to repeat the script that is playing from a small voice recorder that she holds in her hand. The determination and concentration required to repeat a script that is concurrently being heard is apparent in Davey's delivery: the tone and rhythm of her speech has a stilted quality that is quite unlike the intonation of someone

[99]Moyra Davey and Issa Iman, op. cit., para 4.

reading aloud. Art critic Barry Schwabsky has compared her delivery to an act of self-ventriloquism, one that creates a peculiar distance between voice and text.[100] The words that she speaks are the words that she hears and although what she hears is simply herself there is strange displacement of responsibility, as though the words that are spoken are out with her control; she is simply the mouthpiece. The personal, self-reflective content of the script is not communicated in Davey's vocal delivery; the intonations and tonal qualities of voice that are associated with an expression of sincerity are absent. The 'peculiar' distance between voice and text that Schwabsky observed is a *feeling* of misalignment between the voice and the words that voice is repeating.

This misalignment, however, does not throw Davey's narrative into doubt. There is no sense that her story is not to be trusted, but by delivering the script void of the expressive vocal qualities that are commonly associated with sincerity, the peculiar distance between voice and text in *Les Goddesses* highlights the simple fact that there *are* qualities of voice that are anticipated, perhaps even expected, as signals of candid speech. Similarly to *April*, as an edited film, Davey's narration has an intentionality to it; the slips, hesitations, sighs or stutters that remain in the final edit may have been accidental but the inclusion of 'something weird, something out of place,' or 'an unconscious slip' within the film is recognised as a conscious and deliberate inclusion. "I mix chance and choice somewhat scandalously," wrote Davey in her essay 'Notes on Photography and Accident', "… a perfect encapsulation of my own desire for contingency within a structure."[101] By mixing chance and choice, Davey invites the unexpected into her work as a productive tension but one that nevertheless is held at a remove, which is to say, the accidental *is* intentional.

In *The* Narrator, the question, 'what behaviours do we need to perform to be believable?' is accompanied by the question, 'what habits *give us away?'* This question echoes that of Hélène Cixous' who asked of Freud's *Uncanny*, what has been

[100] Barry Schwabsky, 'Moyra Davey'. In: Artforum, Shows, 2011. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201206/moyra-davey-38955> [accessed 10 Feb 2021] para 2.
[101] Moyra Davey, 'Notes on Photography and Accident'. In: 'Long Life Cool White: Photographs and Essays by Moyra Davey' (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2008) p. 86.

produced and what, perhaps unintentionally, has escaped? As a performance, *The Narrator* begins with a description of the space in which the audience find themselves, listing details of the actions that the narrative's 'you' (and I) perform. The work is organised from the outset as simultaneously being a performance of a description and a description of a performance, conflating and confusing ideas of then and now, of description and action, director and directed. This conflation is apparent in the first short page of the script that closes with an acknowledgement of nerves: 'You pause briefly for effect and also partly because you are nervous. Performing has never come naturally.'

After the performance, I was asked by a member of the audience whether my nerves were written into the script, and to a certain extent they were. *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* initially sought to explore the potential of doubt to operate as a critical tool within artists' moving image. The development of my research to incorporate performance reflected a desire to further explore the potential of the unreliable narrator as a productive device for generating doubt. The narrator's uncertain positioning in *April* incorporated doubt within its structure by destabilising the authorial voice; the categories of 'I', 'she' and 'they' all blur into one another, making it unclear whether these characters are distinct or merely emanations of the one mind. By confusing and complicating the positions of 'you' and 'I', this approach was echoed in *The Narrator*. However, as a live reading, the unsettled positioning of 'you' and 'I' was further destabilised by the uncertainty as to when the performance of the 'I' began and when precisely it ended: 'You pause briefly for effect and also partly because you are nervous. Performing has never come naturally.'

Authorial voice

The confusion and conflation of 'you' and 'I' in *The Narrator* is apparent from the outset. The performance opens with the line, 'You are sitting in a darkened room waiting for the audience to settle.' The initial implication was that the 'you' to whom I referred was a second person point of view – that the audience was the character being

described. However, by describing what 'I' was physically doing, just whose point of view was being invoked became doubtful.

"Who are you?" asks literary theorist James Phelan in his essay 'Self-Help for Narratee and Narrative Audience', a question he quickly rephrases, asking instead "who are the 'you's?'"[102] He is discussing Lorrie Moore's collection of short stories written in 1985 titled *Self-Help* in which a character known only as 'you' features in several of the stories as protagonist, a technique that Moore uses to push and pull her reader in and out of the subject position that 'you' offers. She achieves this by maintaining an unstable 'you' throughout, a 'you' who is at points described and at others directed. This combination of description and direction leaves a reader on unstable ground, where the character 'you' appears as both an imagined other (that the reader may observe) and an instructed self (that the reader may become). This is evident in the opening lines of 'How', that reads:

> Begin by meeting him in a class, in a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory. He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes.
>
> A week, a month, a year. Feel discovered, comforted, needed, loved, and start sometimes, somehow, to feel bored. When sad or confused, walk uptown to the movies. Buy popcorn, these things come and go. A week, a month, a year.[103]

In his essay, Phelan identifies two positions in Moore's writing that at first glance appear to be distinct and stable: the first is extratextual, naming and addressing the flesh-and-blood reader (you), and the second is textual, an imagined or fictional 'you' toward whom the narrative is directed. Either way, the narrator is talking *to* someone as opposed to talking *about* them. However, as Phelan notes, this can all quickly change for a reader and, he writes, "another audience position becomes prominent:

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[102] James Phelan, '"Self-Help" for Narratee and Narrative Audience: How "I" – and "You"?' – Read "How". In: Style, vol. 28, no. 3, Second-Person Narrative, fall 1994, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42946256> [accessed: 4 July 2020] p. 350.
[103] Lorrie Moore, 'The Collected Stories' (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2008) p. 577.

the observer role familiar to us in reading homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrations, the position from which we watch characters think."[104] The moment a narrator reveals that they have access to a character's thoughts is the exact moment that the subject position of 'you' recedes, moving back and away from the reader as an available role that they may inhabit. In her essay 'Second-Person Narrative', cultural theorist Mieke Bal describes this movement as a type of translation, a process through which a reader converts an unconventional, second-person narrative into a more familiar format. The difficulty in sustaining second person narration, for both reader and writer, often sees the second person 'you' slotting back into a more traditional substitute 'I.' "The 'you'", she writes, "is simply an 'I' in disguise."[105]

In *The Narrator*, the push and pull in and out of the subject position that 'you' offers, as demonstrated in Lorrie Moore's 'How', is complicated further by the artwork's form as a live performance. Unlike the solitary experience of reading where the unfolding of a text requires a reader willingly engages with an imagined other, be this an intradiegetic character or an extradiegetic narrator, in a live reading the narration is embodied. The situation produces an active 'I' who is addressing a present 'you'. As Bal notes, "the pronouns 'I' and 'you', as opposed to 'she', 'he', 'they' and the like, are totally empty in themselves. They do not refer outside of the situation in which they are uttered."[106] And so although the act of reading a narrative may *feel* like a direct address in which an 'I' corresponds to a 'you', there is a temporal discontinuity, a lapse in time that separates the moment of writing from that of reading. The performative structure of *The Narrator* eliminates that delay by presenting an active 'I' who is speaking *to* a present 'you', who by their very presence reconfirms the speaker as 'I'.

In *The Narrator*, 'you' and 'I' are not stable positions determined by who is speaking and who is being addressed. There is an inconsistency that makes it unclear precisely who is being offered the position of 'you' – the character, the narrator or the audience.

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[104] Peggy Phelan, op.cit., p. 350.
[105] Mieke Bal, 'Second Person Narrative'. In: 'Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History' (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) p. 169.
[106] Ibid, p. 169.

As well as formally structuring the work, *The Narrator* uses the image of the loop to describe and unsettle a notion of character. On the third page of the script the following line appears, 'You read somewhere once that if we say a man has character, we only say that he has an experience that he repeats.' This sentence references a quote from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote, "if a man has character, he has also his typical experience, which always recurs."[107] This notion, almost paradoxical in its logic, of character as a loop that repeats what is typical, informed the structure, concept and content of the performance and resonated with my research into the potential of an unreliable narrator to destabilise a narrative.

This approach to the time loop as a strategic exploration of the repetitions and expectations of a character is present in writer and filmmaker Sarah Tripp's short film *Youth Administrator.* The film recounts the actions of a temporary administrator who performs a small act of theft during the office lunchbreak. It has a minimal, clean aesthetic with only the steady voice of a female narrator as an audible guide in an otherwise silent film. On screen is a pair of pale hands with manicured nails typing continuously at a keyboard that sits just beyond the edge of the film's frame. The story is told from the point of view of a senior administrator who observed the youth administrator lift a thankyou card from a colleague's desk and reposition it on their own. This act of theft is so small that it could seem insignificant, and yet it is described with such care and precision. The meticulous details are depicted without judgement or explanation, as though the narrator is simply offering the facts.

What this detailed description of the youth administrator's actions reveals is something of their character, perhaps nothing more than a glimpse, but one that nevertheless brings into focus the anonymity associated with temporary work. But despite this given insight, the identity of the youth administrator remains largely unknown; with no name, gender, age or image the character is barely there. The lack of details offered acknowledges the youth administrator's temporary status; they were preceded and will be replaced by another anonymous individual. The endless loop of

[107] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil' (London: Penguin Classics, 2003) p. 78.

administrative work will be performed by an endless supply of temporary workers whose hands will be replaced by other hands until it makes no difference whose hands are whose. In defiance of this, there is a singularity to the small act of theft that *Youth Administrator* describes that sets this particular youth administrator apart, however, this singularity is in some ways negated by the very structure of the work itself.

Youth Administrator is a film that loops, both externally as a presentation device (the endless loop of a gallery installation) and internally as a part of the film's form. Beginning with a full screen of pale yellow but ending with green, the larger loop is clearly not intended to be seamless, however, the second loop that is internal to the work itself is discrete and less easily detected. Although this loop returns the spoken narrative to the very start, the narration naturally flows into the repeated section as if a continuation of the story being told. The hands continue to type and so there is no signal, cue or clue to be found in the image. The narrator appears to be building on her story rather than restarting or restating, and so the repetition does not initially register as a return of the same, neither is it decipherable whether or not it is an exact copy of what had previously been. There is a sense that this singular act of theft is not simply repeated by this loop, but it has become caught in it.

Chapter 3: The Unreliable Narrator

You are invited to watch the video from the installation *The Unreliable Narrator*

https://vimeo.com/358479373

Password: MAGIC

The Unreliable Narrator

The Unreliable Narrator is a work in two parts. Part 1 is a video installation that was presented at Hospitalfield's Autumn Season Open Weekend that took place on Saturday 14th – Sunday 15th September 2019. Part 2 is a staged reading that incorporates spoken word and moving image that was performed at three allocated times during the weekend. This chapter will begin with a close description of *The Unreliable Narrator* Part 1 before analysing and contextualising the video installation in relation to my wider research, followed by a description and discussion of the performance, *The Unreliable Narrator* Part 2.

By engaging with the illusions, trickery and duplicity associated with stage magic, *The Unreliable Narrator* builds on the themes of uncertain seeing central to *April.* In the video installation, the material manipulations of the magician are in conflict with the digital manipulations of the video editor; both have at their disposal the tools to visually manipulate not only what the viewer sees but also how they see it. The tension between the two illusory mediums of magic and film speculates on creative agency; who is responsible for the illusion, the magician or the editor?

The relationship that magic has with the truth is complicated. It is described by illusionist Derren Brown as an artform in which "some form of unspoken contract exists between performer and the spectator that ultimately permits deception."[108] My focus on stage magic corresponds directly to my ongoing inquiry into unreliable narration as a method for generating doubt by destabilising an artwork. The title, *The Unreliable* Narrator, links this work to *The Narrator* as a counterpoint that suggests an alternative position will be presented. However, where *The Narrator* entertains the improbable, perhaps impossible, notion of a narrator whose reliability is absolute, *The Unreliable Narrator* begins with the opposite by engaging with notions of duplicity that are associated with the material manipulations of stage magic. A lack of trust is insinuated by the artwork's title, but exactly who the title names remains in doubt. In both the performance and video installation, unstable or unsettled subject positions

[108] Derren Brown, 'Tricks of the Mind', (London: Transworld Publishers, 2007) p. 35.

are generated offering a variety of temporary positions. In the video performance identities merge, conflate and confuse the positions of performer, narrator and character. As in *The Narrator,* this is heightened by the second person 'you', an ambiguous identity that conceals or complicates precisely who is being addressed and by whom.

The Unreliable Narrator Part 1: The Description

Although the context and setting of Hospitalfield House did not conceptually inform *The Unreliable Narrator*, it did physically frame it. For a viewer to encounter the work, they first had to make their way through the corridors and collections of the historic stately home. This description therefore begins with a few notes on the house. Situated in the grounds of the estate, Hospitalfield House is a grand, red sandstone building, Victorian gothic in style, complete with turrets, ornate carved stone detailing and walled gardens. On entering the house, there is a large hallway where a red-carpeted staircase leads up to a number of high ceilinged, chandelier clad rooms including a picture gallery, dining room, music room, and library.

The Unreliable Narrator (Part 1 & 2) was presented in two adjacent rooms on the first floor. In comparison to the rest of the interior, these two rooms are relatively neutral. The walls are painted white and the wooden floorboards are exposed. However, beyond these details the two rooms show little resemblance to one another. They differ in shape and size, with varied ceiling heights, angled walls and different styles of cornicing, mirrors and fireplaces. These differing details acted as a backdrop for an installation that borrowed the disorientating effects of the double. The two adjacent rooms each contained a large freestanding projection screen with identical timber frames. The position of the screens were mirrored, with both angled to face the closed door. Other than the screen, the spaces contained a small wooden bench and two speakers on metal stands. The window shutters were closed and a projected film played on a loop.

The 11-minute film presented in both rooms was identical but this information was not disclosed to the viewer. The work was not synchronised and so the recognisable sound spilling into the hallway of playing cards being shuffled, cut and fanned suggested repetition without revealing the extent of the duplication. Although looped, the film has a recognisable beginning and end and it is this structure that my description will follow.

The film begins with a pair of hands holding a pack of cards. The performer has white skin and dark sleeves. The background and table are both black and the performer's body is cut off at the chest. The directional stage lighting exaggerates the contrast between the black set and pale hands creating the impression of isolated or floating hands – a filmic illusion that is occasionally broken as the stark contrast softens revealing the magician's plain dark t-shirt and bomber jacket.

The playing cards are held still for a moment as a male voice asks, presumably to the camera operator, "Are you on?" There is no reply. The pack of cards is shuffled and the image cuts to black. After a couple of seconds the hands reappear, this time holding a coin that is passed from fist to fist before vanishing and reappearing magically in between the fingers of the wrong hand. Again, the image briefly cuts to black. The sound of playing cards being fanned across the table is heard before the gesture appears on the screen. The magician's hands rest for a moment at either side of the fan, exaggerating the pause by tapping his fingers against the felted table. Keeping time with the rhythm of the magician, the third tap of the table sees the edit cut to black.

In this initial section the playing cards are shuffled, split, fanned and gathered, punctuated both by the magician's performed gestures, such as the tapping of the table, and the editor's insertion of cuts that often result in a black screen. To begin with, there are no magic tricks performed but a visual and audible rhythm is established through the movements of the cards, the magician's hand gestures and the editor's cuts. The pace, however, begins to pick up and the magician cuts and recuts the pack of cards separating them into smaller piles that are restacked in an alternate order. These movements are precise and performed quickly. The cards are gathered and re-split. The magician punctuates his performance with small pauses in which he knocks, taps or spreads his hands wide on the table at either side of the card deck. The pack is neatened into a single stack and after a pause the deck is split by slicing the top half over the bottom so that a single card escapes from the middle. At the exact moment the card escapes, the edit performs a jump cut returning to the previous coin

trick and then back to the cards but the reveal, that was essential to the previous trick's success, was emitted preventing the viewer from witnessing the 'magic'.

As the film continues the audio subtly but progressively separates from the imagery. Certain expectations that have been established by means of the rhythm, as well as the associative relationships between particular images and sounds, are carefully manipulated. What is seen is not always what is heard, and although this irregularity is slight, the misalignment subtly undermines the integrity or reliability of the image. For example, a card is flicked but the sound is absent or an unseen finger click is heard as the edit flicks from one image to another. This particular sound is symbolic. The finger click in magic is a gesture with agency. When the magician clicks it is understood that something has changed that will soon be revealed. In *The Unreliable Narrator* the finger click appears to have a direct impact on the image causing the edit to flick from one image to another while also contributing to the film's musicality; it is a click that keeps time with (or gives time to) a rhythm.

There is a loud click. The magician flicks the top card and it changes from Ace of Diamonds to Joker. An abrupt cut follows and a fan is spread from left to right, a move that appears to swipe the image directly into the next frame. The magician's hand is pressed palm down on the table performing an exaggerated gesture that is clearly part of a larger trick – either there is or there isn't something concealed beneath his hand. He slowly raises his palm to reveal that there is nothing underneath it. He pulls back his hand, bringing it in toward his body in a manner that mimics surprise before swiping the table as if removing unseen dust from the empty space. These theatrical gestures suggest that a magic trick has been successfully performed but the editor's cuts act to conceal rather than reveal the outcome of the trick.

A short section follows in which the magician toys with the cards as if taking a break in between tricks. The cards are turned over, flipped from hand to hand and fiddled with; there is a restless quality to these gestures. The magician coughs to clear his throat and can be heard muttering something under his breath. It appears *unperformed*, as though these movements are not intended for the camera. These unrehearsed gestures

lend an authenticity to this particular sequence. The trick that immediately follows is the only unedited sequence in the entire film and because of this marked absence of the editor's hand, it both builds on and benefits from the sense of reliability generated in the previous scene. In this single unaltered take, the magician is seen meticulously shuffling and re-shuffling the cards, before turning the deck over in his hands and spreading it face up revealing the cards in perfect order, each suit running from low to high followed by the two jokers that sit side by side at the far end of the fan. He places a hand at either side of fan.

This extended sequence sits approximately half-way through the film, and in many ways acts as a tipping point, after which the discrepancies between the sound and image are more pronounced and the editor's hand is more present. For example, shortly after this sequence the magician performs a trick in which he rubs a single card against the pack causing it to inexplicably change into a different card. The sleight of hand is imperceptible and so for a moment the impossible appears to have happened – one card has magically transformed into another. However, immediately after this, the card changes a second time but in this instance the illusion is without doubt a result of the editor's hand. Sitting side by side, these two illusions indicate the underlying tension between the performer and editor who both have at their disposal the tools to visually manipulate not only what the viewer sees but also how they see it. In moments such as this, the editor reveals their hand at work. Like a wink or a nod behind the performer's back, the editor communicates their agency and control over the image.

The manipulation of this trick is exaggerated by the audio that accompanies the next sequence in which the magician moves and shuffles the cards against a soundtrack that does not coincide with the image. The audio is muffled, as though the sounds are heard underwater; it has a digital feel with a heightened bass and when paired with the imagery this produces a surreal or dreamlike quality that ends when the film cuts to black. The image that follows is of the magician shuffling the cards. The frame is tighter and the shuffle is fast and functional. After the strange, dreamlike quality of the previous scene, there is a sense here that the image has been re-set. A sequence of fans

follow, edited together to produce a fast-paced visual and audible rhythm as the hands repeatedly spread the cards across the table. The film often cuts to back at the end of a fan, as though the hand is swiping away the image and clearing the screen.

Watch Your Step

For a viewer of this work the title, *The Unreliable Narrator* is the first piece of information that they are given. It could be understood simply as a warning to be cautious, like a pre-emptive nudge signalling that care should be taken as to who or what is believed. As an entry point to the work, it insinuates that there is someone or something that should not be taken at face value.

By foregrounding the unreliability of the narrator in this way, the artwork (*The Unreliable Narrator*) sets up a situation where the ground is already unstable and the habitual tendency to trust a narrator until given reason not to is reversed, inviting suspicion right from the very start. The narrator is not reliable, so watch your step. This disclosure sits at odds with the typical encounter that a reader will have with an unreliable narrator in fiction. More often than not the detection of an unreliable narrator is a gradual process, a sort of slow reveal that begins with a slight sense of suspicion; perhaps the details of the narrator's story do not quite add up; there might be inconsistencies or contradictions that are irreconcilable with the wider story, and it is because of this; because of the observations made by a reader, that the reliability of the narrator's account is brought into question. For example, in author Charlotte Perkin Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper,* the narrator is a woman whose mental health deteriorated after a 'rest cure' was imposed on her to alleviate her postpartum depression. The room that she inhabits and describes has a hallucinatory quality linked to the enigmatic yellow wallpaper that covers its walls, but because these vivid descriptions emanate from a seemingly unsettled mind, the reality of her experience and the reliability of her account is cast in doubt. Similarly, the narrator of author Kazou Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* misinterprets and represses the details of his story, a habit that only becomes clear as the story progresses and appears to be on account of the suppressive values and morals upheld by his character. Neither author explicitly names their narrator as unreliable, but through the telling of the tale, the reader gradually suspects that the story being told is not necessarily the story as 'it happened'. The author insinuates that there is another, perhaps truer, interpretation of the story's events.

In his essay on auto-fiction and unreliable narration literary theorist Per Krogh Hansen proposes that there is "a general paradoxical characteristic of practically all storytelling, namely that stories tell the (or some) truth, even though what they are telling may not have happened."[109] This notion that a story, regardless of whether or not it is based on lived experience has a relationship to truth is given weight when considered in relation to unreliable narration. "In the practice of reading, after all, we consider every narrator innocent until proven guilty,"[110] writes narrative theorist Kathleen Wall, who along with a wealth of literary theorists (including Booth, 1961; Currie, 2018; Fludernik, 1999; Hansen, 2017; Heyd, 2011) has written extensively about the ways in which we, as readers, might identify an unreliable narrator in fiction. That we entrust ourselves to a text and believe our narrators as 'innocent until proven guilty' is demonstrated not only by the numerous studies generated by the literary trope of the unreliable narrator, but also because of the surprise that is generally experienced when we encounter one. In fiction, the narrator operates as a guide in a world that is already made up, a fictional voice in a fictional world, but one that we trust none the less. And it is less likely that this trust is due to a conscious choice, where a decisive yes permits the fiction to masquerade as a sort of truth, but rather it is an intuitive response, perhaps even a prerequisite for reading. As art critic and writer Jan Verwoert puts it in his essay 'All Writers are Liars', "If we do read on, it's because we feel safe to assume that we won't be fooled."[111]

Therefore, when the narrator of a story is suspected to be an unreliable guide, a certain type of criticality is triggered in a reader, one that disrupts the flow of the narrative by suggesting a distance or difference between the story-world that is being described by the narrator and the story-world suggested by the wider work. These disparities may be the result of the narrator's contradictions, inconsistencies, misperceptions or misreading of a situation. The type of critical engagement that this activates (a reading

[109] Per Krogh Hansen, 'Autofiction and Authorial Unreliable Narration'. In: Emerging Vectors in Narratology, 2017, <https://www.academia.edu/37030194/Autofiction_and_authorial_unreliable_narration> [accessed 19 Jul. 2019] p. 4.
[110] Kathleen Wall, '"The Remains of the Day" and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration'. In: The Journal of Narrative Technique, Vol 24, No. 1, 1994, p. 20.
[111] Jan, Verwoert, 'Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want' (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010) p. 74.

against the grain of the text/work) can have a destabilizing quality and unsettling effect. In *The Unreliable Narrator* the situation is reversed. By naming the narrator as fallible from the outset, the artwork sets up a destabilising proposition, one that attempts to sidestep the initial stage of trust that writers such a Krogh and Verwoert suggest is intuitive. If trust is considered in this way, as an intuitive or permitted base line when engaging with a narrative, then how may an artwork operate when the grounds for trust are refused right from the start?

An example of the disorientating effect that a fallible narrator can have on a reader is demonstrated by Tom McCarthy in his novel *Remainder* (2005). About a third of the way through the novel there is a scene in which an inconsistent description saw me re-read the same three or four pages of the story several times. In this scene, the unnamed narrator is describing a shared meal that he had with a homeless man in a small café. He describes the young female waitress, the white wine, the chequered tablecloth and details their conversation that touches on ideas of character, authenticity and the impossibility of performing a true self. During their conversation, the narrator becomes increasingly agitated by his inability to find the right words and in a bid to better express himself gestures enthusiastically knocking over his glass of white wine. At this stage of the story small details begin to change. The tablecloth that was previously chequered has turned white with a developing stain that is no longer white wine but a deep shade of red. Although subtle, these differing details triggered suspicion and interrupted the onward march of the narrative, resulting in an unexpected and abrupt exit (experienced by the reader) from the narrator's fictional world.

As *Remainder's* reader, I doubted my own reliability and returned to the text with a critical eye, re-reading the preceding pages to determine whether the inconsistencies were down to my own fallibility, that perhaps I had misremembered or misread the description. On realising that the discrepancies were in fact a flaw in the text, doubt was transferred to the author, as if the scene's inconsistencies were a disappointing oversight on McCarthy's part. However, as the short scene progressed details continued to change. The waitress became a waiter who, the narrator notes, "came

back over. He was...She was young, with large dark glasses, an Italian woman. Large breasts. Small."[112] Stumbling over the details of his own story it becomes apparent that the shifting details were not an oversight, but a deviation performed by the narrator who concludes this scene with a confession, "the truth is, I've been making all this up."[113] The narrator's admission solves the problem by providing a reason for the shifting details but by holding his hands up and confessing, the narrator does not become more trustworthy. If anything, by revealing a capacity for duplicity the narrator's revelation casts doubt on the entire narrative, where trust becomes a choice rather than a given. The type of distance that is established in a scene such as this, where one is prompted to read against the grain of the text is an example of doubt generating a sense of criticality. In McCarthy's case, this single inconsistent scene was only four pages long, but doubt is infectious and as such, altered my reading of the entire book.

Although the title *The Unreliable Narrator* frames the work, signalling a potential duplicity at play, it was the very last detail and essentially the final frame that I placed on the work. My decision to do so was convoluted and complicated by a long list of possibilities; titles that talked about magic, belief, illusion or suspended disbelief, all of which were either too prescriptive or too descriptive and seemed to force the work to be read in a particular way. And although it had been my original intention to explore the possibilities of the trope of the unreliable narrator, the artwork that I produced, to my mind, had moved away from examining this explicitly. Therefore, to reframe the work by way of the title operated as a final fold, looping the work right back to my original intention.

[112] Tom McCarthy, 'Remainder' (New York: Vintage Books, 2005) p. 114.
[113] Ibid, p. 114

Magic and Film

In an interview with Vanity Fair, the magician Teller insists that anyone who claims that they can watch a magic trick without trying to figure out how it is done is lying.[114] A spectator casts a careful eye over the unfolding event; if the magician accidentally slips, revealing the mechanics of the trick, then the illusion will immediately fail. The scrutiny, and perhaps scepticism of the spectator is arguably an essential element of the performance's success. For a magic trick to be successful, argues magician and historian Peter Lamont notes in his book *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem*, there must be a juxtaposition between the conviction that something cannot happen and the observation that it just did. "Magic is neither theatre or fiction," writes Lamont, "in that whatever the theatrical or fictional elements might be involved, the essence of magic is that something impossible appears to happen in real time and space. To truly experience an impossible event, you must observe an event that you truly believe to be impossible."[115]

The tension between what is seen and what actually occurred is complicated in *The Unreliable Narrator* Part 1 (the video installation) by the form of film. Unlike in stage magic, where the spectacle is scrutinized and the invisible strings are sought out, the illusions of film rarely entice a viewer to figure out their tricks. Rather than being compelled to wonder, 'how did they do that?', a film viewer would be more likely to ask, 'what happens next?' However, as film theorist Mathew Solomon points out in his book *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century*, this was not always the case. In his book long study of the relationship between stage magic and film, Solomon notes that early cinema coincided with the golden age of theatrical magic, with magicians taking advantage of the deceptive possibilities inherent to the medium of film to create filmic illusions and spectacles

[114] Teller, 'Penn and Teller are Revealing How Their Magic Tricks are Done – and it's O.K.', Vanity Fair, 2015 <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/09/penn-and-teller-fool-us-revealing-tricks> [accessed 9 Mar 2020] para 27.
[115] Peter Lamont, 'Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem' (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 45.

that paralleled those of stage magic.[116] These early films, commonly known as trick films, were made popular by stage magicians such as French illusionist Georges Méliès, who after viewing the first film of the Lumiére Brothers in 1895 (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*) recognised the illusive potential in film, describing what he saw as an 'extraordinary trick'[117].

In his films, Méliès' developed methods of stop motion, fade-outs, double exposure and superimposition to create surreal illusions that often depicted extreme transformations of the human body. For example, in *The Four Troublesome Heads* (1898), a magician (played by Méliès) enters the frame and stands between two tables. He removes his own head and puts it on one of the tables where it starts talking and looking around. He repeats the action with a new head appearing on his shoulders each time until four identical heads are presented at once. The surreal scene, in which four versions of Méliès' head simultaneously exist, all talking at once and looking around, was one of the first known uses of multiple exposure in moving image and so for an audience *how* the illusion was produced would have been a technological mystery. Unlike the well-versed myth that early film viewers were excessively credulous and would flee the cinema to escape a collision with an incoming train (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, The Lumiére Brothers, 1895), Solomon argues that the trick films and fairy tales of filmmakers such as Méliès would have been received by an audience as a technological spectacle; an unfamiliar form of magic in which time could be interrupted and reconstructed, evoking a sense of bewilderment and wonder. Like stage magic, the apparent realism of the film image made it a successful illusion, but one that was understood as an illusion nonetheless.

As film theorist Alan Nadel points out in his essay 'Second Nature, Cinematic Narrative', the familiarization of cinema over the last one hundred years has taught viewers to "comprehend and to naturalize … the proportions of the cinematic shot, the demands of the mobile frame, the disruption of the cut, and the interplay of edited

[116] Mathew Solomon, 'Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century' (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010) p. 3.
[117] Ibid, p. 4.

moving images."[118] Nadel argues that the film viewer has become so accustomed to the illusions of cinema that the conventions are, to a certain extent, rendered invisible; an acquired skill that has evolved to become second nature, a practice, he concludes, that passes for perception. Where the trick films of early cinema left an audience wondering *how* the illusion was accomplished, contemporary cinema viewers are more likely to engage with the film's larger narrative with little compulsion to scrutinize the mechanics of the filmic illusion. This sentiment is echoed by film theorist Seymour Chatman in his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Chatman argues that, "to naturalize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to 'forget' its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading-out process, to incorporate it into one's interpretive net."[119]

As an artist's film, *The Unreliable Narrator's* audience has a different 'interpretative net' than mainstream narrative cinema. A viewer is cued to read an artwork in a particular manner and ask questions as to why the work is as it is. Unlike in cinema, the reading-out process does not absorb the specific form of the artwork, the artistic techniques or the subject matter in favour of a larger narrative, but rather, each component of the work is understood as a potential clue that might reveal the artwork's intended meaning. Therefore, by presenting a magician performing close magic to camera, *The Unreliable Narrator* immediately reveals an interest in illusion as a concept or method that the video installation is engaged with. The relationship between seeing and believing that is associated with the illusions of stage magic is transferred into the reading-out process that seeks to interpret the artwork.

In many ways, illusion itself became a building block or material that as a filmmaker I was able to manipulate by carefully cutting and re-ordering the film footage. The sleight of hand performed by the magician in *The Unreliable Narrator*, when, for example, he rubs a single card against the pack causing it to inexplicably change into a different card is imperceptible and so for a moment the impossible appears to have

[118] Alan Nadel, op. cit., p. 428.
[119] Seymour Chatman, 'Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film'. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 49.

happened – one card has magically transformed into another. However, these tricks are carefully and meticulously edited so that at points it is doubtful precisely who is responsible for the illusion, the magician or the filmmaker. This underlying tension between the magician and filmmaker, who both have at their disposal the tools to visually manipulate not only what the viewer sees but also how they see it, was what led the editing process and informed the specific installation of the artwork as a whole. The tension between the two illusory mediums of magic and film was intended to speculate on creative agency asking: who is responsible for the illusion, the magician or the editor?

In his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', cultural critic Walter Benjamin compares the hand of the filmmaker to that of the surgeon, a position he considers to be the polar opposite to that of the magician. For Benjamin, the illusions of the magician are performed at a distance similar to that of painting; reality is manipulated, but not beyond its surface. In the hands of the surgeon, the patient's body is sliced into, eradicating the distance between himself and the body he is operating upon. In Benjamin's analogy, the cuts, splices and rearrangements of the filmmaker similarly slice through the surface of its subject, an operation that he argues penetrates reality to produce "an aspect of reality that is free from all equipment."[120]

Benjamin's suggestion that by operating *on* reality, a filmmaker can produce an independent aspect *of* reality, is a sentiment echoed by philosopher Stanley Cavell. In his book *The World Viewed* (1971), Cavell argues that rather than merely presenting or describing reality, film screens or projects reality. "In screening reality, film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality before us, i.e., withholds reality before us. We are tantalized at once by our subjection to it and by its subjection to our views of it."[121] However, by arguing for the role that 'reality' plays in film, Cavell is not ignoring what he describes as the "pervasive intellectual fashion" that tells us that "we never really, and never really can, see reality as it is." His writing acknowledges this sceptical

[120] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In: 'Art in Theory' (Oxford: Blackwell: 2003) p. 523.
[121] Stanley Cavell, 'More Of The World Viewed. In: The Georgia Review', Winter 1974, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter 1974), pp. 571-631 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41397154> [accessed 1st February 2021] p. 594.

position while simultaneously resisting this resistance to reality. He does so because of his conviction that, it is theoretical thought (and not lived experience) that challenges reality, and that "a general dismissal of reality depends upon theories (of knowledge, of science, of art, of reality, of realism) whose power to convince is hardly greater than reality's own."[122]

And reality *is* convincing. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observes in his extended essay 'On Certainty', we only need to look at the way that we talk to see that everyday speech *shows* that we are convinced that an objective reality exists; "My life shows that I know or am certain that there is chair over there, or a door, and so on – I tell a friend e.g., 'take that chair over there,' 'shut the door,' etc."[123] For Wittgenstein, it would be absurd to ask someone to 'move that chair over there' if you doubted the fact that there was a chair there that could be moved. But although the request to move the chair shows that there is no doubt as to whether or not there is in fact a chair there, it does not show that a doubt could not be raised. What Wittgenstein reiterates over and over is that everyday speech *holds* things as certain, despite the possibility of there being an error, perhaps even because of it.

What is interesting about Cavell's film theory is the type of hold he enlists with regards to the concepts, ideas and theories that he references. If speech holds things as true despite the possibility of there being an error, Cavell offers no such commitment. Rather than reducing his argument to the familiar binary of true or false, right or wrong, Cavell holds open the proposition that reality can neither be dismissed by theory nor redeemed by common sense; neither argument can outweigh the other. He therefore holds reality in such a way that incorporates doubt.

This sits in opposition to the fact that more often than not doubt tends to vanish with articulation. An utterance is an edited enunciation that emits far more than it states. Certain words have been chosen over others to describe, interpret and to explain and as such, the act of both speaking and writing involve a commitment to a particular

[122] Ibid, p. 165.
[123] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'On Certainty' (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969) p. 7.

truth; this may only be a provisional or temporary position, but nevertheless, doubt is cast aside. Therefore, for Cavell to be able to suspend the concept of reality as neither true nor false, to hold it in doubt, while simultaneously positioning the concept as a frame of reference for his discourse on film, allows him to not only utilise doubt as a form of criticality but also offer this position out to his reader.

In his book, *Doubt*, art historian Richard Shiff writes, "We value critics for the reliability of their judgement in fitting an object or situation to an appropriate category, announcing its proper identity. Challenging the categories themselves is far less common than arguing over their fit or inventing additional ones to contain an experiential overflow."[124] By holding reality in doubt, Cavell allows the theoretically unsettled (and experientially *unsettling*) nature of what we deem reality, or unreality, to remain unsettled. Regardless of whether film is considered a projection of reality or a representation of it, Cavell's film theory draws attention to the lack of categories available to define what it is that we find perplexing about film's relationship to the real.

As a video installation, *The Unreliable Narrator* may cause a viewer to doubt where the 'real' magic ends and the editorial manipulations begin, they may doubt whether or not the two films presented in the installation's adjacent rooms are variations of one another or whether the installation itself is a trick; a double masquerading as difference, and these doubts may or may not be enough to impel a viewer to unpick the given illusions to determine what is really magic and what is really just an image that has been manipulated. Although it is doubtful that such a diligent viewer exists, I do not doubt that *The Unreliable Narrator* brings to the fore the relationship between seeing and believing, reality and illusion as a question and concern that structures the work.

[124] Richard Shiff, 'Doubt' (New York: Routledge, 2008) p. 18.

Act Natural

Both the video installation and the performance (*The Unreliable Narrator: Part 1 & Part 2*) consider the role that the body might play in establishing notions of trust, reliability and authenticity. In both the performance and the video installation rehearsed gestures are performed to either conceal (the magician's precise sleight of hand) or convince (the protagonist's practiced gestures in the narrative). However, alongside these considered movements and practiced gestures there are other actions and motions that are described or enacted by the body that seem less self-aware, less rehearsed and appear to have escaped unintentionally.

In Part 1, the magician performs precise gestures to disguise sleight of hand. A playing card may be switched or slid under another, or a coin carefully concealed behind closed fingers causing it to vanish as if by magic into thin air. These gestures are skilful, careful and precise and are employed specifically to conceal, distract and deceive. The result is that the visible and the actual peel apart – what is seen does not necessarily coincide with what actually happened. It may appear that a coin has disappeared into thin air, and although a spectator may know that logically this is not the case, the visual information received as a result of the magician's sleight of hand contradicts this.

There is also a second set of gestures that the magician performs throughout the film that punctuates the flow of imagery, creating pauses before, after or in the middle of a trick. Fingers are clicked or tapped against the table; hands are spread palm down and placed decisively at either side of the pack of cards. Gestures are performed that exaggerate the unexpected as though the magician shares the spectator's surprise, for instance a hand that is pressed firmly down on the table is lifted to reveal that there is in fact nothing underneath it after which the same hand recoils mimicking disbelief. These theatrical gestures add drama and suspense as well as punctuation to the performance, providing the viewer just enough time to register the impossible event that that had just occurred. However, alongside these conventional gestures of showmanship there is a third set of gestures that the magician enacts that appear less

intentional and less performed and it is these gestures that I would like to focus on. These are subtle movements that seem to be less considered or consciously enacted, in other words they don't appear to have an intended purpose or desired effect.

About one third of the way through the film there is a short section in which the magician toys with the playing cards as if taking a break in between tricks. The cards are turned over, flipped from hand to hand and fiddled with; there is a restless quality to these movements. The magician coughs to clear his throat and can be heard muttering something under his breath. In my initial description of the work, I describe these movements as appearing unrehearsed, unperformed and authentic. My choice of the word authentic here is of note.

As a result of writing the detailed description that opens this chapter, I became aware of certain qualities in the artwork that I had not previously considered with any criticality; the relevance of the gestures that are present in both components of the work are a key example of this. The act of writing, or more precisely the act of describing the artwork, revealed certain qualities and attributes to me that I now understand to be of significance to my inquiry. This process could be considered as the catalyst for a shift in my own position that allowed me to move from being the producer of the work to becoming its viewer, establishing a critical distance. Not only did this process have the intended result of being able to see the artwork with a more objective eye, but it also allowed me to unpick intuitive or unconscious decisions that I had made throughout the process, which brought with it an uncanny sensation of witnessing myself as if from a distance.

I am discussing the descriptive process here because what followed this description highlights a particular type of assumption that I am curious to unravel, and one that I believe is productive to analyse. To re-read my close description was to witness my own slips, preconceptions and unacknowledged understanding of what a gesture might be or mean. For example, as stated above, I describe the movements of the magician as 'unrehearsed, unperformed and authentic'. Without any further explanation, the word authentic in this context looks, sounds and feels right. It

suggests that the magician's movements in this short section were genuine, that they lacked self-awareness and were driven less by a pre-meditated impulse but were perhaps performed intuitively without an intended aim or target. By describing behaviour as being more authentic, a small associative step could lead to the conclusion this behaviour is also more true or sincere providing access to an essential self that sits beneath the performance. What is curious about these specific gestures is therefore not that they appear to be authentic, but that I chose to describe them in this way.

There is a work by video artist Atelia Shaw titled *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) that was introduced to me by a friend and one that I subsequently included in a film screening that I curated.[125] The work includes a filmed interview with writer Kathy Acker who discusses and reads from her novel of the same name, *Empire of the Senseless.* Large sections of the film show her talking to someone sitting just beyond the film's frame in a head and shoulders shot that is edited together with footage of female body builders. My friend told me that when she watched this film there were moments where it appeared as if Acker's mask had dropped as though she had stopped performing her professional self, revealing something that felt more sincere. It might have been a raised eyebrow or an expression that for a brief moment passed across her face. She said that these moments felt authentic, as though she had seen or had access to the real Kathy Acker, as if such a thing exists. When I watched the short film it was these slips that I was searching for. The moments where the real might have accidentally escaped as though authenticity could be caught on camera and held between the film's frames.

There is no argument being made here for the existence of an essential or authentic self that sits below the surface; as a concept this romantic notion has long been debunked, however, as my own description of *The Unreliable Narrator* reveals there is an understanding of, and perhaps even desire for authenticity that lingers on. In his essay, 'The Authenticity Issue*',* psychoanalyst Adam Phillips compares this underlying

[125] 'Walk Notes and Hold Notes', screening curated by Sarah Forrest for GoMA, Glasgow, 2016.

and enduring understanding of authenticity to that of a phantom limb[126], where an absence is acknowledged through an apparent presence, which is to say that despite the transformation of a word's meaning over time, its historical use often persists.

This persistent meaning, not yet detached but simply submerged, can be found in certain sentiments that are spoken day-to-day. For instance, we are told to trust our guts or listen to our hearts, as if an authentic and reliable self is an accessible attribute sitting there inside of us. Art critic and writer Elvia Wilk describes a similar linguistic haunting in her essay 'Performing Authenticity', where she discusses the postmodern insistence that the endless simulacra of our time has made material authenticity irrelevant. "Yet the idea," she writes, "that such a loss of anything original is a contemporary condition simply reinforces the idea that there was at some point an authentic baseline for us to have strayed from."[127] If authenticity is a belief that we cannot let go of then what, asks Phillips later in his essay, "does the desire for authenticity help us to forget?"[128] There is a nod to nostalgia embedded in the question itself that suggests that our desire for authenticity is a desire for what (never) was – an unfounded belief in a former, truer version of ourselves. However, what strikes me about Phillips' question is that perhaps what such a desire conceals and forgets is that authenticity itself is a powerful myth.

In the introduction to his book, *On Doubt*, philosopher Vilém Flusser argues that a held belief can either be authentic or inauthentic, a status that describes whether or not a belief has been doubted. An authentic (undoubted) belief is considered to be a belief that is upheld by faith, a state of mind that the philosopher regards as primordial. However, faith is not considered to be a permanent position. Faith precedes doubt; it is 'the starting point of doubt' or 'the state of mind before doubt.'[129] Authenticity then, is understood to be a state of mind that has not (yet) been corrupted

[126] Adam Phillips, 'On Balance' (London: Penguin Books, 2010) p. 280.
[127] Elvia Wilk, 'Performing Authenticity', 2012. <http://www.eadersdigest.com/index.html> [accessed: 5 Apr 2019] p. 3.
[128] Adam Phillips, op. cit., p. 335.
[129] Vilém Flusser, 'Thought and Reflection'. In: Flusser Studies 1. <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/thought-reflection01.pdf> [accessed 21 July 2021] p. 3.

by doubt. The religious undertone associated with ideas of faith surfaces in Flusser's discussion of 'The Garden of Eden,' 'the myth of Paradise', from which, he writes, "we were expelled and cast out because we ate the forbidden fruit of discrimination between good and evil, the fruit of division and doubt."[130] For Flusser, this myth tells us a tale not only about the origins of doubt but it is also a tale about the mystery of the emergence of thought. He considers the act of thinking and the act of doubting to be synonymous, with both performing the division and ongoing reordering of what is sensed, known and felt.

Flusser's philosophy tells us that an authentic belief is a belief that is whole, that has not been split, divided or rearranged by doubt and that each time we doubt, we re-enact the mythical expulsion from Paradise by destroying the whole or the 'one-ness' that is unique to undoubted, and therefore 'authentic' belief. Following this, an inauthentic belief is a belief that has been doubted, that has been split, divided, rearranged and this is a process that cannot be reversed. The desire to return to authenticity, and any attempts to regain it, is foiled by the simple fact that we cannot un-doubt that which has been doubted. The nostalgia embedded in Phillips' question, 'what does the desire for authenticity help us to forget?', is perhaps then a desire to simply forget. But once doubt (or 'thought') has rendered the authentic inauthentic, there is no return. Although it is possible that a new, more sophisticated or refined 'certainty' may be found, the new belief will never be an authentic belief. It will always be marked by doubt, because the belief will "always conserve the sign of the doubt that was their midwife."[131] That doubt is irreversible by nature is not to say that doubt cannot or will not end – whether authentic or inauthentic, belief temporarily allows our convictions to hold true – but it is the irreversibility of doubt, because it leaves its mark on its object, that it maintains its agency as an active and ongoing critical position.

As a film editor I chose to include the 'unrehearsed, unperformed and authentic' sequence in *The Unreliable Narrator* as a contrast and counterbalance to the

[130] Ibid, p. 3.
[131] Ibid, p. 3.

measured and intentional gestures performed by the magician. This glimpse 'behind the scenes', in which the performer appears unaware that the camera is still rolling produces the illusion that what is being seen is somehow more real, that it has a closer, more direct relationship to what is understood to be reality. However, as a writer my decision to include the word authentic in the thick description, despite my ambivalence, follows a different line of inquiry. What is it to include an error in a text, address the error and explore the reasons why it is there in the first place? The written slips that unconsciously escape are normally edited out. As a writer you go back and correct, bringing the text in line with the meaning that you are attempting to produce. Returning to my thick description in order to analyse the lapses in objectivity, or 'unconscious slips' is therefore to point out an error, one that triggered a further split in myself that echoes the shift from producer of *The Unreliable Narrator* to viewer. Drawing attention to this additional shift is a digression. A pause to point a finger at the writer, questioning the reliability of their account.

In her essay '"The Remains of the Day" and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration', literary theorist Kathleen Wall asks whether a narrator who admits their unreliability is still unreliable? "What are the limits of the unreflective, inaccurate narrator? Can we make an absolute distinction between the unconscious 'slips' or giveaways and conscious declarations?"[132] By providing the means to correct his or her unreliability does the narrator re-emerge transformed into a trustworthy guide, or is such a clean cut of identities as mythical a proposition as the notion of an authentic self? The polar positions of reliable versus unreliable as fixed categories in which people may be placed are too simplistic, and any attempt to do so would demand a gross reduction of an individual's character. People are complicated. However, as Wall notes, "The standard definitions of an unreliable narrator presupposes a reliable counterpart who is the rational, self-present subject of humanism,"[133] as if such a thing exists. It could be said that there is no completely reliable narrator, perhaps no reliable academic either. My point here, however, is not to renounce all responsibility for the

[132] Kathleen Wall, op. cit., p. 21.
[133] Ibid, p. 21.

accuracy or reliability of this text, but to propose and perhaps produce a space of suspension that is central to my research as an exploration of doubt.

The Unreliable Narrator Part 2

Unlike *The Unreliable Narrator* (Part 1), where the magician's precise gestures were performed to conceal, the spoken word performance (Part 2) focuses on the type of gestures that might be used to convince. Part 2 was a spoken word performance, that I both wrote and performed. The twenty-minute performance was presented in one of the two rooms used for the video installation *The Unreliable Narrator* (Part 1). The reading was accompanied by a silent video projection of four interlinked spinning rings that, following the title sequence of a ticking metronome, remained on screen for the duration of the performance. To perform the piece, I sat at a small desk to the left of the projection screen that faced the seated audience. The reading opened with the line, 'Nobody believed a word that you said.' This opening sentence set the stage for the story that followed, one that revealed not only what the disbelieved words were, but perhaps more importantly, the story explored what triggered such a lack of belief. After a pause, the performer continued, explaining, 'This wasn't a case of paranoia or due to your lacking confidence. They told you, one after another that you just weren't very convincing.'

By addressing the act of public speaking in the narrative, while simultaneously speaking publicly in real life, *The Unreliable Narrator* acts as an echo of *The Narrator*. However, where *The Narrator* addressed the permeability of the various speaking positions that it presented (performer, narrator, character, audience), and the slippages between these roles, *The Unreliable Narrator's* focus was on the learned gestures that can often unintentionally reveal rather conceal the emotional states they are intended to disguise.

As the story progressed it became apparent that the character named as 'you' had been attending a vocal coaching session, one that had promised to improve the participant's communication and presentation skills, enabling the group to become

‘better performers, better public speakers, better and more believable orators.’ During this session, the character named as ‘you’ had given a short presentation on the given subject of real life, and it was this presentation that was considered unconvincing. The character, however, had consciously made all of the right gestures and body movements necessary to suggest reliability and present themselves as a believable orator. They had ‘held eye contact, varied (their) your tone, gestured with both hands and pretty much stuck to the facts…’ Yet despite performing the qualities and gestures associated with candid speech, the character was not believed.

The lack of belief in the presentation given by the character ‘you’ was not rooted in the words that she spoke, but it was a critique of the body, whereby the gestures, tone, timbre and tightness of the character’s jaw had collectively stopped the other participants from believing what was said. The irony, to some extent, is that the character’s inability to convince the listeners that what was being said was true did not relate to the content of their story, which was an absurd tale of a vanishing hand, but was a critique based on the performance of the body.

Throughout the story, there are repeated descriptions of the act of talking aloud that focus on gesture, and these details are mirrored in the performance. For example, the story details the hand movements made by the character used to accentuate a point, or the eye contact that was consciously maintained, public speaking techniques and gestures that I, as performer, also draw from while telling the story. Although subtle, the concurrent description and embodied performance of the act of public speaking conflates the two subject positions of narrator (the I who is speaking) and narrated (the you of the story). This fusion is not a permanent effect. It is clear that the performer is giving voice to a set of events that had previously occurred, but what remains uncertain is where exactly the performance begins and ends, in other words, how reliable is the performer’s body? Which gestures, tics and movements are consciously produced as part of the performance and which have unintentionally escaped? The performance does not resolve this question but neither does it pose it with any force. The mirroring of gestures is subtle so as to remain uncertain, with the intention of blurring but not erasing the line between description and appearance.

Conclusion

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen: Exploring Doubt as a Critical Tool within Artists' Moving Image Practice investigates the critical potential of doubt when made manifest *within* an artwork as an attribute or affect. The PhD consists of three main artworks which, together with this written thesis, investigate doubt as a subject, method and, in certain respects, a desired outcome of this body of research. The artworks include *April*, a single screen video, *The Narrator*, a spoken word performance with video and *The Unreliable Narrator,* a video installation and spoken word performance.

This body of research contributes to both practice led research (as a method that incorporates doubt) and artists' moving image (that presents, performs and pursues doubt), with a particular focus on moving image that employs structural methods to critically distance and engage its viewer.

Doubt is central to the subject matter specific to each of the three artworks produced. The research themes of prophetic sight and stage magic that are key to *April* and *The Unreliable Narrator* respectively consider modes of seeing and believing, cognition and doubt. As well as thematically exploring the subject of doubt, my research pursues doubt as an affect or consequence of the artwork itself. There are various structural methods that I have explored to achieve this, for example the use of repetition in narrative or filmic loops that can be seen in my single screen film *April* and video performance *The Narrator*.

My research positions doubt not only as the subject of my inquiry, but as a methodology in its own right. In an interview in The Brooklyn Rail, art historian Richard Shiff proposes a distinct difference in the types of thought performed by artists and critics, writing, "If we have to distinguish artists from critics we would do so this way: artists are the believers, critics are the doubters."[134] Within my research, I occupy both of these positions, combining the artistic production of videos, performances and

[134] Richard Shiff, 'In Conversation: Richard Shiff with Katy Siegel'. In: The Brooklyn Rail, May 2008 <https://brooklynrail.org/2008/05/art/richard-shiff-with-katy-siegel> [accessed 24 Dec 2016] para 20.

installations with a critical reflection on the themes, context and impact of these artworks. As both artist and critic, positions characterised by Shiff as modes of belief and doubt, my written thesis contains a duality, one that offers me a form of critical closeness. In her essay 'Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality', writer and curator Irit Rogoff defines the term criticality as a distinct mode of enquiry that, unlike 'criticism' or 'critique' can operate "from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness."[135] This notion of being embedded implies a resistance to the more traditional form of critical distance, suggesting instead a type of closeness; a criticality that Rogoff notes is not in search of an answer but rather seeks to "access a different mode of inhabitation."[136]

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen commenced with the production of *April:* a single screen video that took prophetic second sight as its theme through which to explore the subject of doubt. The video's narrative structure and shifting mode of address, as well as the loss and occasional gain of descriptive details, responds to the oral tradition from which the work draws, relying less on written accuracy than it does on the memory, character and intention of the storyteller. Narrated by a Scottish woman, the film's text tells a story that shifts from one woman's perspective to another, following the journey of an unseen but verbally described photograph. She shifts from first person to third, lending her voice to a character S who is narrating a story to K. There are moments within the spoken text where the narrator slips, shifting from her to I mid-sentence, blurring, merging or conflating her own identity with the women whose story she is telling.

April is not linear, it does not follow a chronological line but is a digressive, circular, multiple narrative that is grounded on a specificity of place. The relationship between what is seen (as image) and what is said (as voice over) roots the narrative in the given landscape (the spoken description of landscape corresponds to the image), however, neither voice nor image offer a reliable or stable depiction of time. *April's* looping structure contains a nested narrative that repeats and morphs, a technique that both

[135] Rogoff, Irit, 'Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality'. In: Transform, 2006, http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/ rogoff-smuggling> [accessed 25 Jan 2019] p. 2.
[136] Ibid, p. 2.

mimics and tests the limits of memory. On two separate occasions within the film, a woman mysteriously 'appears' in the narrator's kitchen. The enigmatic nature of her arrival hints at the supernatural but without committing to such a source the woman's presence (or lack of) remains ambiguous and open to the interpretation of a viewer. To doubt what you saw, or whether in fact you saw anything at all, is a theme that weaves through my research and is particularly significant to the subject of second sight. There are tensions present in *April* that seek to destabilise the ordinary boundaries between inside and outside, mind and world, illusion and reality that link the work to Freud's concept of 'the uncanny'. The psychological tension that doubting one's vision elicits is heightened by the solitary nature of such an experience. Without a corroboratory witness, doubt endures.

As literary scholar Terry Castle argues in her essay, 'Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', the post-Enlightenment concept of mind has rhetorically folded the spectral and supernatural back into itself, relocating it instead in "our theory of imagination".[137] This displacement of the spectral from being an external sight to an internal evocation introduced, what Castle describes as "a latent irrationalism" into the realm of mental experience. She writes, "If ghosts were thoughts, then thoughts themselves took on – at least notionally – the haunting reality of ghosts."[138]

The notion of a psychological haunting is carried into *The Narrator's* exploration of character as a temporary guise that can be slipped on or off, or in the case of *The Narrator*, as an externally imposed and haunting embodiment. *The Narrator* builds on the concerns raised in *April* both in terms of its structure (that repeats, loops) and its focus on an unstable authorial voice. *The Narrator* opens with an invitation to imagine a situation in which there is 'no doubt, no contradictions, no inconsistencies, no conflicting feelings, thoughts, urges, no shades of grey.' It is a proposition that functions as a speculative 'what if?'

[137] Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie' (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 32.
[138] Ibid, p. 42.

What if you knew no doubt? By putting these questions into play, *The Narrator* entertains the improbable, perhaps impossible, notion of a narrator whose reliability is absolute. However, rather than reflecting on this proposition, the work unravels it. There are various disorientating techniques used in *The Narrator* that actively resist stability. The work performs an imprecise loop that folds the narrative that it tells back in on itself, it repeats phrases, intentionally confuses and complicates the authorial voice, reflecting throughout on the instability of the term 'character'. The work's repetitive and looping form resists closure, offering instead a suspended narrative that engages with, and in many ways relies on, the real time and 'liveness' of performance.

Each of the three artworks that I have produced explore the inherent tensions between knowing and feeling; the slips between what one might intellectually grasp but emotionally or psychologically struggle to fix. This is most apparent in *The Unreliable Narrator*, a work that by engaging with the subject of stage magic brings into sharp focus the relationship between seeing and believing, cognition and doubt. Magic taps into a mode of feeling, a sense of bewilderment, where what is seen contradicts with what is known producing a situation in which one may be certain of what they have seen, yet still question what to believe. Although stage magic makes no claim for real power over anything other than the audience's perception, there is an argument to be made for the power of enchantment. "The condition of bewilderment," writes Sally O'Reilly, "arises when the solidity of the narrative we call logic starts to melt away."[139] This lapse in logic whereby the impossible appears as possible challenges the relationship between perception and reality, presenting instead a situation, that in many respects, is both fictional *and* real. To know the origin of an illusion yet experience it as real engenders a split in the self, a dissonance of sorts, that is central to my understanding of doubt as a state of suspension. However, to be enchanted, notes artist, writer and magician, Jonathan Allen, does not necessarily equate to being absorbed; one may, he writes, "remain critical and … under spectacle's spell simultaneously."[140]

[139] Sally O'Reilly, 'Magic Show' (London: Hayward Publishing, 2010) p. 11.
[140] Jonathan Allen, 'From Bosh to Blackpool'. In: 'Magic Show' (London: Hayward Publishing, 2010) p. 19.

In writer Maggie Nelson's auto-theory work, *The Argonauts*, she writes, "We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. We ought to, but we don't—or at least, we don't quite as readily."[141] The feeling of 'and' that Nelson proposes is significant to my understanding of doubt as a critical tool. In many ways *What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen* could be considered an inhabitation of the 'and' as a method of resisting the closure that the act of doubting largely pursues.

What is Seen, What is Said to be Seen began with practice, by way of the production of *April*, and it will be followed by practice. I understand the research that this thesis presents to be the beginning, rather than the end, of my inquiry into doubt.

[141] Maggie Nelson, 'The Argonauts' (London: Melville House, 2015) p. 68.

Appendix

The Narrator: The Script*

The Narrator

You are sitting in a darkened room waiting for the audience to settle. You lean forward in your chair, take a sip of water from a glass that's been placed in preparation on the table just in front of you and then you say:

> Imagine…

You pause briefly for effect and also partly because you're nervous. Performing has never come naturally.

* This script is single spaced for maintain the original format

Imagine...

No doubt
No contradictions
No inconsistencies
No conflicting feelings, thoughts, urges
No shades of grey
No indecision
No ambiguity
No confusion
No conflicting beliefs
No inner turmoil
No disbelief
No hesitation
No uncertainty
No split, tear, crack or fissure you are complete
No faltering,
No floundering
No dropping the ball
No ambivalence
No wavering
No perplexing
No stalling
No need to break eye contact
No fraudulent feelings
No second guessing. You know what you want.
No more teasing out of thought
No more hovering in between
You are decisive
You are certain
You know what you like
You know what you want
You like it
You know that you like it

INSTRUMENTAL ROCK MUSIC PLAYS
(Clipped abruptly after a few bars)

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You were told recently that something that you had done was out of character.

This struck you as odd because the man who told you this knew very little about you.

You had only met a handful of times. In fact, to be precise, not including the day that he made his comment, you had only met the man twice. And so although you were not complete strangers, neither were you particularly familiar with one another.

The first time that you met this man was in a bar.

It was the birthday drinks of a common friend. You were given a brief introduction, a solid handshake and a few polite words. The exchange was cordial but not especially memorable.

The second time you met this man was in the kitchen department of Ikea near the tea towels. Again, there was a polite exchange, a formality, a vague stab at geniality, a nice to see you and how do you do followed by a comment about kettles and that was it.

You hadn't seen each other since.

And so, you see, it really is questionable whether this man could lay claim to knowing your nature, have such a purchase on you personality that he could decipher, decode or describe your behavior as being either in or out of character.

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You read somewhere once that if we say a man has character we only say that he has an experience that he repeats.

So with this in mind, it could be said that the man in question hadn't known you long enough to witness your repetitions, your loops. He had no sustained experience of your recurring quirks, your ingrained habits or your set of circular gestures through which your character might be said to cohere. Your personality, persona, identity, aura, or character as he put it, could not yet have repeated or completed a single loop.

But although it was your belief that this man's accusation was unfounded, that he didn't have enough knowledge of you because you hadn't spent enough time together, his comment still stuck.

You see, the thing was, that the character that he had accused you of slipping out of was a character that you had only recently become.

Or to be more precise, it was a character that had become you.

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It had all started about a month prior to the man's observation. You had become aware of certain mannerisms, specific gestures, ticks and traits that seemed at odds with your own habitual repertoire of gestures, ticks, mannerisms and traits.

To give an example, you had developed a habit of drumming the surface of things, tapping your fingers rhythmically across table-tops, kitchen counters, book covers and windows, anything that your five digits found they now drummed indiscriminately. This habit appeared out of nowhere. It niggled at you. You rolled your head to click your neck; another mysteriously adopted manifestation.

It was always small things, subtle slight slips, like your toothbrush feeling unconvincing in your hand as it zigzagged across your teeth. And there was something happening with your knees, a sort of involuntary clench. And the list could go on: when you walked to work your stride felt forced, when you put a tea bag in a mug you dropped it from a height, when you looked at your watch you air punched to slip up your sleeve. Not one of these mannerisms belonged to you.

Although slight, these borrowed gestures were precise.

You had started licking your teeth, sleeping without pillows, laughing with your mouth closed and squeezing at the end of a handshake. You peeled off labels, held your fork in the wrong hand and when you tucked your hair behind your ear it just felt wrong.

You were repeating something, but it wasn't déjà vu. You were repeating someone.

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You are not particularly superstitious, but the adoption of these mannerisms coincided with the arrival of a coin. It was double sided, a ten pence piece. A fraud, a phony, a counterfeit.

It came into your possession in the way that all money does. Through an exchange, in your change. You don't know when, you just remember spotting it there in amongst the receipts in your purse. Tails and tails. A double sided coin, either missing a head or gained an extra tail, either way it was an anomaly. You didn't think too much about it at the time, you laughed, turned it over in your hand and you experienced the joy of finding a familiar thing strange. You thought about the uncanny but it wasn't really close. It was just odd.

Tails, never fails.

You wondered how long it had been in the system, shifting from purse to purse, paying for things unnoticed, unseen, hocus-pocus, an unobserved fraud. Classification conceals, deviations unseen, slipping from hand to till to hand a coin is a coin is a coin.

However, much to your surprise, it quickly became a charm, a talisman that you kept on your person at all times. You mostly stored it in your pocket but if your jeans were loose you would carry it in your hand.

It was a curious attachment.

Complicated coin tricks came to you with ease. It rolled effortlessly over the back of your hand dipping in and out of the gaps between your fingers. Another borrowed gesture. An unexplained skill. You rolled your head to click your neck as you watched the coin shift back and forth across your knuckles. You could never quite tell whether it was you performing the gesture or the gesture performing you.

It was as though you were repeating something, but it wasn't déjà vu, you were repeating someone.

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But all of that was nothing. A few gestures here and there. What shocked you most was that you knew your mind.

You experienced certainty, wholeness, and dare I say truth. You had a sense that you knew yourself better than ever.

At first it was liberating. Decisions were suddenly simple. You knew what you wanted, what you liked, what you didn't like. Simple things like what to eat what to wear what to watch on Netflix.

You no longer lingered at the door of the fridge, you no longer hesitated before hitting send. You knew no doubt, you held no contradictions, you had no conflicting feelings, thoughts, urges, no shades of grey, no indecision, no ambiguity, no confusion, no conflicting beliefs, no inner turmoil, no disbelief, no hesitation, no uncertainty, no split, tear, crack or fissure you felt complete.

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The third time you met the man, the one who accused you of being out of character, was at a publication launch at which you were giving a reading. He was manning the sales table from which you purchased a book. Again, there was a polite exchange, a formality, a vague stab at geniality, a nice to see you and how do you do followed by five pounds fifty please and that was it.

You paid in cash, rolling the double-sided coin over the back of your knuckles and into his hand.

As you made your way to the stage, your knees gave their last involuntary clench. You took a seat and waited for the audience to settle.

You leant forward in your chair, took a sip of water from a glass that had been placed in preparation on the table just in front of you and then you said:

Imagine…

You paused briefly for effect and also partly because you were nervous.

Performing has never come naturally.

VIDEO PLAYS ON THE SCREEN OF THE LAPTOP

The narrator gets up and leaves the room.

The Unreliable Narrator

Nobody believed a word that you said. This wasn't a case of paranoia or due to your lacking confidence. They told you, one after another that you just weren't very convincing.

It was a critique, of sorts, the well-intended thoughts and observations of a small group of individuals who were sat in a semi-circle of seats around you.

You felt perplexed.

You had just reached the end of a short presentation and it was disconcerting to be told that you lacked conviction, fell short on sincerity, side stepped integrity and that your words basically just didn't ring true.

The subject of your talk had been real life and you had told the truth, held eye contact, varied your tone, gestured with both hands and pretty much stuck to the facts, give or take a few forgivable creative flourishes.

But when you reached the end of your story the group fell silent. It wasn't weighty or meaningful, but it was tense and thick.

The vocal coach who was running the workshop eventually offered you some constructive feedback on the way that you held your body, the tone that you took, your tempo, your timbre and your jaw, she speculated, was perhaps a little too tight. She

asked you if you ground your teeth in your sleep to which you replied I don't think so but you couldn't say for sure.

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The presentation was the final exercise in a workshop that you attended last year that had promised to help you find your voice, develop your communication skills and perhaps even improve your relationships. The techniques were tried and tested. The vocal coach had won awards. The potential to be a persuasive, solid, inspiring, eloquent and effective, silver-tongued smoothly spoken, impassioned speaker was appealing, and so you signed up.

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The room for the day was a blue-carpeted conference suite on the second floor of a Glasgow hotel with strip lights that buzzed gently throughout the afternoon. The tables had been pushed back and the chairs stacked and stored against the magnolia walls. In the corner there was a coffee station with tea bags on a side-plate and a selection of foil wrapped biscuits in twin packs.

You were the last to arrive and you pulled your chair across the carpet to join the others who were gathered in the centre of the room. Not including the vocal coach, there were eight participants, all of whom had high hopes of becoming better performers, better public speakers, better and more believable orators. They were an eclectic mix. There was a middle aged man who struggled with confrontation, a recent

humanities graduate who couldn't find a job, an entrepreneur polishing their pitch, an out of work actress, a frustrated administrator, two pensioners passing a day, a softly spoken writer who found public speaking impossible and then there was you, who had seen the workshop promoted on your Facebook feed and thought you'd give it a go.

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The day had been structured around a series of exercises. Some were simple. You had to concentrate on your breath. In for 5 and out for 7. Breathe down, fill your belly. Breathe up and out through your mouth. Words were whispered and scripts were shouted as you paced around the room varying your tone, heightening your pitch and testing out tempos. You had to hold hands with the actress and without breaking eye contact tell her what you had for breakfast.

Along with the others, you had been asked to prepare a short talk for the group that would put into practice the techniques that you had learned throughout the day. The subject was REAL LIFE. Chose something everyday, quotidian run of the mill and share it with the group. It might be a memory, an experience or encounter. Something familiar that you can recall without the need for notes.

The stories were varied. Some people spoke about their hobbies and others their holidays. The administrator told a good story, it was an emotional tale about his cat dying and the writer eloquently recounted a dramatic lightning storm that she'd experienced in Quebec. After each presentation the group reflected on the chosen style, tone and tempo of the speaker, suggesting small improvements; maybe more gestures, maybe less.

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You were the last to present. You stood up and took your position in the centre of the semi-circle, inhaled deeply and dropped your shoulders.

It was uncanny, you said, pausing for effect…illogical, impossible and yet irrefutable. I saw it with my own eyes.

You had decided to tell the group about the time that your left hand disappeared. It had just completely vanished. One minute it was there, the next it was gone. You hadn't actually witnessed it happening but you believe it was about 11 o'clock because you remember seeing it at 10:45 when the post arrived.

You first spotted it when you were getting the milk from the fridge. You opened the door with your right hand, reached out with your left and that's when you saw it. Your arm just stopped. You pulled back your sleeve and stared at your wrist. You closed the fridge and walked toward the kitchen sink where you stood for a few moments gathering your thoughts.

You ran it under the cold tap, raised it above your head, shook it vigorously and held it out of an open window. You got a knife from the kitchen drawer and tentatively pushed the tip into the space at the end of your wrist. There was no sensation. It was a visual conundrum, a material malfunction that defied learned logic and laughed at lived experience. You told the group about the particular way in which you could see straight through it, holding your left hand up and out as a visual aide. You were careful to vary your tone, make regular eye contact and gesture with both of your hands.

When you reached the end of your story the group fell silent. It wasn't weighty or meaningful, but it was tense and thick.

People started fidgeting and making unnecessary movements, leaning forward or back in their chairs. Things were put into or taken out of pockets. The actress placed one polyester cup from beneath her seat into another. A man tapped his knees. The strip lights buzzed.

And that's when they told you, one after another that you just weren't very convincing.

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