

11-21-2008

Between You and Me

Thomas Micah Stansell

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BETWEEN YOU AND ME: AN EXPLORATION OF INTERPERSONAL
INTERACTION IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED WORLD

by

THOMAS MICAH STANSELL

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken, MFA

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly online world interpersonal interactions become a less integral part of our cultural make-up. The exploration of this phenomenon is the thematic concept that activates *Between You and Me* – a triptych-split-screen short film and video installation. This text is dedicated to exploring how theme, technique, and theory are considered in the context of the film, and how character and form (more than narrative) illuminate the thematic concept.

INDEX WORDS: Film, Video, Installation, Experimental, Visual, Split-Screen

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2008

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December 2008

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my wife. Thank you for your patience and support. I could not have done this without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kay Beck, Matt Rowles and Elizabeth Strickler for their support for this and many other projects. I would like to thank Ly Bolia, Dr. Michael Bruner, Nancy Floyd, Dr. Angelo Restivo, and Sheldon Schiffer for the knowledge shared and guidance offered. I would also like to acknowledge the help, guidance and support of my thesis committee.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly online world interpersonal interactions become a less integral part of our cultural make-up. Of course, it could be argued that the possibility for global interpersonal interactions has increased. However, these interactions are now technologically mediated. There are several immediate consequences to this mediation, the most quantifiable being the absence of any tangible/tactile component to the interpersonal interaction. There are no handshakes, no eye contact, no olfaction or chemoreception. The exploration of this phenomenon is the thematic concept that activates *Between You and Me*.

Between You and Me is a short film and video installation. At its most basic level, the work is about using an interesting and effective combination of sound and image to tell a story that illuminates a theme. The work takes shape as an experimental narrative, driven by unconventional cinematic visuals and techniques. While substantively, the movie is more about character and theme than plot, a plotline is nonetheless present and integral.

The genesis of this work was a realization that I did not know my neighbors or the people from my neighborhood with whom I shared a daily commute on the train. This idea was then extended to urban existence in general where I was constantly surrounded by people, yet constantly alone – disconnected in unarguably the most connected time in modern history. I arrived at the idea that it is actually the mode of connection which is keeping us disconnected. So, I created characters based on occupations that predate and are subsequently endangered by this technological connection – a mailman for example. From these characters, I created interactions, and it is these interactions in which this theme of disconnection can be seen.

The simple plot follows two characters as they move through an urban space. They are connected by two shared tangible objects (a letter and a book) and by similar surroundings (a

crowded train). Both interact with similar characters (though never the same characters as the other) engaged in similarly endangered occupations. As the movie progresses there is an exchange of the shared objects that hints at a greater story. These two characters drive the story forward, but it is the characters with which they interact, and those interactions that make up the thematic core of the film.

A hybrid of sorts, the work falls somewhere between cinema and video art. Utilizing unconventional techniques that include split screen, compositing, cascading edits, and digital animation (among others), the form of the work contributes to its thematic grounding and to the narrative itself. One of my primary goals through this work is to develop a thematic approach to narrative and to allow the form of the movie to work equally with character and plot to reveal the theme. To that end, the story is stripped down to its most essential elements, and the form of the work is given greater responsibility. This idea of finding unconventional ways to tell stories that are thematically or theoretically based has been central to much of my past work. However, where in my previous work I have used sound and visuals to create specific sensations that relate directly to elements of the *narrative*, in this work I am using visuals and form – primarily the split screen or triptych presentation – to convey specific elements of the *theme*.

This film exists on a precipice; a moment where the consequences of technologically mediated interaction have begun to be felt, yet the vestigial presence of necessary face-to-face interaction remains. These necessary interactions have been distilled and characterized, making up four icon characters within the film's world. In addition to the four "icon" characters, there are two complimentary characters acting as enzymes to complete the interactions and drive the simple plot of the film. The narrative action of the film follows these two complimentary or "through" characters as they interact with the icon characters within the various settings of a

presumably urban society. The whole of the film plays out in a three framed split screen or triptych, with scenes alternating between interactions and interview-esque direct addresses of the camera – and subsequently the viewer – by the icon characters. The remainder of this text is dedicated to exploring how theme, technique and form, and theory are considered in the context of *Between You and Me*.

THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

In order to make a narrative film about the themes at hand, it is necessary to characterize moments where interpersonal interaction exists in a tangible and fundamental way. In other words, it is necessary to create an iconography to represent these interpersonal interactions. The four “icon” figures are: a librarian, a postman, a waitress, and a lover/girlfriend.

These icons inhabit a space where interpersonal interactions are necessary and therefore it is possible that the interactions may initially be between strangers. This is important because it allows for an ambiguity of proximity wherein it is unknown how familiar or unfamiliar the interacting parties may be and, consequently, why the meetings are strained. Each interaction is composed in such a way as to position characters side-by-side (sometimes devolving into back-to-back) rather than face-to-face. This creates an awkward space where characters speak words into the empty space in front of them, and only indicate to whom they speak with furtive glances that are certain not to make eye contact. This avoidance of face-to-face interaction references academic studies in which the societal effects of computer mediated communication (CMC) are measured. Researchers study CMC in contrast to FTF or face-to-face interaction. These strained exchanges may be seen as either a deterioration of communication skills or a deterioration of relationships (both potentially stemming from the same cause). Located in an urban space, these icons explore more than just the effect of computer mediated communication – indeed they explore the effect of an increasingly “automated culture.”

Each character represents a form of interaction that is in some way endangered by the increasing presence of technology. In the case of the librarian, the primacy of the Internet as the new repository for information and the advent and rise of e-books and online research databases (increasingly inhabited with full-text articles) means fewer library patrons. Additionally, the



Figure 1: Film stills 1 and 2 – the waitress and the librarian



Figure 2: Film stills 3 and 4 – the postman and the lover

move to electronic library catalogs has had the effect of distancing the librarian from the patron. In the information age, the access to resources online has changed the traditional role of the library. While the Internet is certainly not a replacement for the *library*, it is in many ways a replacement for the *librarian* – or at least the component of the job that deals with interpersonal interaction. It is within this space that the librarian operates in *Between You and Me*.

Like the librarian, the postman's role is progressively decreasing, as email has become the standard for both personal and business correspondence. While there is the occasional personal letter (increasingly relegated to only the most nostalgic of situations) most of what the postman delivers is either junk mail or bills or official correspondences. So, in addition to his impending obsolescence, the eagerness and anticipation with which his arrival and the delivery of the mail were once met is certainly waning.

The waitress at the local diner or greasy spoon is endangered by a fast paced, progressively more automated culture, and is being replaced by over the counter coffee shops and fast food joints. The grand tradition of familiar conversation and cute nicknames leveled at complete strangers, and the earned (and coveted) status of “the regular” is falling by the wayside.

The lover/girlfriend is an extension of the previous three icons, all of which offer the possibility for an interpersonal interaction between strangers to develop into a regular or repeated interaction within the confines of their occupations. The lover takes this further, developing an intimate relationship from what began as an interpersonal interaction between strangers. With this intimacy comes a vulnerability that is not present in the interactions with the other characters, spotlighting the increased consequences of the deterioration of interpersonal skills.

Beyond the shared status of “soon-to-be-relic,” other common factors contribute to the selection of each icon character: the cinematic nature of the characters, the presence of tangible

objects that facilitate the interactions, and the potential for an interaction to move over time from strange to familiar. To address the first point, a cinematic pedigree (so to speak) is embedded in each role. These are the characters that are continually invoked to provide structure, connectivity and authenticity for a narrative. These characters are elemental. Immediately recognizable and immediately locatable, they provide not just character, but setting as well. The stability or, perhaps, stasis achieved by the simple presence of these particular characters within a narrative is an important part of this project, but the fact that they are *used this way repeatedly in movies* makes them the ideal icons for *Between You and Me*. This preexistence in the diegetic realm in general makes these characters simulations moving toward simulacra (in the way that Jean Baudrillard uses the terms). That is to say, the characters are moving toward a point where they are “images without resemblance” – where they no longer resemble actual people performing tasks, but rather have become the *idea* of these occupations. They are moving toward being more real than the real.

The presence of a tangible object that serves to facilitate the interpersonal interaction adds a second order icon to the mix. Just as each character is an icon for a certain kind of interaction, the objects that they use become icons for the characters. This becomes important in drawing visual parallels between the ways each character interacts. It also provides for a tangible representation of the interactions in a primarily visual medium. In a way, each object (a coffee cup, a library book, a letter, a journal) takes on the properties of a face-to-face interaction, the tangible, physical nature of it.

In a technologically mediated interaction a buffer is present, distancing the communicators. The buffer is the technology (whether it is a computer or telephone or text message or email or something else). Interestingly, the technology that acts as a buffer also

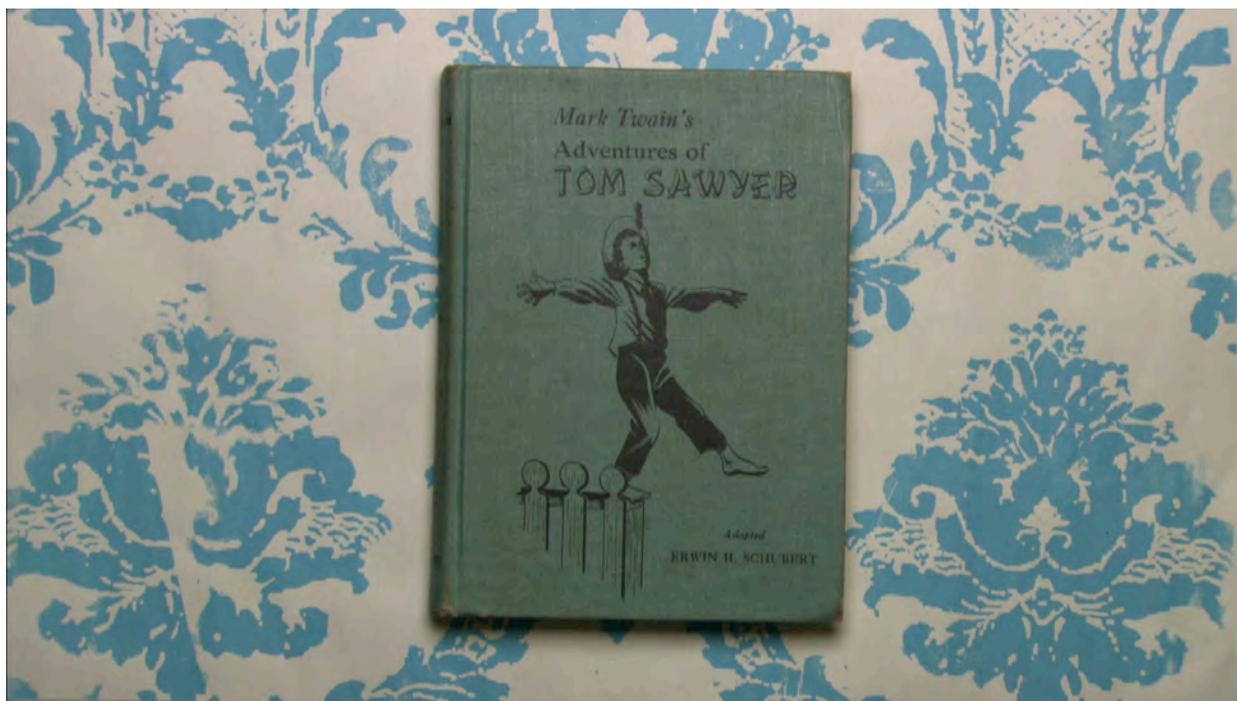


Figure 3: Film stills 5 and 6 – objects

makes the communication possible in the first place. Essentially the objects represent the technology. They act as buffers and at the same time facilitate the interaction. Because of the presence of the objects, there is no physical contact made in any of the interactions (directly paralleling the absence of physical contact within a technologically mediated interaction).

When the mailman hands the woman a letter, it is this letter that acts as an insulator, but it is the letter that also makes the interaction necessary in the first place. Another function of the objects, besides their iconical and metaphorical functions, is the advancement of the plot/story. They are sign posts, or key frames that help to establish a chronology in the on screen world and draw the tenuous lines of relationships/connections.

The final common element of the icon characters is the possibility for the movement over time from an interpersonal interaction between the unfamiliar (strangers) to an interaction between the familiar. The primary importance of this element is the allowance for ambiguity. It is necessary that these interactions (save the interaction of the lover) be able to be interpreted in two ways: as between strangers, or between familiar parties. In this way, the viewer is able to interpret the strain that is present within the interaction as a natural result of a first meeting, *or* they may see it as a more systemic breakdown of communication between individuals. It is this second interpretation that is most crucial to the theme of movie, and indeed there are narrative elements pointing the viewer toward it, but most important is the open nature of the text. This idea of an open or “writerly text” (to borrow the language of Barthes) is sustained in various ways throughout the film through the use of split screen, repeated images, ambiguity (in both image and monolog/dialog/narration), and contradictory narration. The possibility for movement from unfamiliar to familiar additionally creates a sense of temporality within the film. In essence it serves to collapse screen time, allowing for the possibility that in the few seconds that are

actually seen on-screen, a much longer and repeated relationship has been formed. Restated, it allows for the possibility that by seeing the interaction played out on screen for only a short time, the viewer will understand that these characters have been repeatedly interacting in this way day after day for an extended period of time.

In addition to the icon characters, there are two “through” characters that complete the interactions. These characters inhabit few defined characteristics. In many ways they are anonymous save their interactions with the icon characters. It is only through these interactions (and interactions with the tangible objects that facilitate these interactions) that their existence is ratified. This anonymity or amorphism allows for interchangeability. This interchangeability allows for, again, an open, writerly text. So, while the icon characters are fixed, the complimentary characters are fluid, allowing the viewer to inhabit that space with greater facility.

All this is not to say that these characters lack specificity. On the contrary, every element of their interaction is contrived. Primarily, the idea that the through characters are the “completing” or “complimentary” element to an interpersonal interaction is made tangible (much as the objects operate to make the interactions tangible) by pairing female to male. It is not that these exchanges or roles are in any way gender specific (they could be easily switched with no *thematic* effect), but the presence of both genders within the exchange creates a depth of meaning. In the context of this film, the structuralist idea of genders as binary opposites – or even in the post-structuralist, *logocentric* view of western gender relation should be avoided. Perhaps here (pertaining to gender) it is best to move from a linguistic model – defined by absence and presence – to more of a mathematical or biological model – the idea of binary



Figure 4: Film stills 7 and 8 – through characters

complements. If the through characters are thought of as complementary, the completing part of the interaction, then gender difference becomes a tangible, physical representation of this. Also, subtle as it may be, there is the possibility for sexual tension that serves to heighten the awkwardness (lack of eye contact, extended pauses, stilted language) of each exchange.

This awkwardness is another specific element of the through characters. While the interactions as a whole appear awkward, it is the specific language and actions of the through characters that produce this. Mostly, the icon characters operate as one would expect. Their language is appropriate and natural. So are their movements and positioning. It is the through characters that disrupt the system. Their questions don't really have answers and their responses to questions aren't really answers either; they do not make conversation, they make statements. "I couldn't concentrate." "This coffee is terrible." "Hand delivered." "I requested it." The minimalism of these statements and the interactions in general serve the theme of the film. Within this diegetic world, language, conversation, interaction, has been distilled to its most essential elements. This distillation directly parallels technologically mediated interaction, where eye contact is unavailable and therefore unnecessary, where extraneous pleasantries and superficial language is lopped off in preference of efficiency. This minimalism extends to body positioning and physical movement. Like people blind from birth, they are unaware of (or at the very least unskilled in) the nuances of body language and proximity.

What compounds the through characters is their responsibility to the plot as well as the theme. In concert with the objects of the interactions, these two characters drive the story and supply a timeline or chronology to the narrative. They act as the weft in a woven fabric. Outside of the interactions, the two occupy the most public of spaces – busy street corners (specifically Times Square) and subway trains. But, they exist in these spaces unnoticed, in isolation. To

continue the weaving analogy, they ride subway trains like bobbins on shuttles gliding through the shed without touching the other threads. In the end, however, it is the weft, the through characters, that bonds the warp into a fabric. The characters – and the objects that facilitate their interactions – are bonded by tenuous threads into (some form of) a relationship. All of these elements work in concord to create the substantive middle of the film.

TECHNICAL AND FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

Between You and Me was conceived of as a hybrid of sorts – purposed as both a single channel movie and a multi-channel installation. Most of the discussion of the technical aspects will be reserved for the “movie” version as it is not dependent in any significant way on where it is displayed. It is a less fluid version than the installation version (which will have multiple forms depending on where and how it is installed) and therefore easier to discuss.

The most immediately noticeable technical element is the way the movie is presented on the screen. Although the movie starts in full frame 16 x 9, within the first minute, on a match action cut, it transitions to split screen. The single screen is fragmented into 3 frames: a triptych. The movie then, for the most part, remains this way for its duration. Besides being the most obvious of the technical elements, the split screen format owes the most to the multi-channel incarnation of the piece.

The reasons for and effects of presenting the work as a triptych are numerous. One of the effects that relates most closely to the thematic center of the work is the concept of fragmentation/division. The on screen world that the characters inhabit is trifurcated and while they are clearly in the same space, so too are they clearly separated. Moreover, each may exist in multiple parts of the same world simultaneously. This visual fragmentation reinforces the strain that threatens the tenuous ties of their interactions.

The movie alternates between presenting simultaneous views from different angles of the same action, and presenting different views of the same character at different times performing different actions. In the first mode, the viewer may see close-up, medium, and wide shots of a scene all at once, with the action playing out in synch across the three frames. Or they may simultaneously see two close-ups (one of each character) and a two-shot of a conversation. The



Figure 5: Film stills and 9, 10 and 11 – split screen

effect of this method is to open up the editing process to a collaboration between the director/editor and the viewer. Presenting the work as a triptych allows the viewer to decide what element of the scene is important and on what they want to focus.

To again use the language of Barthes, this makes the work a more writerly text, engaging the viewer in the process of constructing some elements of the narrative. However, this is a collaboration because the choices are still limited by the filmmaker and given some measure of preference through position and timing. So some portion of the editing process has been relocated to occur simultaneously with the presentation of the work. A shift of power also occurs by providing the viewer a heightened sense of omnipresence – able to see everything at once. The effect of this is not unlike a moving image Cubism wherein the viewer is contained within the view.

Another element that arises in this first mode of presentation is a subtle erosion of trust of the narrative. At first, it appears that three angles of one event are being viewed simultaneously. With closer inspection however, it can be determined that what is actually being seen is the simultaneous *presentation* of one action occurring multiple times, each time with slight variations. This slippage is subtle yet important. It implies a repetition that reinforces the interaction as iconical.

The second method of presentation, presenting different views of the same character at different times performing different actions, is reserved for the icon characters. The primary effect of this method is not unlike parallel editing, in which the time and space of the diegetic world are expanded. In this case, the frames are arranged so that the iteration of the character speaking is in the center, directly addressing the viewer. On the flanking frames, the actions of

the viewer serve to reinforce the words they are speaking in a direct way. The side panels also illustrate a repeated routine, again supporting the established iconography.

The second technical element in *Between You and Me* is the camera work. The camera work can be separated into two classifications. The first is the smooth, gliding or floating camera, and the second is the loose, hand-held camera. These two styles can be thought of as objective and subjective respectively, although those distinctions do not apply at all times. The searching close-ups of the subjective camera place the viewer in the scene, while the smooth, float of the objective camera gives the sensation of detachment or observation. Because of the presence of the split screen, at times both the objective and subjective cameras are on screen simultaneously. This adds another option to the editing eye of the viewer. One notable exception to the objective/subjective distinction is the moment when a character speaks directly to the camera (and therefore the viewer). This occurs four times throughout the film, once for each of the icon characters. When a character speaks directly to the camera, the camera is no longer objective. Even though each of these scenes is shot with a smooth, detached camera, the direct address of the viewer by the character immediately shifts the camera into a subjective mode. The viewer is no longer a detached observer, but has now engaged with the diegetic world.

This direct address has effects beyond shifting the camera into a subjective mode. The third technical element is the composition of the icon characters. In the scenes in which these characters speak directly to the viewer, the central shot is on long push in as they speak. The character is center framed in a highly structured shot that takes place within the realm of their occupation (diner, library, post office, home). Within these shots, elements are carefully chosen and highly contrived. In these instances, the whole of the *mise en scene* contributes to the



Figure 6: Film stills 12 and 13 – framing of an icon

character's status as an icon. Within the monologues that the characters deliver are contained the predictable mannerisms of an interviewee. These repeated elements have the effect of simultaneously making the character more real and making the character more real than real. By selecting certain mannerisms of people being interviewed, those self-conscious and performative elements of subjects of *cinema verite*, the character is given an air of realness. But, those very same elements, because they are so highly attuned to serving just that purpose, cause the simulation to become a simulacrum. They move from real to unreal – or hyperreal – in an instant.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Between You and Me has several theoretical bases: Baudrillard's ideas of simulation, Benjamin's idea of the *flanuer*, Metz et al. and semiotics. The semiotic methodology is perhaps the most interesting to apply to the final form of the work.

Dutch scholar Mieke Bal argues that a work of art is an event – one that takes place each time an image is processed by a viewer. While Bal is likely referring to painting or sculpture, this fits well with moving image work, in that, due to it being a time based art, each exhibition is literally an event. And each time it is displayed it is at the mercy of its surroundings. This is true for both a theatre and an installation, but obviously the most drastic alteration to the work would occur in the case of the later. The work of art is an active producer of the viewer's experience, and that experience will change depending on which way the wind blows (or the snow falls, or traffic, or temperature, or crowds).

The projection operates as an indexical sign of the photographs (24 per second). The light captured records the presence of those on screen. The actor playing the waitress however, becomes an iconic sign for both a waitress and, secondarily, a sign for a person, a woman, an actor. The same occurs for actors playing the postal worker, the librarian, the girlfriend. The inner workings of a post office become a denotative instance of a mailroom, but a connotative instance of a system of correspondence. The same shift occurs within the structurally similar library.

The most exciting possibility lies, however, in the application of the ideas of montage as a semiotic system to the work. In film theory, montage is the idea that when images are placed next to one another they engender some meaning. The meaning is dependent on the viewer's experience. The idea of montage is typically applied to single channel linear work (although it

can be equally as effective when applied to a non-linear work, as images still end up next to each other and therefore create meaning). In the case of *Between You and Me*, however, there are three frames or screens across which the images move. So we have created a syntagmatic structure (think of this as a horizontal line moving through all of the screens) with *multiple* paradigmatic categories (think of these as a vertical column of choices above each screen – any choice can be substituted for any other choice). What makes this different is that we do not have to wait for the next shot in a sequence for the effect of montage to occur. We have eight shots interacting simultaneously shot after shot, creating an exponential explosion of meaning.

Here, each screen is carefully choreographed to interplay with the others. All the elements of *mise en scène* are used to control as much as possible the reactions between images from cut to cut. There is a great interplay of images that occur due to the concern with sameness and difference structurally within the work. James Sutton is a semiotic sign for a person . . . and also a man, and a white man, and a skinny man, and an actor, and a postal worker. Simultaneously Liz McGeever is a sign for a person, and also a woman, and also a white woman and an actor, and a waitress. This occurs again with a coffee cup, and a book, and a letter, and an order pad. These interacting signs begin to create meaning. This kind of work creates new possibilities for semiotic readings, and begs to be read this way.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the strength of the work lies in the quality and consideration of the image and the formal elements of its presentation (i.e. split-screen). It is the image that motivates the narrative and conveys the theme. And it is the theme that motivates the image. If the image is not engaging or at least interesting, then the rest is irrelevant. So, at its most elemental state, *Between You and Me* is a sound and image experience. Then, if it is successful as a sound and image experience, at the most elemental thematic state it is about people and relationships. And, if that is a believable conceit, then it is about the strain and fragmentation of interpersonal relationships in a technologically mediated world. This multivalent approach allows the work to succeed in more ways than one, and creates an open and accessible text.

This openness however, also makes for a more difficult work. It asks the audience to engage with and participate in the work in order to arrive at not just the theme, but the story as well. Multiple streams of moving images can be overwhelming, and maintaining a focused and active “reading” will require some tenacity on the part of the viewer. It is precisely this state of viewing that allows the experience of the movie (the work taken as a whole, a sum of its parts) to convey its thematic core.

The experience may be something akin to being in a public space (a crowded train or street corner) and overhearing parts of a conversations and then allowing your mind to try and fill in the pieces – to take the fragments and discern some meaning. While this is the active experience of piecing together the narrative, it also serves to place the viewer into the thematic space of the film. Each person experiences the work alone. They may have watched an entirely different 15 minutes of images than the person next to them. Additionally, due to the fragmentation or trifurcation of the screen, and the fragmentary parts of the narrative, there is a disallowance of

closeness. So, while there are macroscopic views of intimate details of characters and their lives, they offer little information (even the words they speak) for developing an intimate relationship. This is directly reflective of the activating theme of disconnection (as a result of technologically mediated interactions – here the act of viewing the film).

While I feel that this movie is clearly an extension of my past work, I also must recognize the influence of two particular artists on, specifically, the form of this work. I have seen none of his work in person and only a few video documentations of it, but what I have seen of the work of Doug Aitken has shaped my thoughts on the possibilities of cinema and installation. To be brief, Aitken's work allowed me to conceive of creating cinematic works that function as both multi channel installations and single channel movies. Beyond this, I feel some kinship to his position on the quality of the image in the work. This is something I have always placed importance upon: crafting technically good images and giving them equal weight with concept.

Besides Aitken, the cinematic work of Elija-Liisa Ahtila has directly impacted this work. In particular, the use of split screen in *If 6 were 9* has been greatly helpful as, if nothing else, a proof of concept. Although her use of the technique differs substantially in intent, and subsequently in implementation, it allows for the possibility of this kind of work. Of course, these two (contemporary) artists are not the only influence on my work and this work in particular. In large part, my shooting and lighting technique is indebted to cinematographers such as Lance Accord and Robert Yeoman. I have borrowed much visual style and structure from the French New wave and filmmakers like Goddard, Buneul, Bertolucci, and Antonioni. My language, characters, dialog and sense of narrative certainly owe writers Anne Dillard, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Raymond Carver.

In *Between You and Me* I am attempting to refine and distill the salient elements from these influences, my past work, and theoretical interests into a focused beam. The point of which is to propel the creation of a new kind of work. Specifically a work that is open and challenging in its approach to narrative and theme.

From the onset, I approached the work with two ends in mind: to display the work as a single channel movie, and as a multi-channel installation. This also allows the work to be more accessible – and to be accessible to differently oriented audiences. Here, accessibility does not refer to form or theme, but availability – giving the theater or film-festival-goer as well as the gallery-goer the opportunity to see the work. Beyond generating a greater, more diverse audience, this dual-purposedness affects the form of the piece as well. It allows the incorporation of elements from each into the other. In this way, new and interesting forms and methodologies are discovered – new ways of displaying images, of conveying narratives, meanings and themes.

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APENDIX: SCREENPLAY FOR *BETWEEN YOU AND ME*

Between You and Me

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. CITY - DAY

A musical DRONE slowly blends with the natural sounds of a city. There is a gutter. There is a building seen from a low angle as clouds drift by. There are the wheels of a train. There is a concrete pilaster with peeling paint. There is a shoe. Graffiti. A tree. A taxi. A cup of coffee. A hand.

INT. DINER - DAY

A MAN - late 20's, thin, deep eyes - reaches for a cup of coffee sitting on the table in front of him. The coffee moves side to side in the cup, dissipating the energy released by the interruption of its inertia. He sips the coffee, grimaces slightly as its bitterness touches his tongue, and gently returns the cup to the table.

He caps an ink pen sitting a few inches from the coffee cup and closes a small notebook sitting a few inches from the pen.

A waitress moves toward the table.

WAITRESS

Not staying long.

MAN

This coffee is terrible.

WAITRESS

(craning her neck)

Didn't look like you got much done.

MAN

I couldn't concentrate today.

WAITRESS

Was that decaf?

(beat)

The orange one? or the brown one?

MAN

How much today?

WAITRESS

Let me get my calculator.

INT. DINER - EARLY MORNING

The diner is darkened. Artificial light mixes with the blue light of early morning. The waitress stands at the counter, composed in the center of the frame. She looks directly into the camera.

WAITRESS

My name is Jean. I've been here. .
. going on 3 and a half years.
(beat)

CUT TO:

The Waitress moves about behind the counter, preparing for the coming customers.

WAITRESS (VO CONT.)

We put the decaf in the pot with
the orange handle and pour-spout.
It is easier to keep up with it
that way I guess.

CUT TO:

The Waitress standing looking at the camera.

WAITRESS (CONT.)

I've convinced myself that every
once-and-a-while I have a clue as
to what is happening. . . but,
that usually doesn't last very
long.

EXT. CITY - DAY

A young WOMAN stands alone on a street corner. She is tall and thin. She has dark hair. Cars move slowly by. The wind is blowing.

INT. METRO TRAIN - DAY

The man from the coffee shop is standing at the very end of the very last car of the train. As the train exits a tunnel, light floods through the rear window of the car. The city recedes above the converging tracks. He looks at his notebook and pretends to scribble something down. His

eyes move from the window to the notebook, avoiding everything else.

The sounds of the train turn into music.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

A young WOMAN moves angrily around a dimly lit room. She is tall and thin and has dark hair. She is not the woman from the street corner.

She balances on one leg as she forces a high heeled shoe onto her right foot.

The Man from the coffee shop is calmly sitting in a low chair. He is staring straight ahead, trying to avoid the acidic glare of the woman.

She puts her left shoe on, stomps the floor and twists her foot back and forth to complete the process.

MAN

(to the floor at his feet)

Is that it?

WOMAN

What are you asking? Yes. Yes that's it . . . I guess.

She grabs a coat and a medium sized bag from the couch and walks out the front door.

INT. HALL - DAY

The Woman stands in the hallway next to her bathroom door. She is center framed and looks at the camera.

WOMAN

I have to keep myself from thinking sometimes. I just say. . . "there is a chance that this may never happen. "

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

The Woman is brushing her teeth and looking into the mirror.

WOMAN (VO CONT.)

There is a chance that this may never happen.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

The Man is quickly moving around the room, picking up papers and books and stacking them into piles about eight inches high. He picks up a bundle of clothes from the couch and cradles it in his arms. He then awkwardly leans over to pick up an empty orange soda can.

WOMAN (VO CONT.)

There is a chance that this will never happen again.

When he leans over, the man sees the corner of a book sticking out from beneath his chair. He moves toward it, negotiating the bundle of clothes and picks it up by wedging it between his ring and pink finger (in order to maintain his grip on the soda can). He places the book on the top of the pile.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

The Man and Woman sit on the couch. They are looking straight ahead, and hardly moving. There is roughly a foot of space between them. They are holding hands. Their hands are resting on the cushion, occupying the space.

INT. HALL - DAY

The woman is standing looking at the camera.

WOMAN (VO CONT.)

I've convinced myself it's just better to think that way.

INT. METRO TRAIN - DAY

The woman from the street corner stands next to the window on a crowded train. She is reading from a book. On the edge

of the page are small, poorly drawn, stick figures. She turns the page. There are more stick figures scribbled in the margins. The train stops. She closes the book, tucks it under her arm and steps off of the train and onto the platform.

EXT. CITY - DAY

Low clouds move close and fast over the top of a glass and metal building. There is a tree. There is a bird on a branch. There is a can rolling back and forth in the gutter. Pigeons flying. A coin on the pavement.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

The woman from the street corner approaches the librarian's desk.

WOMAN 1
 (in a whisper)
 Hello . . . I was looking for a
 book.

The LIBRARIAN looks up at her from behind his glasses.

LIBRARIAN
 (in a quiet voice, but
 not a whisper)
 Okay . . . do you know the name of
 the book? We have a card catalog
 that I can help you with.

WOMAN 1
 Oh, no, I'm sorry. I requested it.
 I was told it would be here today.

CUT TO:

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

The Librarian stands in front of a shelf full of leather bound books. The books' bindings are solid primary and secondary colors, and are grouped accordingly. The Librarian is in the center of the frame and looks into the camera.

LIBRARIAN

You don't think, "Librarian. That sounds nice." At least I never did. It's not something I really wanted to do.

CUT TO:

The Librarian pushes a cart stacked with books past rows of shelves.

LIBRARIAN (VO CONT.)

I've come to appreciate it though.
It is very quiet here.

He turns down an aisle, pauses for a moment to shelve a book and continues on.

CUT TO:

The Librarian is center framed, looking into the camera.

LIBRARIAN (CONT.)

I like the smell of the books.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL OF APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

The Woman from the street corner enters the hallway. A POSTMAN is sorting mail and distributing it among the dozen or so boxes. The Woman approaches her box and inserts her key.

POSTMAN

(not looking up)
I haven't gotten to you yet.

WOMAN 1

Oh, I . . .

POSTMAN

Let's see . . .

He flips through a stack of letters in his hand.

POSTMAN (CONT.)

Here we are. Looks like a letter.

WOMAN 1
(smiling)
Well thank you. Hand delivered.

INT. POST OFFICE MAIL ROOM - DAY

The Postman stands in front of an array of bins, sorting machines and conveyors. There is constant activity behind him. He is center framed and looks into the camera.

POSTMAN
Some people. . . a lot of people,
think it's monotonous. But there
is a great deal of variety.

CUT TO:

The Postman moves from one bin to the next, collecting mail and loading it into his bag. He sorts the letters into bundles and binds the bundles with a rubber band.

POSTMAN (VO CONT.)
The philosophy I've developed is
that it's not as much about mail
as it is about people.

CUT TO:

INT. ENTRANCE HALL OF APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

The Woman takes the letter she has just been handed and slips it into the book she has tucked under her arms. She moves toward the stairs.

INT. POST OFFICE MAIL ROOM - DAY

The Postman is center-framed, looking into the camera.

POSTMAN (CONT.)
When somebody sends a letter,
they're sending a piece of
themselves. Literally there is
probably some of their DNA
traveling with that envelope. And
then I touch it, and it might even
have my fingerprint on it when I
deliver it.

INT. DINER - DAY

Coffee moves side to side in a coffee cup sitting on a table. The Man is sitting at the same table. He is scribbling in his notebook.

EXT. LIBRARY - DAY

The Woman approaches the library with the book tucked under her arm. She slips the book into the book depository on the outside of the building.

INT. DINER - DAY

The Man is scribbling on the last page of his notebook. He caps his pen and sets it on the table a few inches from his coffee cup. He turns to the first page of the notebook and begins to flip through the pages like a flip-book. Two stick figures animate across the page. They start at the edges and move towards the center. They collide in the center and merge into one stick figure with two heads and four arms and four legs.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

The Man moves around the living room. He bends over and picks up the book from the top of the pile and exits the room.

EXT. CITY - DAY

The Man exits the diner and walks down the street. He is carrying the book tucked under his arm. He stops at a mailbox on the corner, slips a letter from between the book's pages and deposits it into the slot.

EXT. CITY - DAY

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FADE OUT: