

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: A Video Installation Work

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This video installation art piece is a visual homage to T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," as well as a commentary on human consciousness. Rather than an adaptation or a retelling of his poem, it is meant to serve as an independent work of video art inspired by the thematic elements and imagery in the poem, as well as by Eliot's own connection with cinema. This work was created with the intention of displaying it in a gallery setting as a video installation art piece that would be projected onto the gallery wall.

Visual Elements

This video installation art piece is comprised of still images stitched together with crossfade transitions and transparent overlay of video clips of ink in water. Each scene contains constant motion coming from numerous sources, producing an unfocused, dreamlike quality. This is intentionally done to provoke a disorienting response as a reminder that what is depicted is not Prufrock's external reality, but a portrayal instead of his inner psyche and his struggle with internal conflict.

The abrupt transitions between sequences mimic the effect apparent in the poem in which "possibilities seem to 'flicker up' before the speaker, sudden and full of drama, only to abruptly end with no hint of resolution" (Trotter, 2006). The color imagery is associated with a mood that rapidly transitions from hopefulness, to self-doubt, and finally, to despair. While there is an obvious shift in color scheme between each of the three main segments of this video, this movement and the washed-out white highlights of each scene remains constant.

The first few sequences feature a young couple walking the streets of a town square. The contrasting cool and warm tones accompanied by the bright highlights give these sequences a more lighthearted, hopeful mood compared to the sequences that follow (see images from Part One).

In the second set of sequences, Prufrock is pictured alone in the same location. The scene has a murky, sickly tonality to it, featuring video overlay of yellow acrylic paint to mimic the yellow fog mentioned in Eliot's poem. This sequence transitions to the next as Prufrock is seen entering a dark alley and fading into the ink comprising the break before the next scene (see images from Part Two).

The last few sequences of this work transition suddenly to a vastly different landscape than the prior scenes. Instead of walking the streets of the city, Prufrock is seen standing in a forest beside of a stream. Although not on the beach as in the reading, this scene mirrors the sudden shift in mood and location evident in the poem. This section illustrates Prufrock's abrupt surrender to despair that follows his frantic inner struggle as if he has given up, and has completely disassociated himself from reality. His face is hauntingly pale with deep shadows around his eyes. In the last scene, his entire face is obscured by shadow (see images from Part Three).

Methodology and Process

The earliest stages of this project existed as simple pencil sketches to plan the overall composition and mood of each scene, including camera angles and location type. Accompanying these sketches were lines from "Prufrock" to determine which segments of the poem would be used, and in which scene each line would be applied. These sketches were then translated into storyboards and watercolor sketches in order to decide what factors would be used to convey mood, including color scheme. This is also the stage where reference photos were used to make decisions on what type of location, wardrobe, and actors should be implemented in this video.

The photographs were shot on location in the town square of Columbia, Tennessee and in a forest in Linden, Tennessee using a Canon Rebel T5 DSLR camera with a 35-50mm lens. The

actors featured in this video are my brother and his wife, Kaleb and Bailey Pitts. The actors were briefed before shooting began on the intended mood and expression that was to be portrayed, as well as on the underlying meaning of the poem. They were then directed on how to interact with the space and with each other during shooting. Approximately one thousand photographs were captured for these sequences.

From a technical aspect, using a series of photographs rather than video allows for manipulation of each individual frame. After shooting, these photographs were individually processed with Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom. During this processing stage, each photo underwent initial sharpening, lighting adjustments, and color correction. This is also when extraneous background information such as other people, animals, and cars were edited out of the composition. After “cleaning,” these photographs were then altered aesthetically to convey the intended mood of the project. This was completed by selecting a sequence of images from a scene in Lightroom, and then adjusting the color, contrast, and lighting to create more dramatic and stylized imagery.

By using a high shutter speed (125/second) and continuous capture, each image captured the illusion of motion with small stops in between rather than seamless motion. Moving from image to image, it is apparent that the latter is a continuation of the motion from before, but that it is not as fluid as video footage or an even higher shutter speed would be. This is exaggerated by the speed that the images are displayed in the video. The speed chosen portrays somewhat believable motion from frame to frame, but is also slow enough to discern each individual frame. This is inspired by cinematic technique as well as Prufrock’s own recitation. Professor of literature and cinema, David Trotter, explains:

When Prufrock wistfully remarks that he has seen the moment of his greatness “flicker,” it is the images that flicker, not a light source; the flickering is mechanical. The OED’s [Oxford English Dictionary] first citation for “flicker” in its cinematic sense--a succession of changes in a picture occurring when the number of frames per second is too small to produce reliable persistence of vision. (Trotter, 2006)

By adding crossfade transitions during this pause, the previous photo fades out as the next photo simultaneously fades in, making it difficult for the viewer to focus on one image at a time. Implementing this cinematic visual effect of “dissolve, in which one image slowly fades out as another fades in” (Flynn & Leonard, 2014) adds to the intended dreamlike, disorienting effect. The video editing, as well as the combining of the photographs, video, and sound was completed using the video editing software Adobe Premiere.

These disjointed, jittery movements are contrasted with video clips of ink and acrylic paint moving through water. These materials were chosen for their fluidity and semi-transparent nature. The video clips were created by recording ink and paint being dropped and mixed into a clear glass of water using the same Canon Rebel T5 DSLR camera. These shots were incorporated to further give the video a soft, dream-like aesthetic when overlaid with the photographs, as well as to give the viewer’s eye a visual element to rest upon between the erratic movement of the photographed scenes. The video clips were incorporated into the film using Premiere, where they were imported onto a separate layer, then set at a lower opacity in order for the photographs underneath to be visible. After this, the brightness and saturation of the images were adjusted for clarity and stylistic purposes. During this stage of processing, the sequences from the initial thousand photographs were narrowed down to the most effective and clear sequences.

The elements of sound in this video are the reading of lines from Eliot's poem by Michael Goode, an English and theatre teacher from Summertown High School, and the musical score "Trio for Piano, Cello, and Clarinet" by Kevin MacLeod. This song's tempo (56 bpm) coincides with the movement present in the video, and its repetition and somber tone, created with piano, cello, and clarinet, add to the overall mood. Mr. Goode was directed in his reading to shift in tone and tempo in accordance to each scene. He sounds hopeful and mysterious while reading the beginning of the poem and forlorn by the end.

Intent

In my current work, I strive to encompass the ideas of consciousness, perspective, montage, translucency, surrealism, humanism, and existentialism. Combining different media experimentally and intuitively is imperative to the process of creating these works. I implement the elements of painting, sculpture, photography, illustration, and digital media to create installation pieces.

I chose "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as the subject for this visual work due to its thematic and stylistic relevance to my own work and interests. This work contains elements of surrealism and vivid imagery that I knew would translate well in a visual medium. With my interest in exploring consciousness through my work, the challenge of depicting Prufrock's inner struggle and mindscape was appealing to me. Because the themes of this work coincide with the same themes depicted in my other mixed media work, I created this with the intention that this video would be displayed as an installation work as part of a series in the event that I procure a solo gallery show.

Historical and Artistic References

The original principle of moving pictures is derived from Eadweard Muybridge's photographic work. In his work, Muybridge would photograph figures in motion at a high shutter speed in order to capture the small movements that, when put into a sequence, would convincingly convey the action of the figure (Taft, 1955). This is, in essence, the same process used to create this video.

"Destino" is a film collaboration between animator Walt Disney and surrealist painter Salvador Dali, and later completed by Roy Disney (Castillo, 2012). This work was referenced for this project due to its heavy use of surrealistic imagery, as well as for its use of medium. Dali is traditionally known for creating oil paintings, which are, of course, static in nature. Seeing his trademark surrealistic style and imagery put into motion through animation gives the viewer the opportunity to experience his work on a new level. This is the same effect I strove to achieve in translating Eliot's literary work into a visual piece. One of the most effective uses of movement to evoke the intended surrealistic atmosphere in "Destino" is its use of crossfade transitions in its animation of the figures. This same type of transitional effect is applied to the figures in this video art piece.

Eliot's connection with cinema prescribes the artistic video as the ideal medium for a visual representation of his poem. Research for this work investigates the cinema's influence upon his work as well as his contributions to cinema.

Eliot was familiar with and evoked cinematic technique in his writing. In his 2006 essay, "T.S. Eliot and Cinema," David Trotter relies upon "sufficient scattered reference to cinema in Eliot's letters, essays, and poems, to suggest an enduring preoccupation, and one with definite consequences for his development as a writer." Trotter notes that "cinema appears first in the

poems, rather than in letters or essays [...] by way of a shared terminology of the screen, and of images that flicker on the screen.” He observes that, “the view these poems propose is of a consciousness as a space, or event, or drama, of projection.” Trotter describes “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as “the love song of a voyeur equipped with a telescope, or a movie camera,” when he explains that, “Eliot sought not just to come to terms with, but to explore fully, to articulate in and as the poem itself, the power of images thrown technologically onto a screen: images visionary and yet hard, unreal and yet true, like those in an early film” (2006).

Deirdre Flynn and Garry Leonard went so far as to allude to Eliot’s poem in the title of their book, *Nerves in Patterns on a Screen: An Introduction to Film Studies* (2014), and to suggest in their introduction that the speaker, Prufrock, “explicitly refers to the new visual entertainments emerging as a dominant art form in the 1920s when he states ‘as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen.’” The professors/authors describe Eliot’s poem “itself operat[ing] like a ‘magic lantern,’ a neo-cinematic optical device, throwing up ‘patterns on a screen,’ where the screen, in this case, is the mind of each individual ‘viewer’/reader.” One technique pertinent to this video is the episodic nature of the images they describe through an explanation by Terry Borton: “‘They did not tell a story with a visual beginning, middle, and end. The existing images froze a moment in time... His [Eliot’s] images, in tandem with the kind of narrative progression associated with watching a motion picture...through an implosion of words and images, a narrative, indeed a movie, was created in the mind of each individual viewer’” (2014).

Recognized for his 1992 study of Eliot’s time at Harvard, Manju Jain references Eisenstein in celebrating “Eliot’s Legacy to Cinema” (Jain, 2008). Jain goes beyond a comparison of Eliot’s technique with that of the cinema to offer that Eliot, in fact, affected

“developments in film theory, as well as some cinematic techniques, issues, and themes.” It is interesting to note that Eliot, as a student of philosophy, studied under Hugo Munsterberg “whose *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) is considered to be the first comprehensive study of the film medium [...] Munsterberg makes out a case for film as a new art” (Jain, 2008). Jain concludes that “although Eliot was to become quite acerbic about the academic jargon used by Munsterberg [...], the issues that Munsterberg raised in his work on film no doubt made a strong impact on his poetic practice and literary theorising.” Perhaps most notably, Jain suggests that Eliot serves as a participant in the “conjuncture between philosophy, cinema, and poetry” (2008).

Literary Analysis

In order to identify the elements of the poem to portray in this film to evoke the intended mood and theme, a literary analysis of the poem with a focus upon Eliot’s use of surrealistic imagery was conducted.

The poem stirs its readers with hopeful anticipation with its opening invitation to make a visit; however, it becomes “a frustrating experience, the more so because it had begun so promisingly, with the proffered complicity of intimacy that conventionally lies behind so many poet/reader relationships here made explicit-- ‘Let us go then, you and I.’ It is an offer that takes us nowhere” (Scobie, 1991). The reader is instead lead down “streets of tedious arguments” (Eliot, 1915). “The narrative line founders and is immediately bemused by the repetition of ‘Do I dare?’ and ‘Do I dare?’ [...] Explanations are deferred (in the way of texts with their readers), but the promise is never quite redeemed” (Scobie, 1991). Hopelessly, “one knows that Prufrock will never ‘force the moment to its crisis’ because, ironically enough, Prufrock has in effect married his pain, his sense of abiding failure” (Pinsker, 2006).

We see Prufrock's frantic inner soliloquy and indecision in his unrelenting questions to himself, from the mundane-- "Do I dare to eat a peach?"-- to the profound-- "Do I dare disturb the universe?" This type of disjointed, reeling inner dialogue makes it clear that we are examining this character's conscious rather than the objective reality of his world.

The rhythm and pattern of the verse are certainly insistent and urgent, perhaps neurotically repetitive [...] The disquieting of the reader is achieved above all by the repetitive, incantatory manner of his language, not only the repeated phrases and sentences-- 'there will be time' or 'do I dare?'--but the insistent weaving of word repetitions. (Scobie, 1991)

The all-encompassing feeling of despair begins in the third stanza of the poem, when Eliot begins to write about the "yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes" (Eliot, 1915). This personified yellow fog creeps around the edges of the poem, tinging the once hopeful evening of possibility described in the beginning with Prufrock's self-doubt. Eliot's use of color to depict how Prufrock's internal feelings of despair coincides with Sergei Eisenstein's explanation of inner tonality and harmony:

When we speak of 'inner tonality' and 'inner harmony of line, form, and color,' we have in mind a harmony of *something*, a correspondence with *something*. The inner tonality must contribute to the *meaning* of an inner feeling. As vague as this feeling may be, in its turn, it is always directed finally to something concrete, which finds an outer expression in colors, lines, and forms. (Eisenstein, 1957)

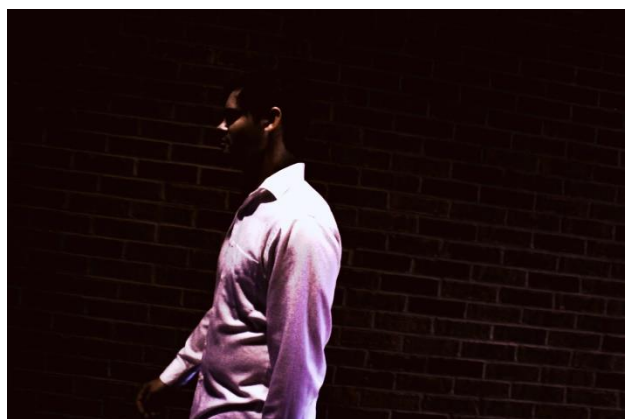
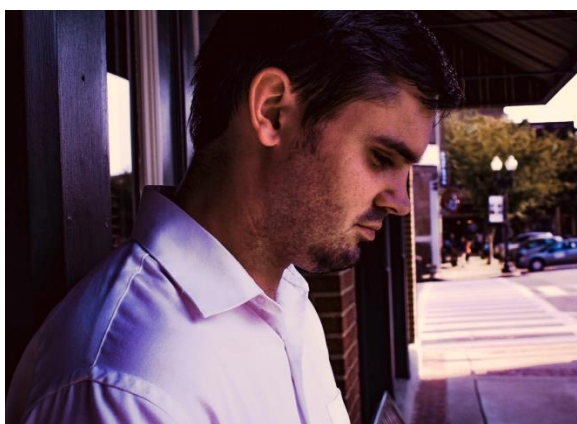
In the last section of this poem, the mood suddenly feels less frantic and resigned, as if Prufrock has distanced himself from his painful struggle with himself and entered a space that is completely separate from his perception of reality. Whereas, he was discussing tangible elements

such as fog in a surrealistic manner, he now talks about fictional ideas, such as singing mermaids. We see the beginning of the transition into this disassociation between stanzas of his back-and-forth arguments within himself with the line, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (Eliot, 1915).

Part One



Part Two



Part Three



Definitions (Museum of Modern Art: Glossary of Art Terms)

Installation- A form of art, developed in the late 1950s, which involves the creation of an enveloping aesthetic or sensory experience in a particular environment, often inviting active engagement or immersion by the spectator.

Medium- The materials used to create a work of art, and the categorization of art based on the materials used (for example, painting, drawing, sculpture).

Mixed media- A technique involving the use of two or more artistic media that are combined in a single composition.

Modern- Modern can mean related to current times, but it can also indicate a relationship to a particular set of ideas that, at the time of their development, were new or even experimental.

Shutter- A mechanical device for controlling the aperture, or opening, in a camera through which light passes to the film or plate. By opening and closing for different amounts of time, the shutter determines the length of the photographic exposure.

Subconscious- In popular writing about psychology, the division of the mind containing the sum of all thoughts, memories, impulses, desires, feelings, etc., that are not subject to a person's perception or control but that often affect conscious thoughts and behavior (noun). The Surrealists derived much inspiration from psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams and the workings of the subconscious mind.

Surrealism- A literary, intellectual, and artistic movement that began in Paris in 1924 and was active through World War II. Influenced by Sigmund Freud's writings on psychology, Surrealists, led by André Breton, were interested in how the irrational, unconscious mind could move beyond the constraints of the rational world.

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