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Senior Thesis

Writing and discussion are perhaps the two least popular aspects of an art and design thesis. Not to get into generics, but most art students are happiest and most successful with personal images done with brushes or cameras. Personally, I've come to most appreciate talking about art. I'm a film lover, and an arts writer. My most intimate and honest work is created around the discussion and dissection of film art. Artists like Gus Van Sant, Jonathan Demme or David Gordon Green are the artists that I'd like most to emulate. But I don't necessarily want to be them in the sense that they were movie directors to come out of art school. I admire their ability to create a dialogue through the art of film. I like to think of myself as something akin to Carrie Rickey. As a film critic for the Philadelphia Enquirer, Rickey uses her ability to observe and appreciate visual literacy in written and spoken forms. She engages others in film. That is what my interests are as an art student. That is what I wanted to achieve in my senior thesis this year at the University of Michigan's School of Art & Design. My senior would be an exploration and articulation of ideas concerning film and art, divided into several projects.

This year would be dedicated to the creation of several film-based projects. With my interests in film art conversation, creation, and theorizing, the project would be divided into four parts. The first part would be the development of a screening series, consisting of topical and relevant film to be watched and talked about almost every week. The next part would be the occasional time-based work, consisting of experimental and

narrative movies created by me. The third part of my thesis would be a lecture, based on my ideas concerning a recent film work. And the last part of my thesis would be the writing of an essay, synthesizing ideas from the previous three projects, with a focus in tandem with the lecture. But before looking at each project, I have to reflect on my process, and how I came to my thesis work.

With my arrival at the art and design, my desire to work in filmic discourse was not as developed as a simple desire to just take pictures. But with my rejection as a photographer for the school's newspaper, The Michigan Daily, I went into turnaround and became a film and arts writer for that same paper. Despite the handicap of being an inexperienced writer, and an art student, which a writing section in a newspaper doesn't often take seriously, I went on to write over 150 pieces on film and art. My art school education and experiences enable me to review films and conduct interviews in a unique and more immersive way. I wasn't content with re-hashing standard text readings of films, like pontificating about cinematography or career gossip. I looked at each film as a unique, immersive experience for audiences to engage in. Each film is like a painting, and its gallery was the theater. This mindset became key to my writing. It became my strongest form of expression. Discussing art became my favorite form of art.

That would become the key to my process in creating a senior thesis this past year. I asked myself from the beginning, what was it that I could do to continue this process of creating and discussing ideas on film as art. But I couldn't bring myself to do just one project that amalgamated all of my interests. I had to spread out my interests in several pieces, mentioned earlier.

The first thesis project, the screenings, came from director Jonathan Demme. The “Silence of the Lambs” director, and art school graduate, created a film club during his educational days. The idea was to bring together a group of individuals interested in visual literacy, willing to talk about films. It created grounds for discussion, and allowed ideas to float around and be developed. It was an actual way to enjoyably talk about art, film specifically. Incorporating personal taste and knowledge with film courses taken at the U of M, I developed a schedule and a set of prompts for discussion. Initially, the first semester was dedicated to selecting obscure films that students haven’t seen, and building an audience. Work ranging from avant comic Ernie Kovacs to Warner Brothers Tunes shorts was presented, just to test the crowd. But with the second semester, and a desire to better integrate the screenings with my decided lecture content, I showed films like “Triumph of the Will,” and “The Dark Knight” to stir up conversation and reverberate ideas. Be it nostalgia and youth with film like “Tron,” or operatic insights with “The Dark Knight,” numerous ideas were presented. And, at the end of each screening, a sense of fun was achieved. It became a stimulating hangout. But the next step was to test out filmmaking.

In the last two years, video production has become a growing interest for me. With my writing, it’s beneficial to better understand the craft that you often talk about. It helps to watch a great deal of material, but a certain kind of understanding comes with creating something. I’ve taken courses such as Performance for the Camera, Video Piracy, and other art and design studio courses relating to film production. I took it upon myself to work in video, with my own filmic influences taking precedent in my work, while trying out different techniques. I wanted to mix vaudeville, natural lighting and

other topics of interest to me in film. For the first semester of my thesis, I chose to emulate the works of Ross McElwee, a documentary filmmaker who employed techniques of cinema verite wherein he would just not stop filming at any given point and time. In practicing this, I created a series of short films, capturing peers in their most awkward moments after asking them why people should go out with them on dates. The prompt generated a great variety of response, ranging from stunted to sensational remarks. But, this would not play into the final products of my work, which would be the lecture and the paper. The lecture would utilize my short film work.

And lastly, as the outline for the lecture, as well as my exercise in writing, I created a 25-page paper on Batman and Wagner. It was meant to flesh out ideas and practice better expressing my thoughts on film. With it, came a comprehensive research and revision process. I read and incorporated countless books and films, all the while synthesizing these pieces into my singular thesis idea. It would account for the video work, screenings, and lecture work. The essay, “Wagnerian Knight” would be a culmination of ideas, to be used in the conclusive lecture.

With the lecture, came the need to present a unique and interesting idea. It would utilize much of my essay, as well as my video and screening works. I wanted to present something beyond textbook analytics, and engage an audience with my ideas. The commitment to the idea was the greatest challenge. I felt the need to have an original, specific idea to talk about, beyond film as art. But by the second semester of my thesis, I came to accept a recurring idea on “The Dark Knight.” Recent and fresh in many minds, I wanted to discuss the film’s implications in Richard Wagner’s operas, and its relation to

Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will." I wanted to discuss the "Knight" as something beyond its comic book origins, which made it so compelling.

The lecture was to be a mix of live performance, videos in the Wagnerian style, research and audio/visual elements. After reading into the works of Wagner, the Nazis, and Batman, I would connect the dots for the lecture, but engagingly so. I didn't want the lecture to be another academic setting that accidentally bores its audience. It had to be fun. After much debate, editing, practice and re-evaluation, the lecture became an hour-long event about Batman and German opera. Featuring clips from Looney Tunes to Excalibur, and music from "The Dark Knight" and Wagner, dancing, bike riding, and stand-up volume, the lecture was more like an experience than a lecture. This was about "The Dark Knight," presenting unique and original ideas with it, and getting people interested in talking about it.

Although the lecture would be the culmination of my work and research, my thesis would be a combination of works. With my initial goals of film and art discourse, comparable to the work of Carrie Rickey, Jonathan Demme and Ross McElwee, I found that my art was the discussion of art. Through reading, writing, research and executing my several projects, my work became a fitting expression of myself. The lecture and its preceding writing, screenings and video work were what I set out to create. I created various conversations on film art with others. This has been a very successful, and pleasantly realized year to do this kind of work. I talked about movies, in the most immersive sense possible.