UNDER THE MASK: ANALYSIS OF PROCESS AND FORM

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

This text is a companion piece of writing to the thesis project, Under the Mask. This project is a video production with a running time of approximately 45 min. This text is the accompanying writing requirement that details the concerns and process of the working relationship between my collaborators and myself.

The paper is written as a first-person account of events associated with the project. In between the anecdotes, there are attempts to objectively expound on topics relevant to the stories. It should be read in conjunction with a screening of the video in order to fully comprehend the conceptual basis of the project.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I wish to thank the children involved and their respective parents for giving me the opportunity to realize this project.
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INTRODUCTION

HAVE FAITH; NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS.

Like many of my projects, this movie began as a question. Defining my position to my work was the central concerns of my experiences over the last two years. What defines a particular work is inconsequential since the conceptual elements are unique to each project and the experimentation takes priority over finished results. Instead, I could set up a situation that allowed me to examine the operations of my processes, whether it was dealing with the apparatus of how one sees a picture or how groups or persons create themselves. In one piece I gathered my neighbors one evening to watch video
introduction I had taped of them. In another, I used a video projection in combination
with a musical performance to deal with notion of looking at images. My work
experimented with how to relate myself to the images and experiences around me,
ultimately questioning the importance of my own artistic contributions to those images
and experiences.

The question that began the movie was a continuation and a more in-depth
investigation of most of the pieces I was doing during this time. Because of the length of
time it took for this project to become realized, the movie operates as an organizing
context for the other pieces to exist inside. When I began to think about starting a large
project or body of work, my most curious studio practice involved projecting videos of
movies onto my studio wall and leaving them playing while I went about doing other
things during the day. The act of not watching and letting the ephemeral projection exist
as an object in my studio ties together many of the issues I was thinking about: issues of
work and production, issues of claiming and creating a personal space, and thinking
about how I exist as an artist in relation to an autonomous process. Not ironically, the
movie I present as my thesis research can be seen as dealing with the same issues.
(AN ASIDE)

The image of the mirror is the central metaphor in the video. Plot-wise the story is a narrative about self-discovery. The girls literally find a magic mirror that apparently transports them to another place and transforms their appearance giving them literal masks. The mirror says, “HAVE FAITH; NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS.” They discover themselves behind their masks and learn to accept who they always were.

Video, too, is also a mirror for them. The shaking of the camera and the constant look at the audience by the girls continually address the notion of reflection and anti-illusionism. The amateurism of the production is a constant state of admitting its failure to seduce into illusion. What is apparent in the video image is its transparent qualities that deny a sense of fictional representation. Because of video’s relation to home-movies and reality-footage, it is naturally associated with real-life events that Under the Mask exploits in order to reinforce a kind of mirroring of reality.

This concept of self-discovery is also parallel to an artist’s process of making and discovering his/her own practice. The creative process is also explored in the production
of the movie. The girls were integrally involved in the making of the movie. One of the goals of the project was to invest in the girls' creative ideas. Another goal was to experience the energy that was produced from giving inexperienced makers an opportunity to express themselves with apparent artistic freedom.
CHAPTER 1

WHAT WE DO IS NOT RESEARCH.

This was the first time of many that I would believe I had bitten off more than I could chew. I was shooting my mouth off with big claims about this new project, about how I was attempting something bold and ambitious. I had made short videos before using friends as actors—real funny ones that had guys shoving shotguns in their mouths. But now I was bored. I needed to reinvent what was old hat by now. I was going to make a big spectacle of this movie. It would hover between cinéma-vérité-like documentary and intensely engrossing fiction.
Amazingly, the performers were to be children! They were to perform a school play and I, the well-experienced video-maker that I was, would capture them in a way that was never imagined before. Their performances would be stilted and awkward but I would transform them into moving portraits of adolescence, my true subject. I would mix backstage and on stage footage and make the correlation between their performed lives and their actual ones. After all, wasn’t being a child all about learning to act? Don’t we all take on performed identities to experiment with who we are? I would manipulate and change everything and arrive at the greater truth that all documentaries purport to seek. Audiences would instantly see through the façade of the acting, and grasp what was really being showcased—brilliant filmmaking of artistic genius.

My biggest conceit of my plans was that I would somehow manage to organize all of the logistics of doing this project. Actually, most of the videos I had made were complete failures. I was unable to keep any production solvent for an extended period of time. I had tried to make another one in my second year of grad school, and it was a valiant attempt. It was to be a horror movie that would be laughably gory as well as cheaply dubbed. We had momentum at one point, but eventually that dissolved as well. In reality, I had made only a couple of short videos and was incredibly inexperienced.
with handling big projects. Still, even today I have trouble filling out paperwork and making deadlines. I can’t even clean my own room.

My experiences with children at that point was an unfinished teaching certification program I had gone through before I came to grad school. I had worked in elementary and high schools, but the actual teacher always supervised me. If something disastrous happened, they could fix it. One time when I was trusted enough to handle kids alone, I let them play in a fenced in area where the school kept a couple of sheep. The sheep felt threatened by their presence and tried to maul the group of girls, violently knocking down a little girl with a mental disability.

I had no clue how to do what I wanted to do. Equipment-wise, all I had was a low-end mini-dv camcorder and no sound stuff—like I would know what to do with that stuff anyway. Experience-wise, I had several flops and unprovoked sheep attacks.

The first thing I needed to do was academically validate my project by approving my research through the Office of Research Risks Protection at Ohio State University. The application was twelve pages long. I wrote permission forms and scripts for initial contact and printed them on Department of Art stationery. Eventually when I would venture out into the schools to make my movie, I would come acknowledged as a serious academic researcher. I would now be known as the Co-investigator; my advisor would be
know as the Principal Investigator.

Several months after I sent in the application, my advisor and I both received this letter from the Office of Research Risks Protection:

*I am enclosing a letter that indicates the action of the Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board regarding study #02B0084, Production and Analysis of a School Play Project, with Nestor J. Domingo. After reading the proposal, the committee determined that Mr. Domingo’s project does not constitute research as defined in the federal regulation (45 Code of Federal Regulations 46, section 46.102(d)). Research is there defined as “a systematic investigation, including research development testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.”

*It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a proposed study constitutes “research” according to this definition. The committee gave the application careful consideration and determined that this project does not meet the definition and thus does not require the continuing oversight of the Review Board.*
Thus, you can initiate the activities outlined in your proposal. Please keep the enclosed letter in the files for this study, in case anyone raises a question about whether you have followed the appropriate review procedures.

The determination that "no review is necessary" does not relieve you of the obligation to obtain the appropriate permissions from the school and from the parents and children involved in the project.

What we do is not research.
THE TOOTH

After all that trouble of finding out how I could find actors in the public schools, I ended up working with the daughter of a visiting artist who had a studio down the hall from my own. What struck me when I first began to work with Amira was how excited she was to be involved. During my failed attempts to find seventh graders in a drama class at Arts Impact Middle School, I realized how difficult it was to generate enthusiasm among the students. Their eyes would grow large when I mentioned making a movie. I would send them home with my carefully worded permission forms and that would be the end of it. I would never see those permission forms signed.

With Amira, it was easier to continue working because of the proximity of her family to the university. She was very motivated to do this project, and we began having meetings in her mother’s office to work out ideas for the project. Amira was a precocious 12-year-old and I encouraged her to write down ideas for the movie. The scope of the project had changed. There was an interest for me to withdraw my claims of authorship and focus on being a facilitator for the children to make their own movie. The objective was clear. This project would never have the authority I was
interested in if I were to remain the director or author. Amira—who was very much interested in becoming involved as a writer and director—helped along the process of removing myself as creator of the piece. This signaled a shift in subject for the movie. The constant negotiation between Amira and I was proving to be far more interesting than my previous ideas.

Amira tried to write a script and the first thing I discovered was the withdrawing as author was more difficult than I had imagined. Amira did not have the discipline to complete a script and many of her decisions seem to be made through vanity rather than for regard for the final product. In essence, she was a 12-year-old, inexperienced in the realities of doing a project at this scale. To her credit, she still maintained a respect for the project that allowed it to become realized. I always encouraged an anarchic spirit of amateurrism that may have threatened to doom this project as it had for many of my past works. For the record, she insisted on no violence and no bathroom humor.

The result was a short video, The Tooth, which was based on a larger scale concept that we had been working on. We did this truncated version because of time and logistical restraints, such as finding locations and cast members and finishing before her summer vacation. This video demonstrated a number of inconsistencies and is ultimately
problematic. The video reeks of my editing. Initially Amira's mystery story features a
girl who has amnesia from being struck in the head by a falling tooth; the video takes
place in the hospital bed as the girl tries unsuccessfully to amuse herself.

I added a voice-over and suspenseful music to make the video intriguing, but the
piece fails to reflect the collaboration that took place. It seemed to revert to the earlier
ideas that I believed to be limiting. The Tooth succeeded in doing was revealing the
shortcomings of the utopian situation that I was trying to force upon the project. In my
mind, I could hand the camera over to the kids and trust that everything would fall into
place. I needed to be comfortable in asserting my authority over the project. I needed to
find a medium between the voices of the kids and exerting the control necessary to have
the final result be successful. Gasp! I was becoming a teacher.
CHAPTER 2

Instead of envying the script and dialogue writers, the trained actors, the elaborate staffs and sets, the enormous production budgets of the professional film, the amateur should make use of the one great advantage which all professionals envy him, namely, freedom - both artistic and physical. - Maya Deen (1)

The movie, Under the Mask, is tied to an understanding of its production process. The collaboration between the children and I is the context for understanding the story. Aesthetically, the movie is focused on amateur forms of storytelling and moviemaking. Decisions that began that project centered on assumptions about naïveté that surround the
artistic practice.

There is a historical precedence to this assumption. One can call to mind the reverence of children’s imagination held by modernist artists such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and Jackson Pollock. In film, part of the movement that became known as the New American Cinema had artists such as John Cassavetes and Stan Brakhage championing a romantic return to amateurism. These artists held the child’s imagination as an example of a purer model of creativity; an example of a creativity that was closer to human intuition somehow unencumbered by social corruption.

There are many reasons for this tendency. It has been a recurring theme of modernist artistic practice. Certainly, the irrationality that became associated with early twentieth century avant-garde movements was based upon a certain understanding of childishness as being a response to modernity. Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that underpinned the avant-garde’s fondness of irrationality was focused upon the adult unconscious and its formation in childhood. (5) Victorian-era writers and artists held assumptions of children being holders of some supernatural innocence that privileged them. Lewis Carroll and William Blake used themes of childhood in their work as metaphors for innocence. Liberal advances and emergences in the fields of education, especially art education, during the sixties and seventies were based upon child-centered (8).
perspectives and paralleled the apparent romazticism in the studio arts.

Amateurism, in this respect, can be seen as a reaction to notions of strict
formalism and rationality. The worlds of adulthood and of childhood can be seen as
emblematic of these opposites. The adult represents the sophisticated world of rationality
and professionalism, the child being representative of the amateur, one who does work
out of love, and the irrational.

My movie adopts modes of amateurism to reflect and parallel the concepts of the
childish and naïve. Understanding the negotiation of authority during production is a
necessary connection to questions about creativity and technical competency surrounding
an educated and sophisticated artistic practice. It is my intention for this movie to pose an
alternative to systems of formalist artistic production by using tactics of amateurism. Not
to say that the piece is coldly calculated to be a reaction to a professional and highly
crafted production, rather the aspiration to reinvent my relationship to my work began
with ideas of not-knowing and starting-from-uncertainty which a formalist interest in
production could not resolve for me. (2)

By formalist, I mean a practice that possesses conventional and rational
structures, such as when a film is routinely revised and planned in pre-production in order
for the whole production to run smoothly or when a painter prepares a canvas in a
traditional manner in order for the final work to be more archival. In my thinking at the conceptualization of this project, the ideas of convention and tradition are ultimately contrived and counter-productive because of their predictability. These ideas result from the desire to make an artistic working process conveniently systematic and occupied only with its own importance.

The final video, however, also begins to operate as a critique of the romantic purism implied by the above. As one can observe in the finished video, there are elements of strategic articulation that betray the presumed childishness of the project. The rhythmic editing and the introspective moodiness of many of the sequences contradict the evident awkwardness and self-awareness of the images. I want to keep any conclusions about production values and authorial credit in flux.
We were behind schedule. After almost one year of trying to complete this project, we were just then beginning to get started. By then, we had a larger cast and a new story. Amira’s best friend, Caroline, stepped into the picture as a co-author of the script and one of the leading actresses. The rest of the cast seemed to be picked from both of the girls’ families’ friends, including a dog that belonged to a neighbor of Caroline’s.

One thing that was very curious was Amira’s reluctance to give her brother, Sivan, a role. There seemed to be an intense possession of the movie emerging in Amira and she did not want to share the spotlight with her sibling. Eventually, Sivan was included on a technicality; another girl roughly the same age as Sivan was given a role and Amira couldn’t justify not giving him a role.

We decided that the perfect spot for the video would be a wooded area in Caroline’s neighborhood. It was located behind The School for the Deaf. We met after school and walked through the area several times trying to find the best locations to set each section of the video. The path through the woods went around in a circle following a creek eventually ending up in an open field where soccer games were played.
On these occasions when we would location scout, we would drive my car to a nearby road and walk around the circle trying to get a feel for the place. One day as Caroline, Amira, and I walked through the field, Amira said,

"I think that this movie might be too avant-garde for people."

I asked her what she meant by avant-garde.

"I mean, that this movie might be too strange for some people but it will get them to think."

I asked Caroline what she thought avant-garde meant.

“It’s like when something is really artsy and weird and it makes an audience think about something in a different way.”

Amira agreed.

To take up an alternative is to fundamentally oppose an established structure.

Under the Mask is an attempt to embody an alternative practice. What are the established structures that the movie is opposed to?
CHAPTER 3

THE PROBLEM WITH CREDITS

We were at Amira’s house trying to work out the credits for the title sequence. I felt that for some reason the title sequence was critically important to the project. It was the longest shot of the video. It followed the girls as they walked the dog, Isla, to the woods. It was shot fast-level (dog’s-eye view) and last for several minutes. The credits superimpose over the scene.

I was quite unsure about how to credit myself. Wasn’t I the director after all? Didn’t I orchestrate this from the beginning? How would my name being present in the
title credit affect the overall interpretation of the video? Plus, how would the credits look? I was thinking about a sans serif font design that referenced the titles in Godard's Weekend. "Very communist and arty," I thought to myself, "The perfect thing for this movie." Typically I left Amira the trouble of deciding.

She wanted to put the title, Under the Mask, in this god-awful spooky font. The ends of the letters coozed and dripped like a gory corpse. The rest of titles were in this mismatched but strangely appealing western movie font, which I would approximate as a wanted poster type design. Luckily, the spooky font wasn't on my computer.

As for the credit, well, the movie would say written and directed by Amira Silver-Swartz and Caroline Angell. Sivan, who was hanging around offering his suggestions said. "It should say directed and edited by Jay."

Amira interjected, "But he didn't really direct the movie. He was more like a producer."

In the end, I gave myself a "Conceived and Edited by" credit in hommage to Chris Marker's Sun Surf. (6)

The decision of choosing the structure of a narrative story for this project was to
pose my concern about creativity and artistic practice in relation to the dominant cinema form. Narrative film-making, having established its own codes and conventions, lends itself easily to questions of artistic authenticity, because of the structures of divided labor that have formed around film production.

There are a variety of roles that make up a single film production and — as one can attest by watching the lengthy end credits follow an average feature film — usually these productions employ a great deal of manpower. In a extremely simplified and generalized list of roles essential to a feature, there are the writers who write the script, the actor(s) who perform the action called for in the script, the cinematographer who operates the camera to record the actions, the director who plans and decides what and how the script is to be filmed, and a producer who assembles the people to perform all these roles. This list does not even begin to credit other crucial roles, such as sound people, set designers, editors, etc. The point is to demonstrate the need of narrative film — and distinguish the traditions of narrative film from other forms such as documentary and experimental cinema, which the need for divided and specialized labor may not apply to assemble a large group to produce a single product. Thus, it may be difficult and at the very least, arguably undetermined, to assign one of these roles as the sole author of these productions.
The *politique des auteurs* that began to surface in the critical discourse of French film criticism of the 1950s and continued in the American film studies as the auteur theory attempts to demarcate authorship in filmmaking. The theory is that a single filmmaker, usually the director in the classic interpretation of auteurism, is able to leave a personal signature upon his/her body of films that transcends the commercialized system of divided labor thus arriving at a personal vision of cinema. It was used by the French critics as a way to reclaim and canonize the work of commercial filmmakers such as John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock in order to create a larger and richer history of cinema that was comparable to the other arts. (7)

Since then it has been misinterpreted as equating the auteurship of a director (or writer, etc.) with that of a marketable concept that could draw attendance to a particular film. Witness the never-ending tread of Hollywood to begin every movie with the extremely tasteless "a film by so-and-so". Not so bad when it is "a film by Robert Bresson" or "a film by David Lynch", but immediately suspect when it is "a film by Michael Bay". How easy it is to commodify any attempt to acknowledge something as art or someone as artist. There is a question of how these attempts are ideologically driven, intentional or otherwise. (4) When an opportunity to advance a definition of high culture arrives, who benefits the most? It is not surprising that the canon will most likely
include choices that are western and Euro-centric and will be supported by those with the most capital.

By embracing the contradiction of Hollywood narrative film, in its efficient systematic organization of labor and its commercial need to forsake the machine and amount a single individual as the maker, is how Under the Mask begins to approach a solution to my question about individual creativity and production. The movie puts the issue of who is author in question simply by allowing the girls to contribute to the degree that they did.

Certainly the lives and imaginations of suburban adolescent girls have rarely been given a voice in media representations. The images we do see of this age and gender groups are often relegated to metaphorical interpretations or idealizations of this group. In other words, the images we see are usually created from an adult-perspective. In the process, one can see how one’s own subjectivity begins to marginalize one’s subject. The project attempts to address this issue by involving the girls into the authorship of the movie. It was my attempt to destabilize a situation where one person becomes the maker and the other persons the subject. A pre-existing scenario such as the divided labor system of narrative film production provides a strategy to destabilize our notions of maker and subject.
CHAPTER 4

THE PREMIERE

I presented the video premiere as my thesis exhibition. It took place at Hasset Hall Soundstage – though I don’t know why it is referred to as a Sound Stage, unless it is referring to the loud whooshing sound of the ventilation system – and Silver Image Gallery, which is immediately below the Soundstage. Upstairs the movie screened three times in a makeshift theater space with only thirty chairs; downstairs was the reception where there were tables, chairs, and buffet line. A closed-circuit camera was placed on top
of the movie screen and the video feed was seen on a monitor placed in the reception area.

The reason I mention all of this is because I wanted the premiere to somehow reflect and reinforce the situation and contexts of the movie. There to be two spaces that alluded to both the theatrical spaces of a movie theater and lobby and to the concept of the family gathering. The movie situated itself between the discourses of commercial movie going and of intimate family events. The closed-circuit television operates as a preview of the events that allude to pre-feature film entertainment as well as mirroring the participants of events in a similar manner that the participants of the project were involved with idea of mirroring in the movie.

On one of the gallery walls hung this statement, written by Caroline for this event:

> When Amira and I collaborated to make the movie’s scenario, we had ideas but no way to channel them. We had already walked Ayla in the woods many times. There was something mysterious and magical we wanted in our movie, something in the rushing stream and graceful trees. Through many sessions (not all fruitful)
and deep thinking, we did it. We hope the audience will understand our meaning.

We wanted to portray two girls who worried about what people thought, and were victims of society, both trying to fit in. Carrie and Mira were both thoughtful, smart, brave, creative characters inside, but masked it. Carrie tried to be "cool" and wanted to conform and be popular. Mira figured it was hopeless trying to be popular, so she hid herself, trying to be an outcast. We made these two girls find themselves in a situation where they literally were masked, not just figuratively speaking. The girls, with the help of magic and their true selves, managed to fight their weaknesses and self-consciousness (which took the form of an evil clown).

This evil clown symbol was large and terrifying when we were in doubt of ourselves but was small and weak when we were powerful. It eventually self-destructed when we found our true selves and managed to come out from under the mask—both literally and figuratively.

The biggest challenge of making a film for us was learning how to show meaning in actions and body movements. This was new to us. We had experience in drawing and writing but film required images, words, sounds, and coordinating
actors. It also involved controlling an independent spirited little dog. The weather
didn’t always cooperate. We had to earn little things like remembering what to
wear days later when we continued shooting, keeping a supply of gum handy, and
not losing the mermaid brush. Also, we couldn’t forget treat for bribing Aylo. We
also had to learn to negotiate on our ideas. (This was probably the hardest!)
There were numerous little quarrels, but in all honesty, everyday we fumed we left
the woods exhausted but very pleased and enthusiastic about our work.

In conclusion, there was a lot of work in the making of this movie. We learned a
valuable lesson in working together and being cooperative and patient. We both
want to thank Jay for his even harder work, patience, indulgence and good
humor. He showed wisdom in when he offered a suggestion and when he stayed
silent, forcing us to solve our own problems. It is an understatement to say that it
was all completely worth it. I hope you enjoy this little piece of art.

-Caroline Angell
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The video was rear-projected on a translucent screen. One of the most curious
discoveries was that one could watch the movie behind the screen with the image in
reverse. By the second screening, there were almost as many people behind the screen as
there were in front of it. For me, it was a welcome change. I was exhausted from editing
the video and having a new way to look at it was refreshing. But I wonder what the
people who had never seen the video before thought of the idea of watching something
for the first time backwards?
One association for me is the performance of a Javanese shadow play. Some members of the audience will watch the play from the backside, witnessing the musicians playing their instruments and the puppeteers manipulating the pieces of leather and wood that would become a king or a witch if viewed from the front. How curious it is to see everything exposed. The magic of the story being somewhat lost by the lack of the flickering shadows across the screen.

After the screenings, all the kids were ecstatic. Later I was told that on the ride home, Anaia, Sivan, and Caroline were talking non-stop about their new commitment to movie making. It was decided that each one would definitely be continuing their respective careers in writing, directing, composing, and acting. They were movie stars.

Two married faculty members watched the movie from behind the screen. They approached Caroline afterward and told her how good she was as the sheep. They asked her if she knew that if you watched from behind the screen the whole movie would be backwards.

“Oh yeah,” Caroline said, “it’s a real art film.”
1. Video still from *Under the Mask* (color, digital video)
2. Video still from *Under the Mask* (color, digital video)
3. Video still from *Under the Mask* (color, digital video)
4. Video still from *Under the Mask* (color, digital video)
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