

EP-J



N. 8



PANOS FOURTOULAKIS



Following a screening of her work at Zumzeig Cinema
in Barcelona,



American artist and experimental filmmaker Leslie Thornton addresses the audience through a pre-recorded video projected on the cinema screen.



There is a familiar yet uncanny element to this experience: the format of her speech shares similarities to confessional videos on social media perceived through mobile devices.



Yet, unlike those, her expression of vulnerability feels sincere.



The artist speaks intimately about *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984–2016), her opus film work of seventeen episodes, to express her concerns about the rapidly evolving technology surpassing human scale.



The work follows two children raised by media images, navigating a post-apocalyptic terrain. Thornton speaks of her family history; her father and grandfather –unbeknownst to each other at the time– worked on the production of the atomic bomb during World War II.



She speaks of the Apocalypse.



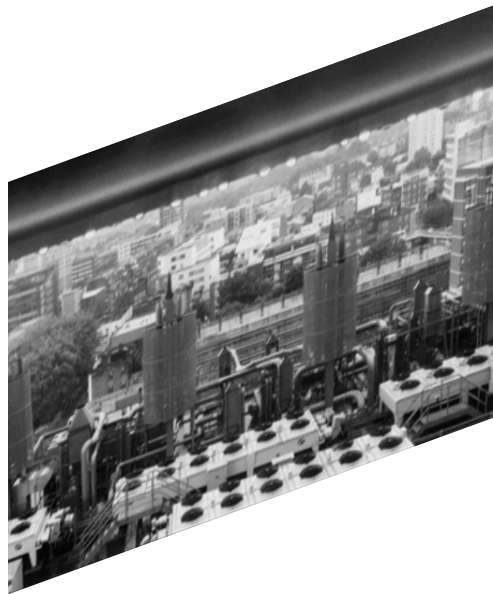
The artist considers the apocalypse a situation that will not signal a sudden end, but rather a slow ongoing one that we may already be experiencing – mainly through the climate crisis. ¶



The associations that arise from the experience of Thornton's speech, concerning what we might consider an apocalypse, the concept of death as an ongoing condition, its impossibility regarding our digital imprints and moving images in general, and the latter's affective and affecting capacities in producing our subjectivities, have struck me since. ¶



Like Thornton, theorist Evan Calder Williams considers that “the capitalist apocalypse has already been coming uneven and across time.”¹ Not a spectacular event, but a slow condition that has been unveiling for centuries.



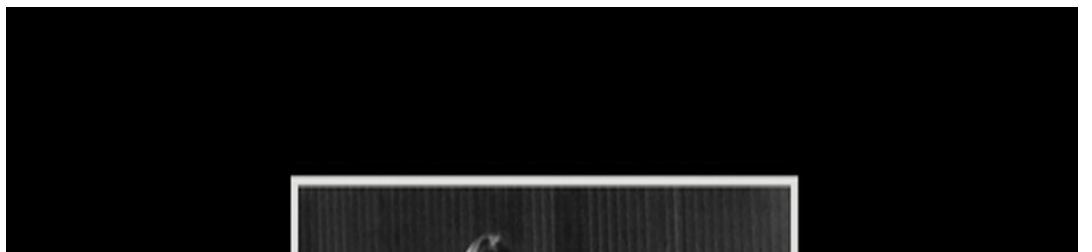
Unlike a catastrophe, which he considers a dead end, the apocalypse signals a revelation, “the lifting of a veil.”



Suddenly, elements that have always been present yet invisible are exposed. We see the collapse of totalizing structures, of universal notions that have served to define how things must be. ¶



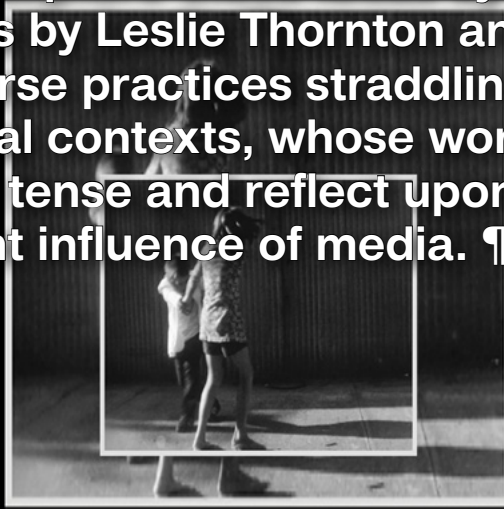
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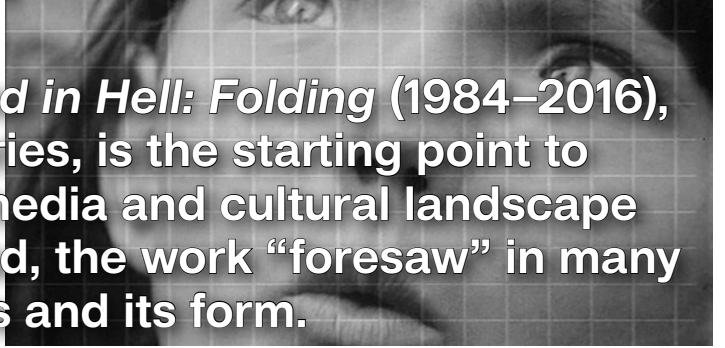
A way to consider the development of late capitalism and its effects on selfhood is to consider the development of media and how they shape our subjectivities and embodied sensibilities.



In the following pages, I will explore these ideas by looking into two moving image works by Leslie Thornton and Erica Scourti. Two artists with diverse practices straddling different generations and geographical contexts, whose works speak to the urgencies of the present tense and reflect upon what it is like to live under the constant influence of media. ¶



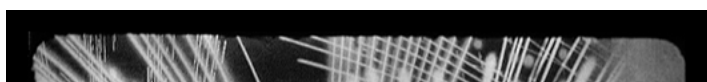
Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding* (1984–2016), the anthology episode of the series, is the starting point to understand the contemporary media and cultural landscape of excess that, it could be argued, the work “foresaw” in many ways, both through its thematics and its form.



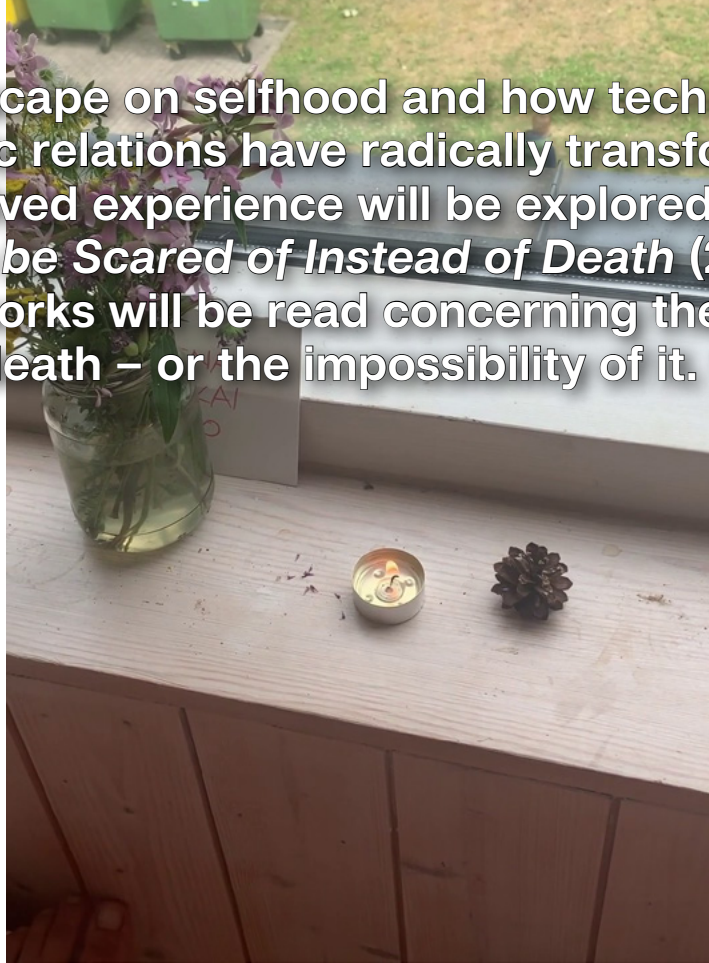
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The effects of this landscape on selfhood and how technology and neoliberal economic relations have radically transformed the ways we articulate lived experience will be explored by looking into *8 Things to be Scared of Instead of Death* (2021) by Erica Scourti. Both works will be read concerning the notion of the apocalypse and death – or the impossibility of it. ¶



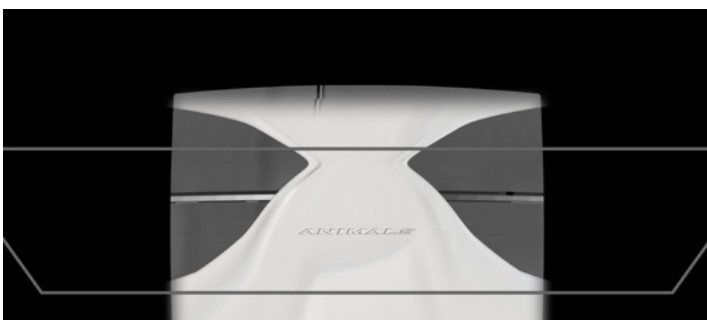
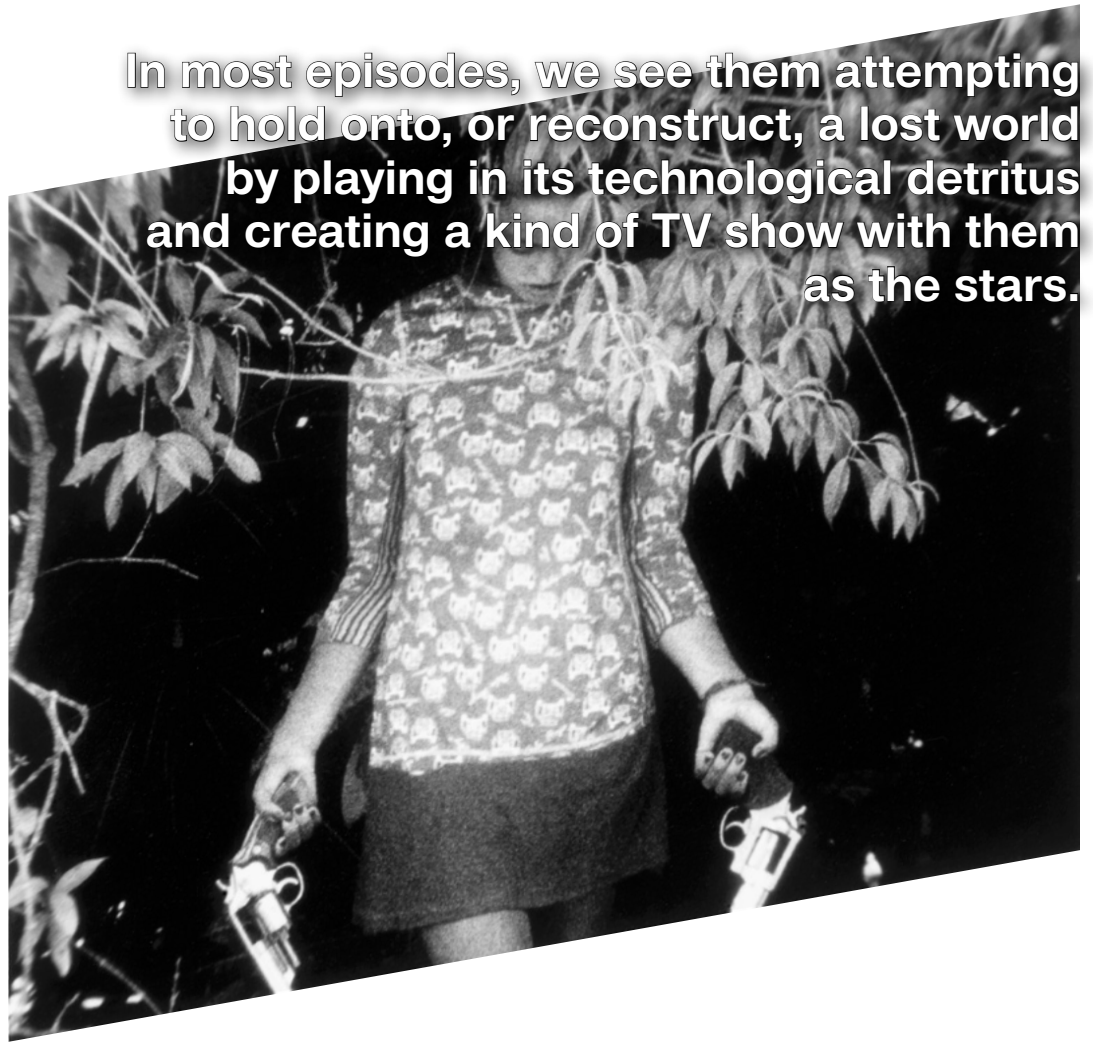
LIFE AFTER DEATH IN PEGGY AND FRED IN HELL



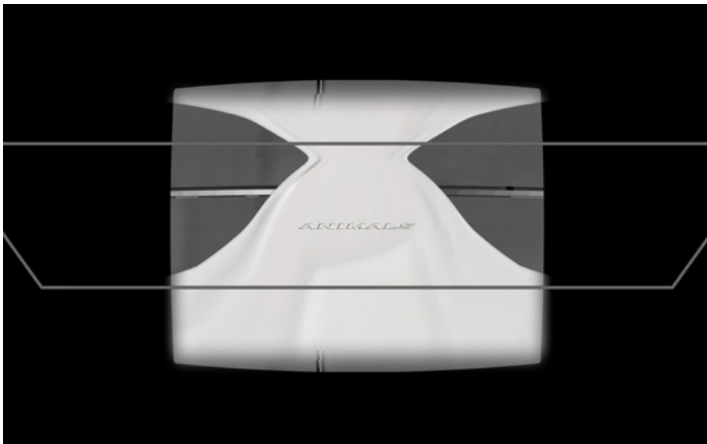
The initial premise of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* concerned two children alone in a post-apocalyptic world.



In most episodes, we see them attempting to hold onto, or reconstruct, a lost world by playing in its technological detritus and creating a kind of TV show with them as the stars.

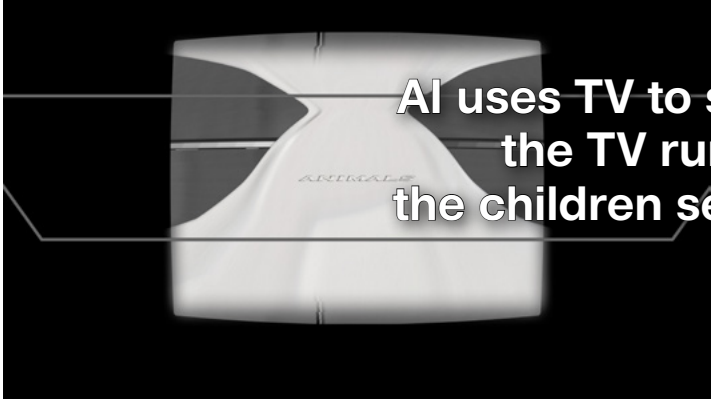


What I do not reveal, although it was my own backstory from the beginning, is that they are being observed by an artificial intelligence entity, studied as models of human affect or emotion.



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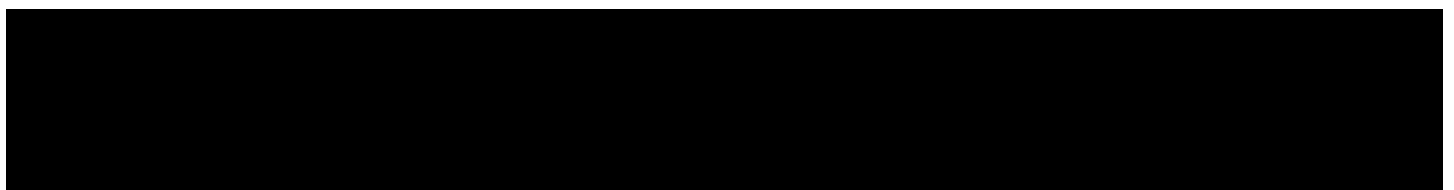




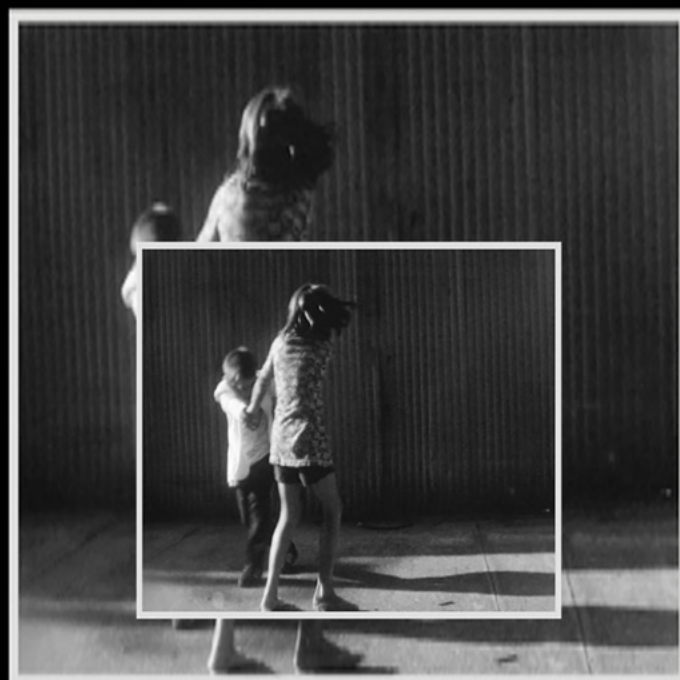
AI uses TV to stimulate their behavior. It keeps the TV running, and the only other people the children see are on TV. They think they are on TV, and they perform.²
(Leslie Thornton, 2018) ¶



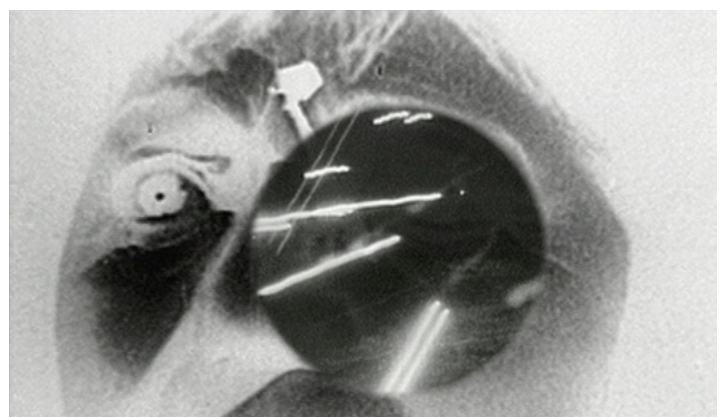
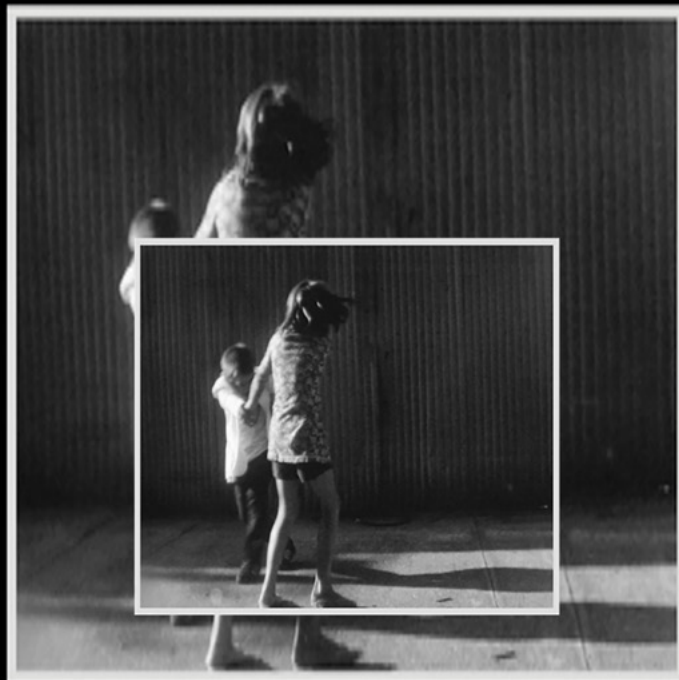
The apocalypse has happened, and the sole survivors of humankind are two children, Peggy and Fred.



Thornton constructs the post-apocalyptic terrain where the children navigate “Hell,” the hell that followed the death of civilization, which in turn resulted from technology’s capacity to exceed human control.

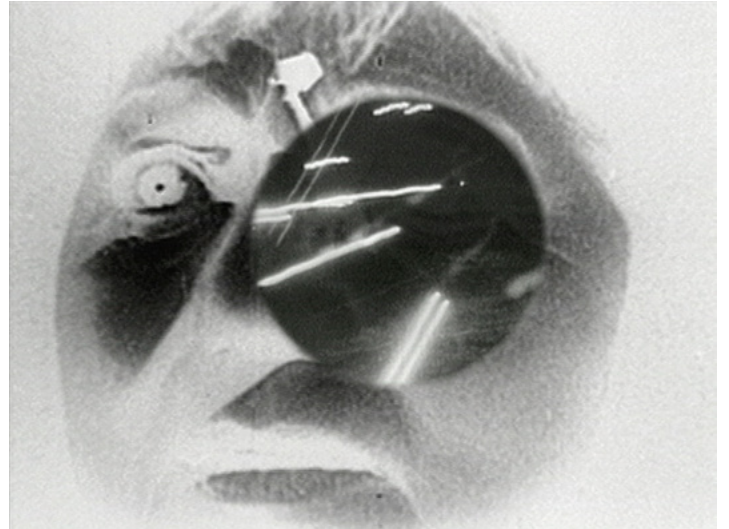


The actual events leading up to the apocalypse are unknown. The only remnants of the past are twentieth-century media images, serving as documentation and models of living that continue to play in the background.



These images become the children's only source of knowledge and understanding of the social. ¶

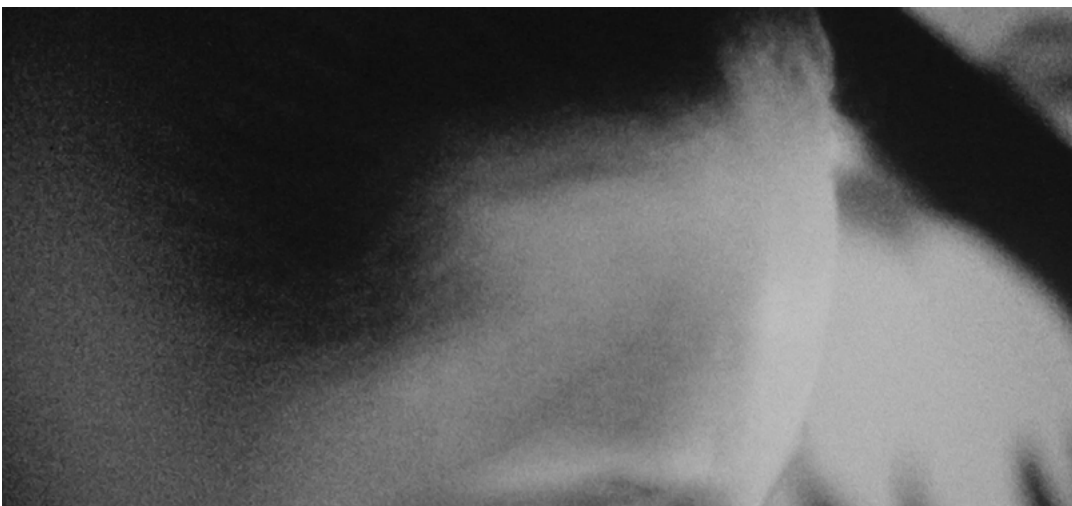
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The storyline is minimal and non-linear; most scenes occur in an indoor environment cluttered with mostly obsolete media.



When the children venture outside, they explore deserted industrial areas, empty fields, and demolished buildings.



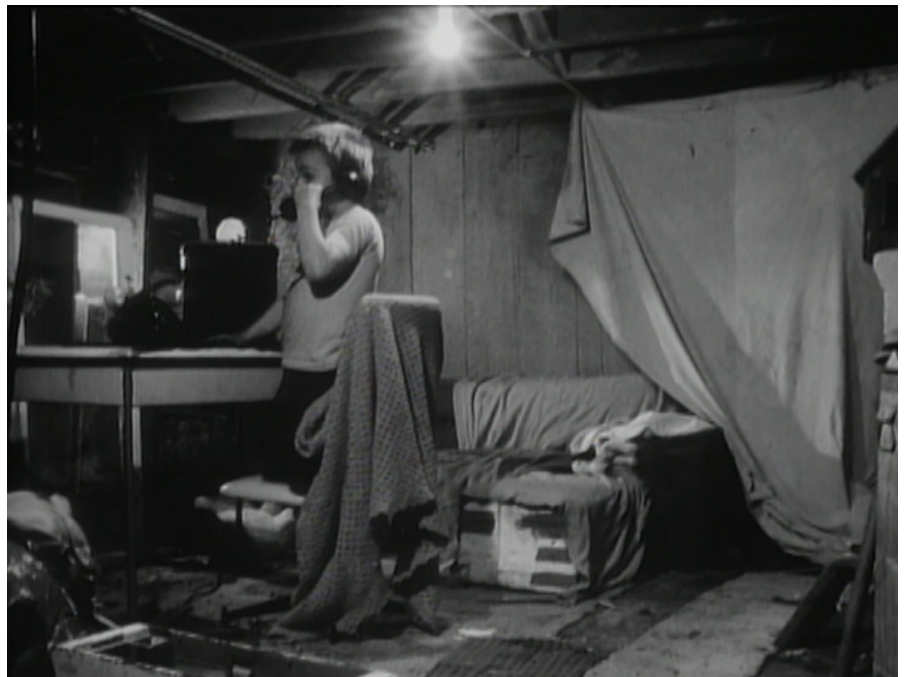
There is a strangeness to their interaction with the world or what is left of it, and unclear what is staged and what isn't.



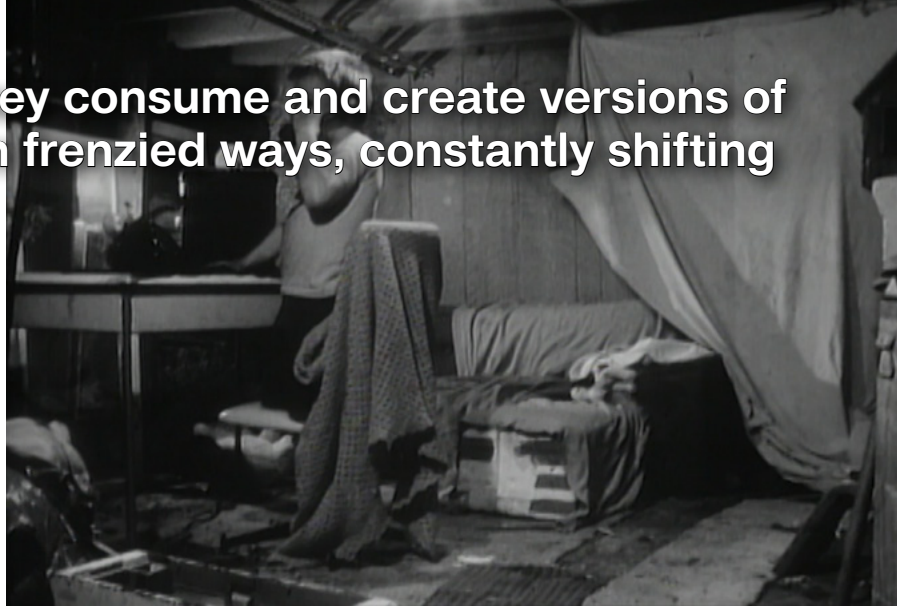
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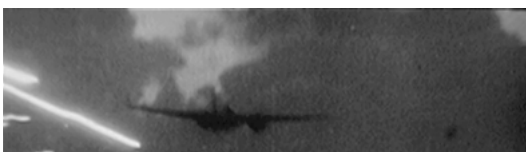
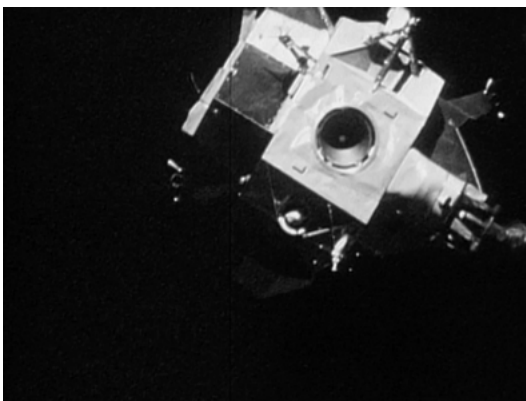
Everything is a performance, with the children playing adults, mimicking the voices they hear on TV, pretending to talk on the phone, going to space, getting ready for work, and carrying out other mundane activities.



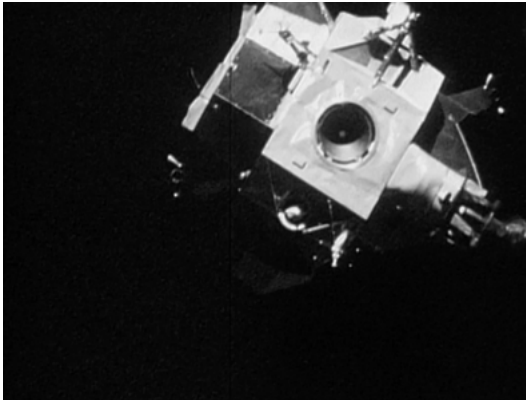
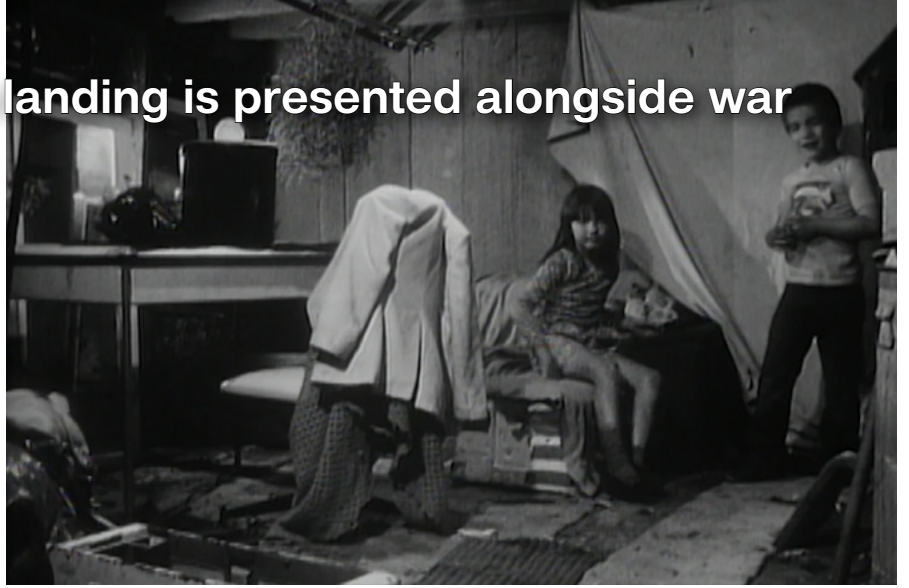
They embody images they consume and create versions of them, acting them out in frenzied ways, constantly shifting their focus. ¶



Alongside the children's performances, we see montaged footage from various archives spanning the twentieth-century history of the United States – a history of technological advancement and destruction.



Footage from the moon landing is presented alongside war and natural disasters.



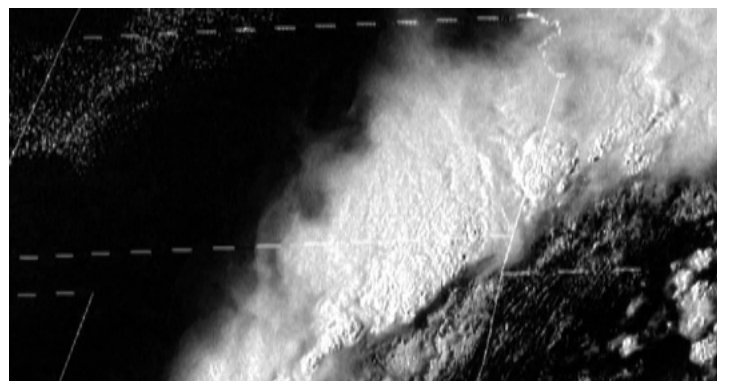
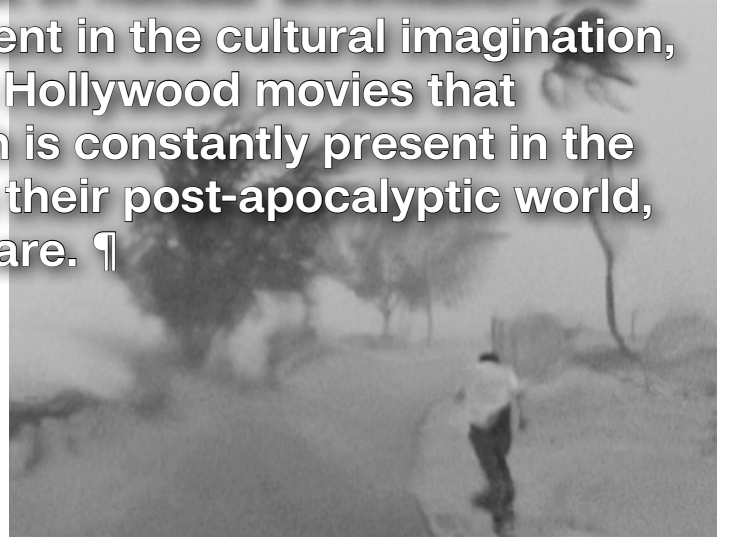
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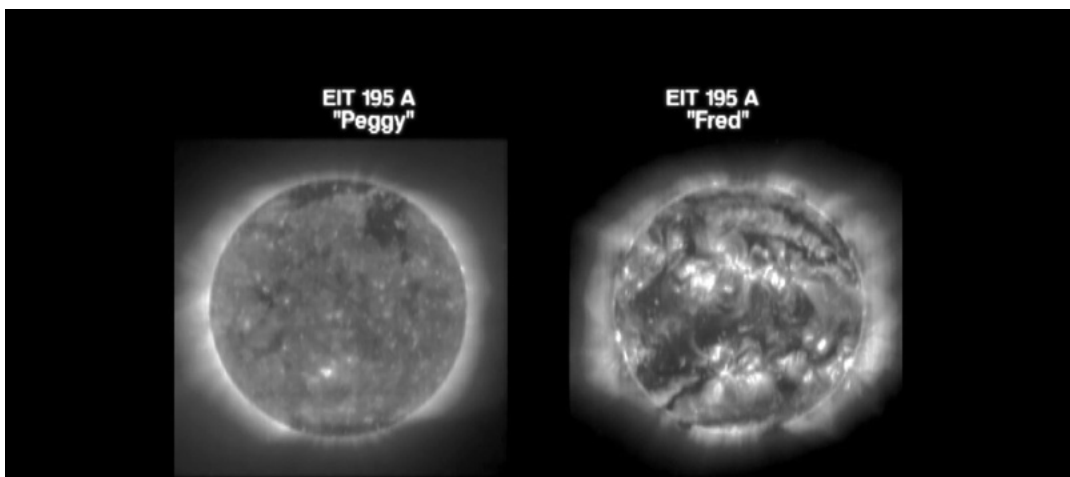
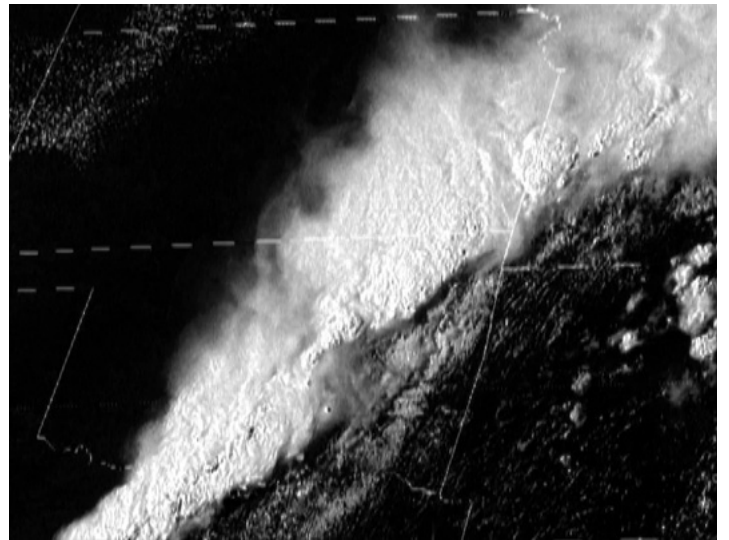
The deterioration of the environment is a recurring theme throughout the series – in one scene, we see a group of ducks on a pond only to find out later that they are all dead; in another, we hear the account of an eyewitness of the Hiroshima bombing attack.



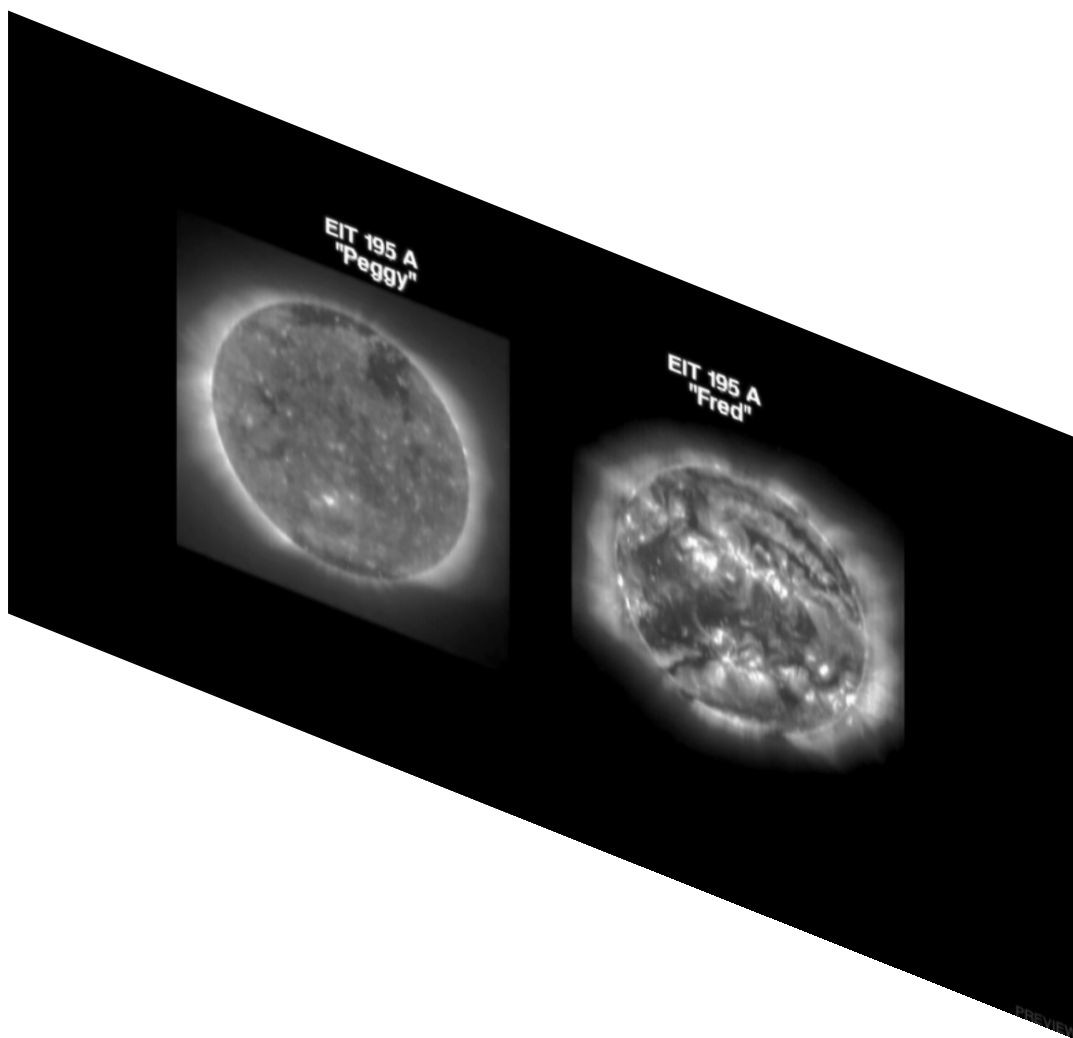
Cold War anxieties are present throughout. It is worth noting that the production of the work started at the height of Cold War tensions, in 1983. The threat of nuclear annihilation and fear of extinction was very present in the cultural imagination, not least through nuclear-panic Hollywood movies that were popular at the time.³ Death is constantly present in the children's lives as they navigate their post-apocalyptic world, yet they seem not to notice or care. ¶



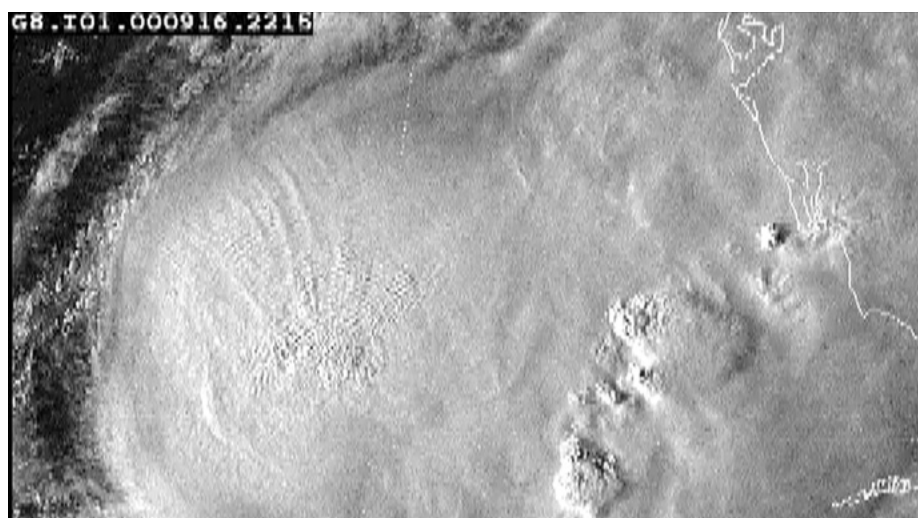
Finally, towards the end, it is revealed that an AI entity studies the children as models of human affect and emotion.



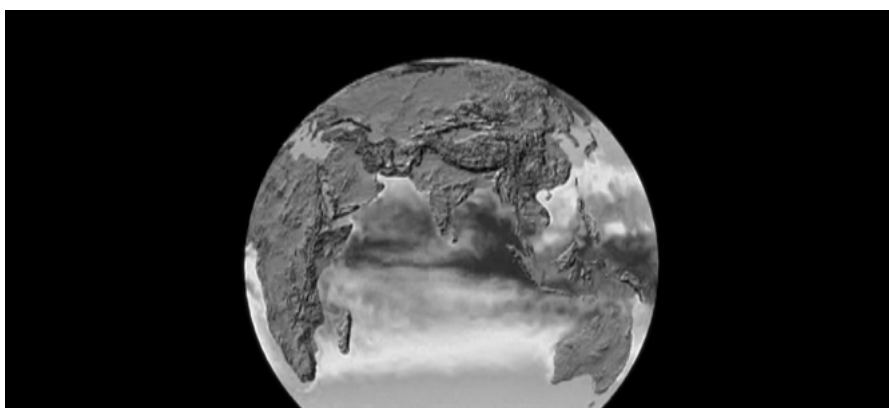
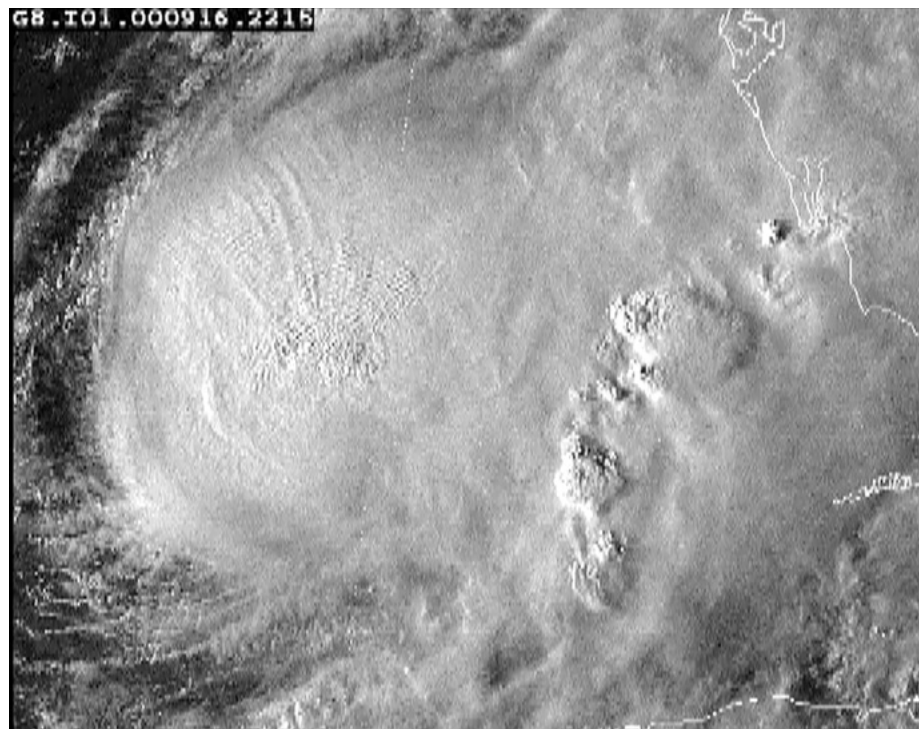
As of 2023, generative artificial intelligence entities are becoming accessible to the public; public engagement data is used as a resource for AI research and development,



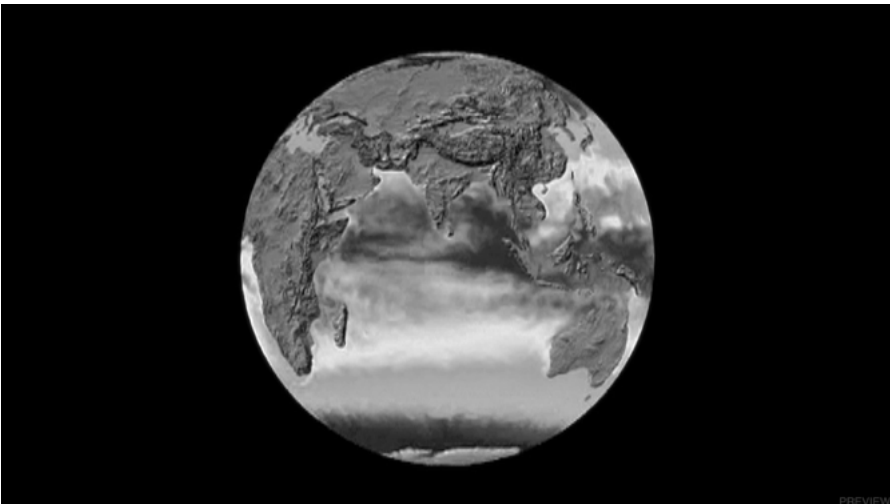
while concerns regarding the **unregulated** development of these new technologies continue to increase.⁴ ¶



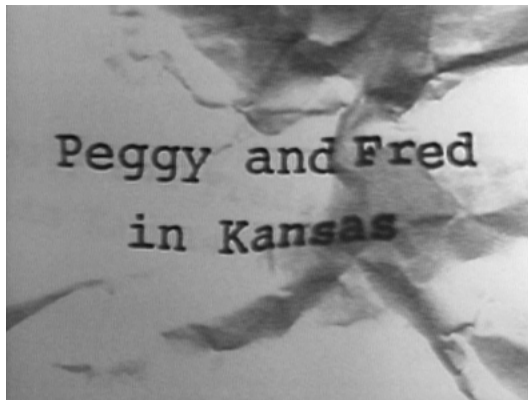
Today, like Peggy and Fred, we navigate a terrain overloaded with information in an endless loop of image production and consumption, where the distinction between the embodied self and its representation becomes malleable.



The children's behavior mirrors our engagement with social media and how these have reshaped our understanding of selfhood, sociality, and narrative forms.



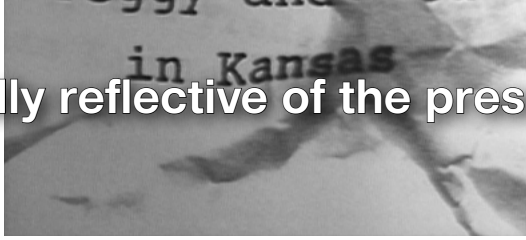
The effects of this engagement into frenzied, destructed attention also reflect present attention disorders. ¶



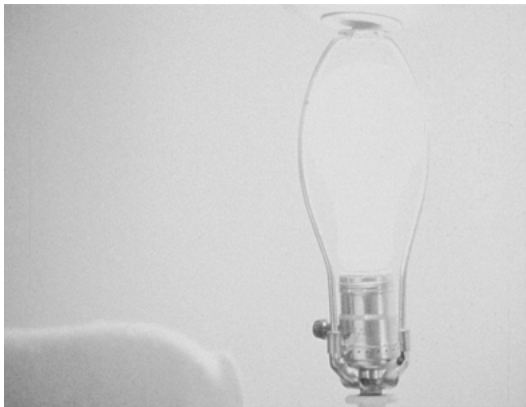
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The work's form is equally reflective of the present.



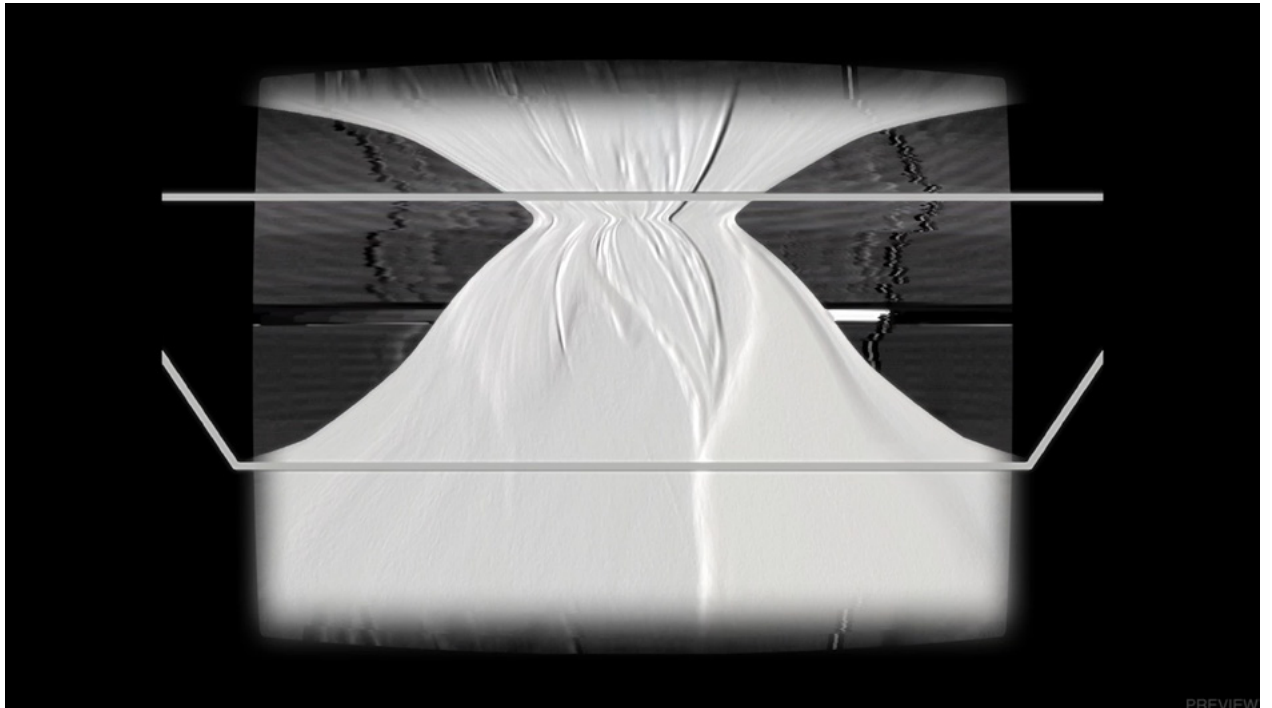
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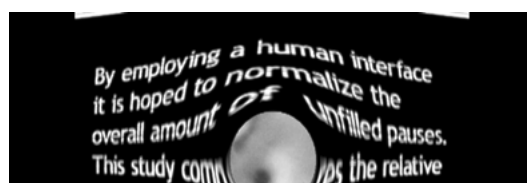
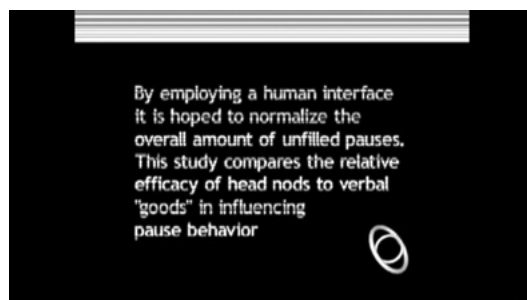
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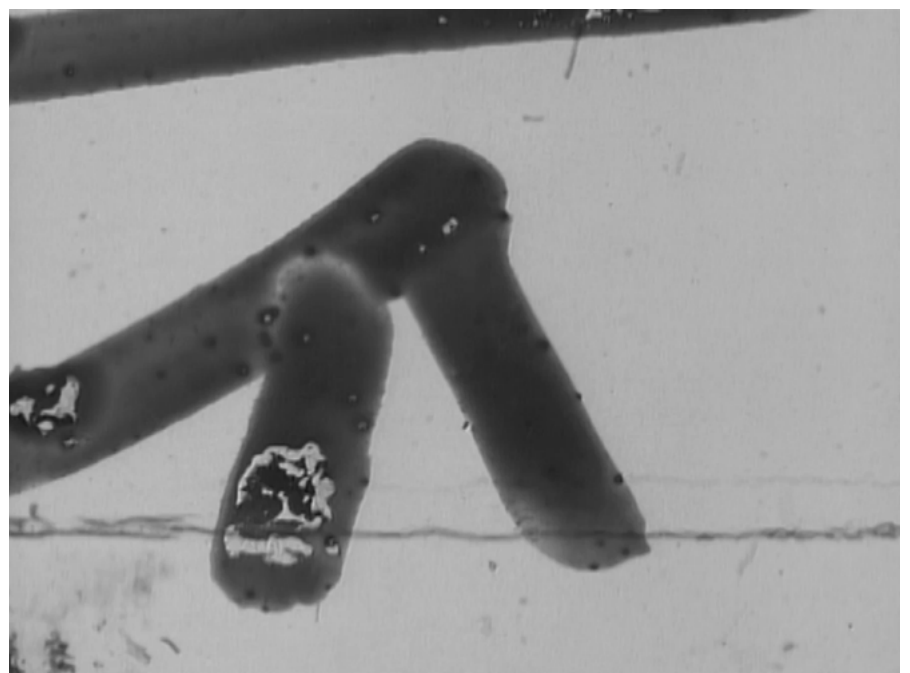
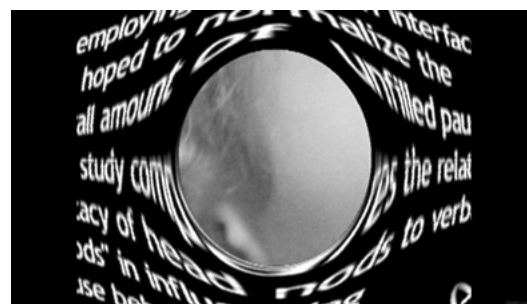
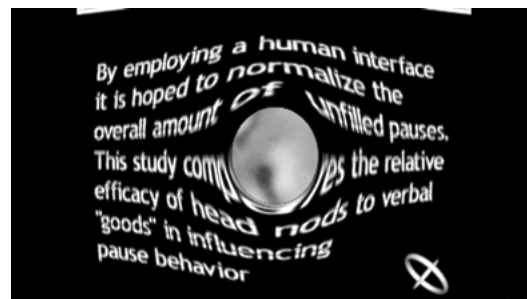
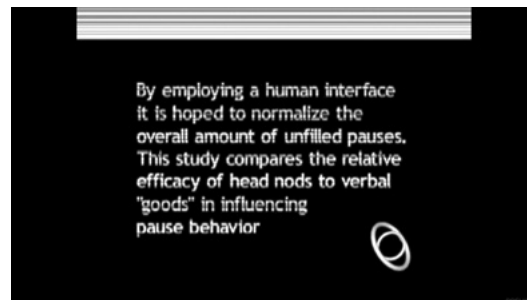
The work is open-ended, with no traditional narrative structure, not centered around a single theme but exploring multiple at once.



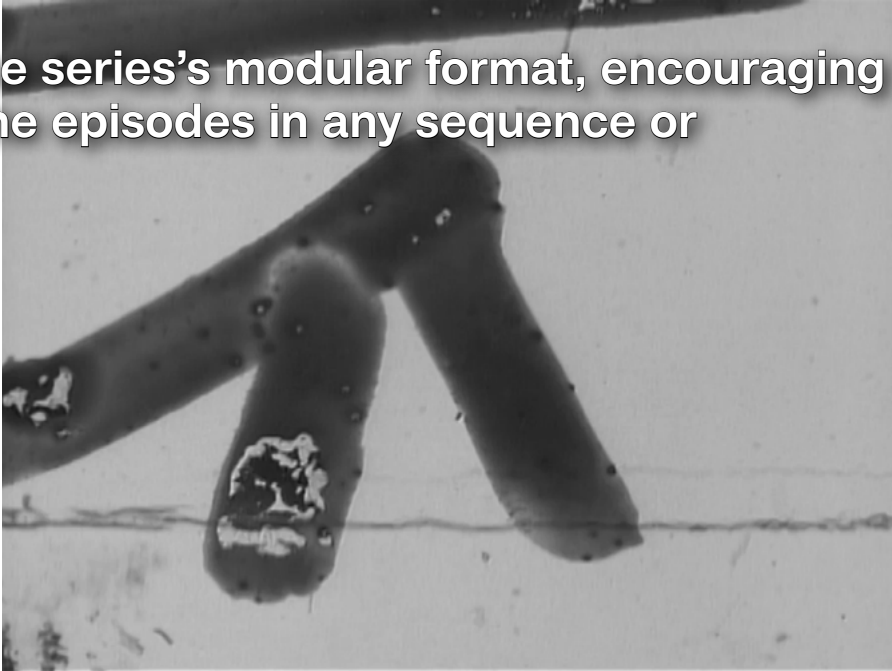
Ecological catastrophe, nuclear annihilation, language formation, and the rise of AI, to name a few.



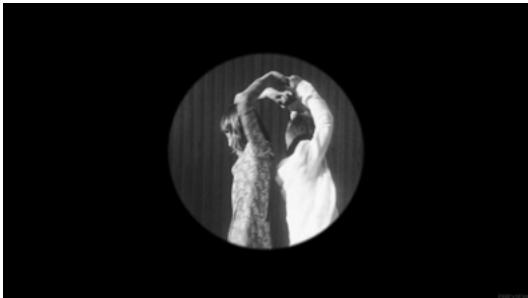
The artist re-edited and reworked the shot footage and archive material multiple times into new sequences as she developed new episodes.



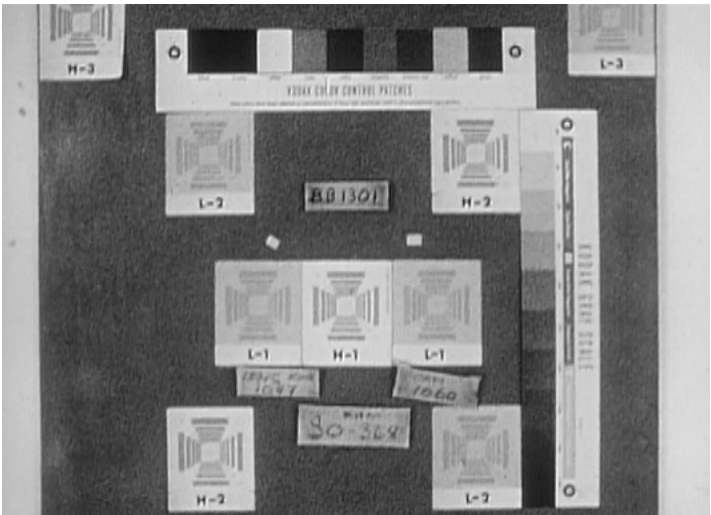
Thornton emphasizes the series's modular format, encouraging viewers to experience the episodes in any sequence or simultaneously.⁵ ¶



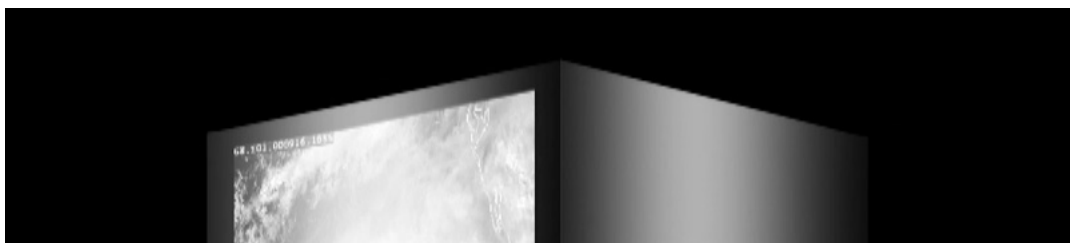
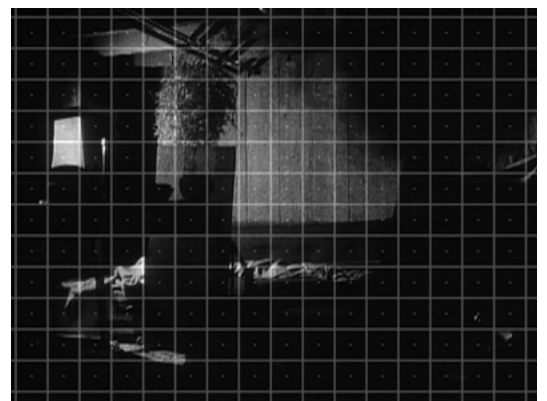
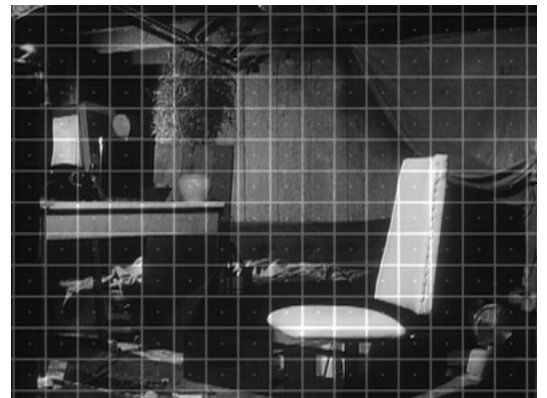
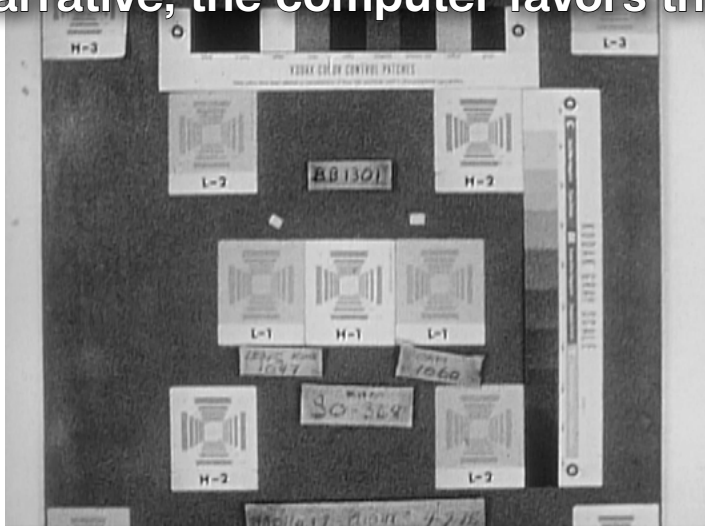
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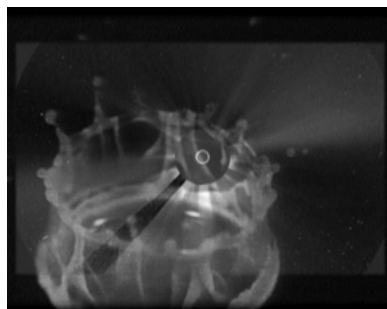
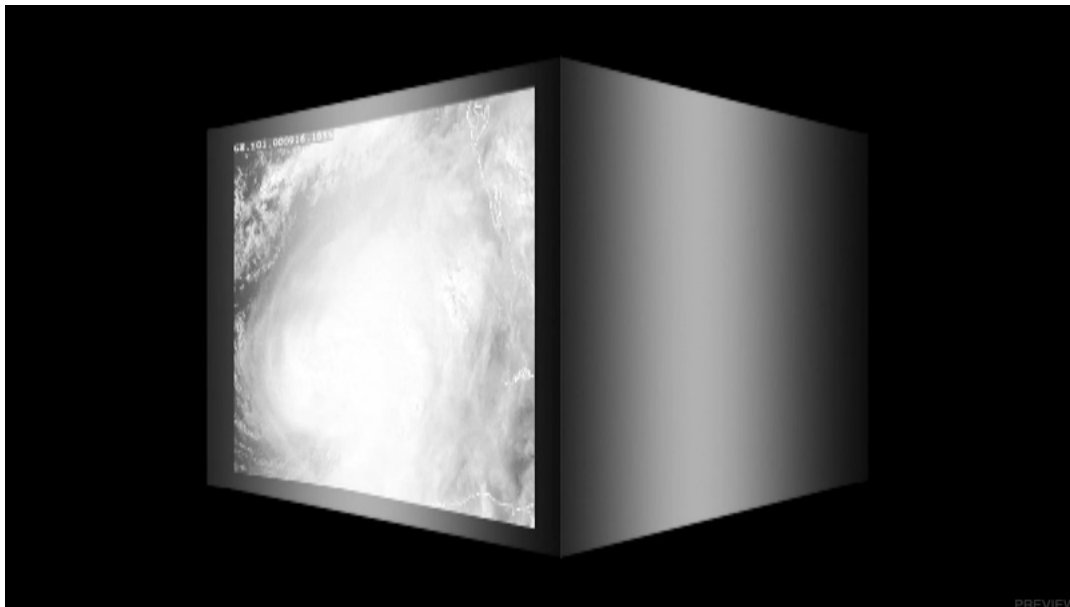
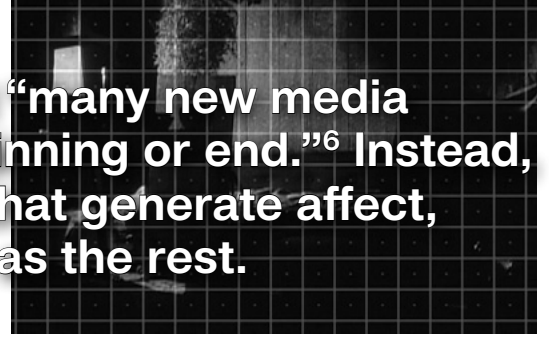
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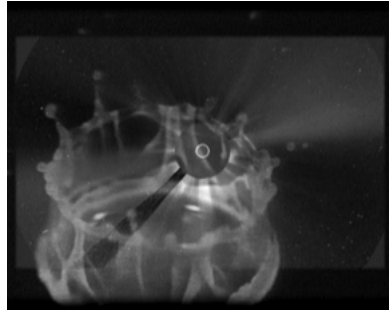
Such an approach reflects contemporary ways of producing and circulating content. Unlike in the modernist tradition, where media objects such as the novel and cinema favored linear narrative, the computer favors the database.



Media theorist Lev Manovich notes that “many new media objects do not tell stories or have a beginning or end.”⁶ Instead, they are collections of individual items that generate affect, each possessing the same significance as the rest.



The remixing of existing content has equal importance to what is deemed original. New media co-exist with the continuous remediation of traditional media in a diverse and ubiquitous landscape that is continually changing, so vast that it is impossible to comprehend.



There is no longer a single hierarchy of culture and media distribution, as before the Internet.⁷



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Instead, everything co-exists rhizomatically in a complex network with multiple focal points across different communities. ¶



PEGGY and FrED
IN HELL



Peggy and Fred in Hell reflects the cultural shifts over thirty-three years of its development and the transitions motion picture technology has undergone – shot on 16mm, processed into analog video and later on digital media.⁸

PEGGY and FrED IN HELL

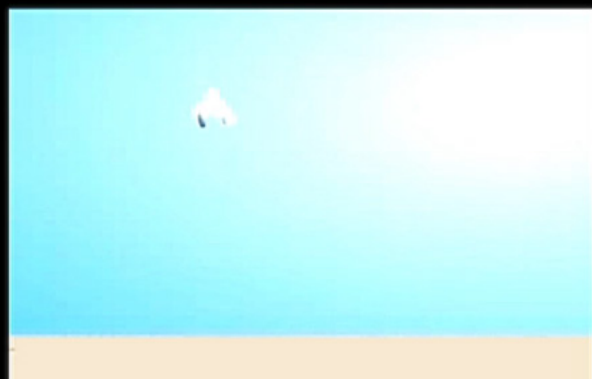
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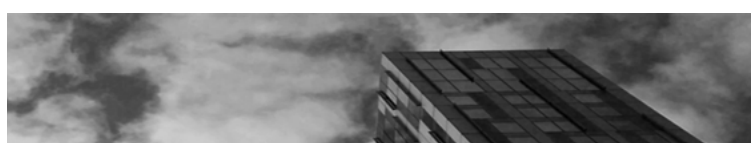
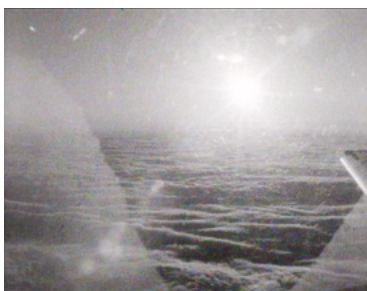
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"Peggy"

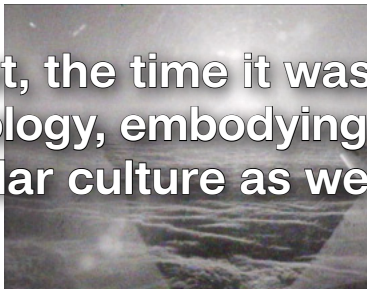
EIT 195 A
"Fred"



Experiencing the work today, we see different time periods slip into one another, equally reflecting the past, the present, and the future.



The past, the time it was produced – a document of media archaeology, embodying Cold War anxieties and the emergence of popular culture as we know it today.



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The present – the ubiquitous and diverse media landscape that we navigate, defined by excess, anachronism, and solitude, where culture's continuous montaging of earlier eras is so prevalent it is no longer noticed, while we live through ongoing catastrophes.⁹



But also the future – where capitalism and technology evolve in ways we can yet not imagine, entirely surpassing human scale. “At first, the children appear as protagonists, building their world. By the end, they are fragmentary subjects for data analysis,”¹⁰ Thornton notes. ¶



THE WORKING SELF



I suppose I have a really loose interpretation
of “work” because I think that just being alive
is so much work at something you don’t
always want to do.

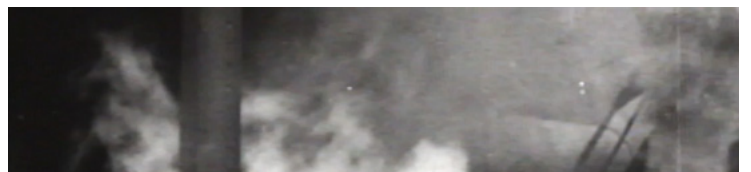
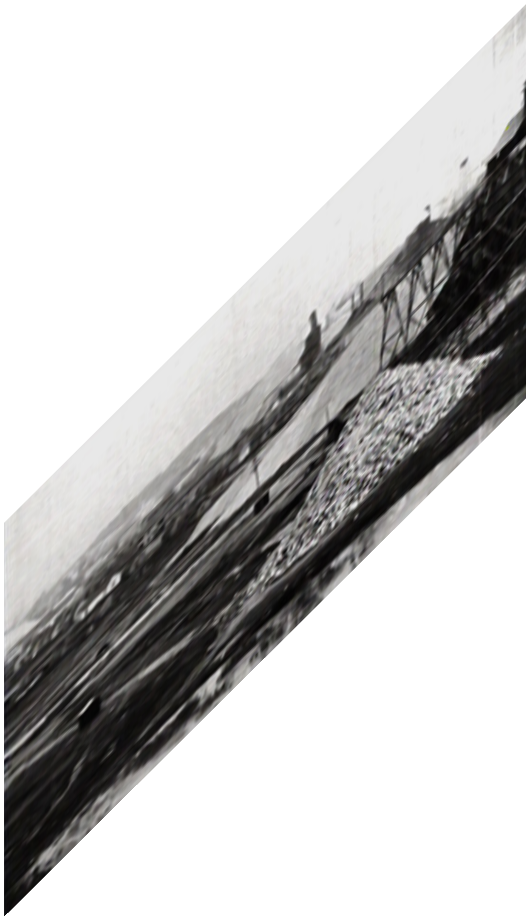
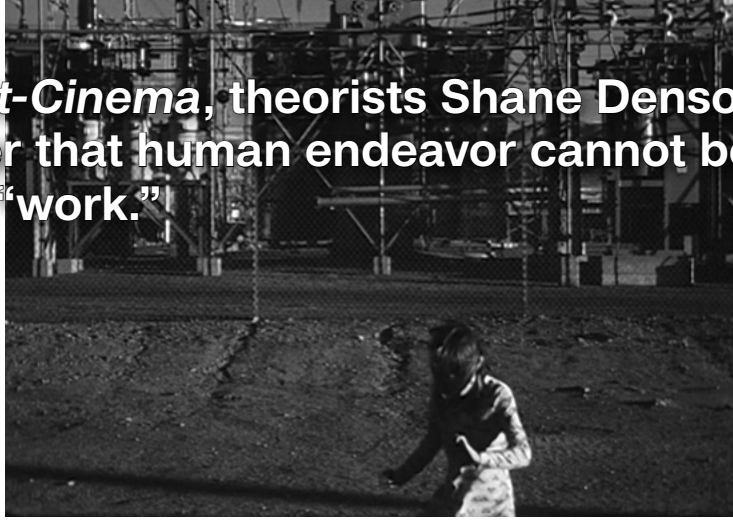




The machinery is always going.
Even when you sleep.¹¹
(Andy Warhol, 1975) ¶



In *Perspectives on Post-Cinema*, theorists Shane Denson and Julia Leyla consider that human endeavor cannot be understood outside of “work.”



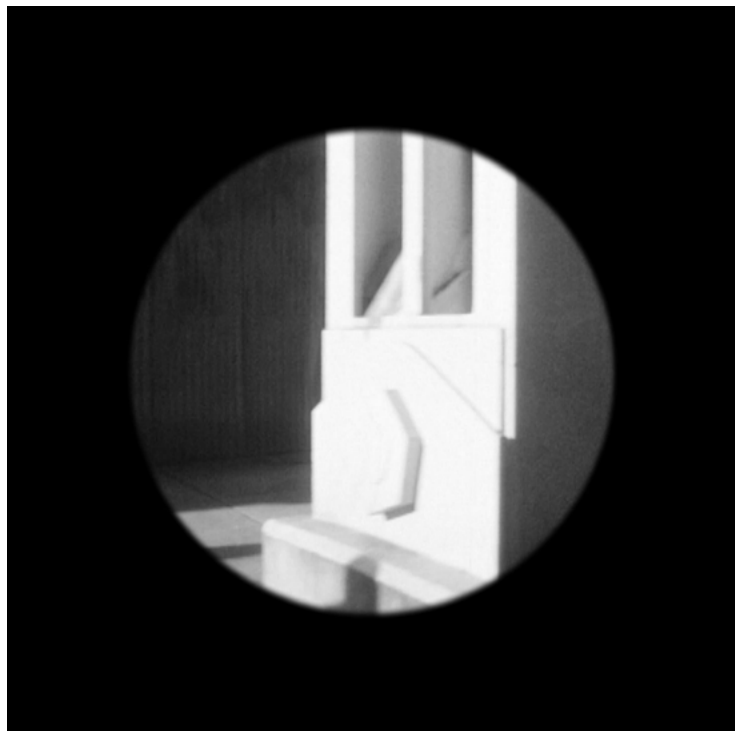
“The conversion or reduction to the digital of almost every *iota* of human existence would seem to reduce art and entertainment (film, games), economics (banking, credit), and communication (personal, commercial) to a single plane of intangibility, to the ether.”¹²



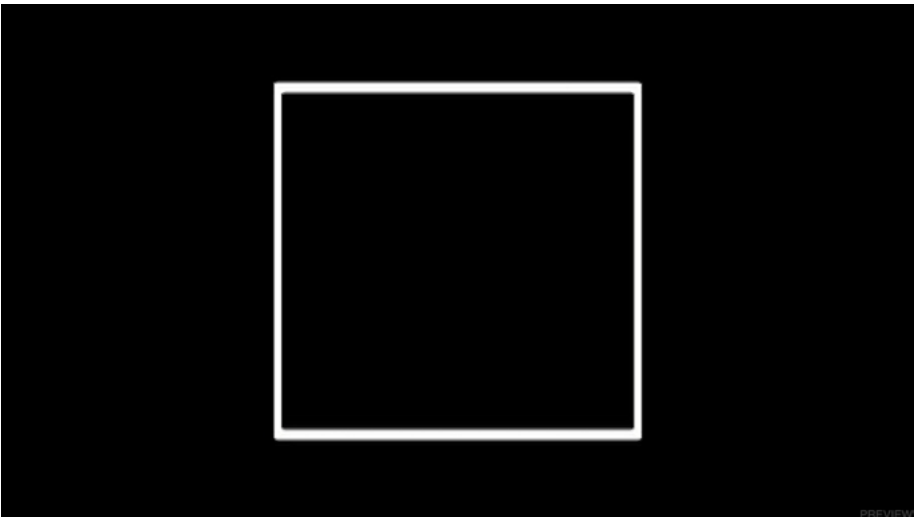
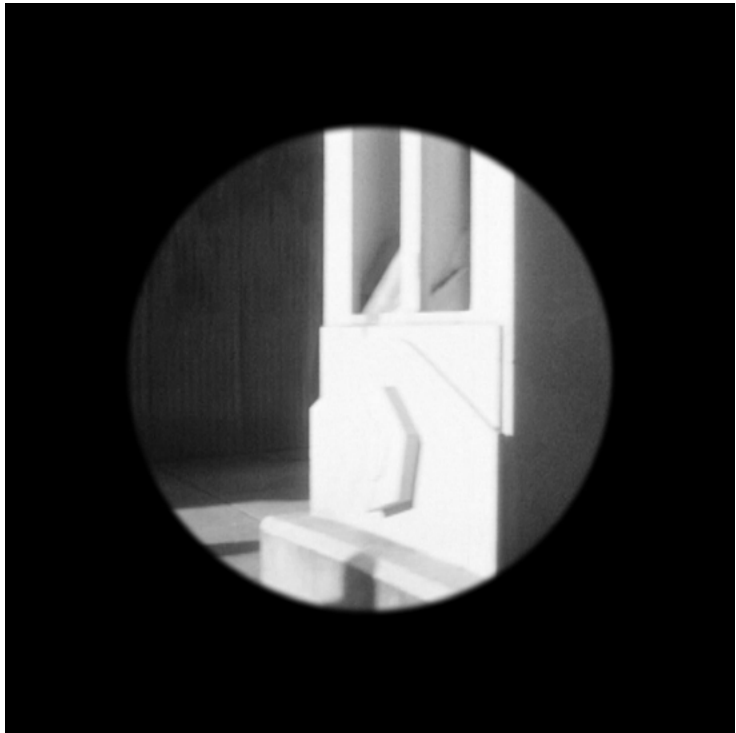
We experience most aspects of our daily lives through our devices. Our sense of selfhood and comprehension of the world is formed by and with them. ¶



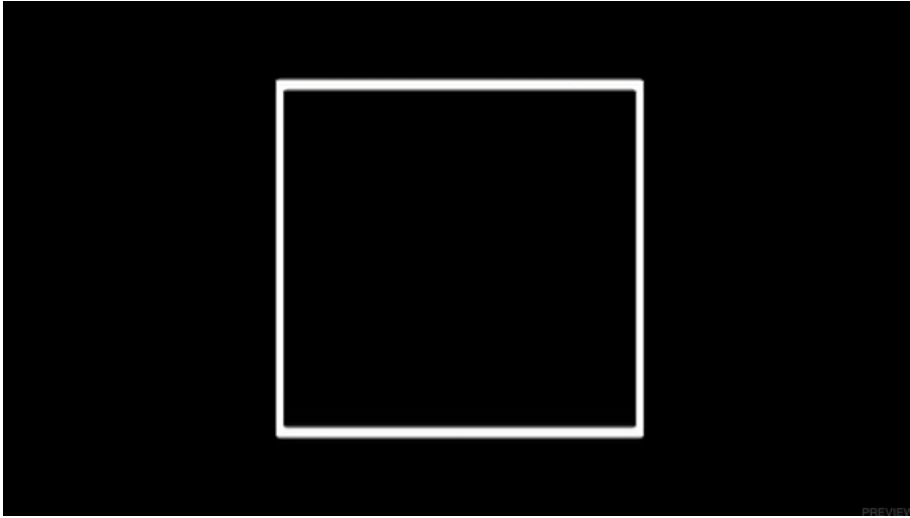
Contemporary media are procedural.



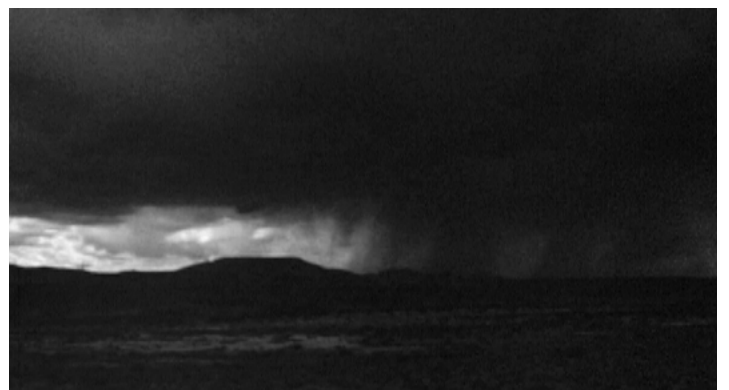
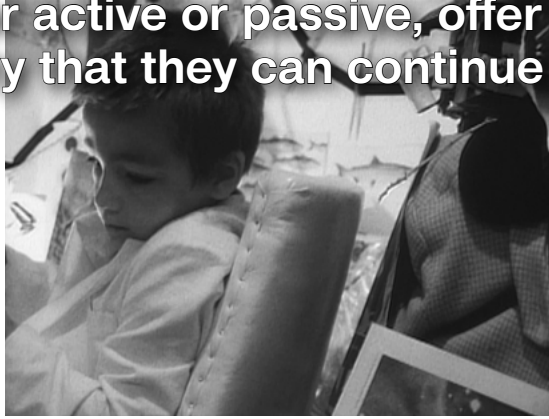
They are structured to encourage constant user engagement and induce a state of flow (e.g. games, social media, or streaming services).



Flow theory, conceived by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s, considers immersion into an activity and reaching a state of intense concentration without wanting it to end as an approach to achieving happiness.¹³



Jay Bolter relates Csikszentmihalyi's theory to contemporary media. Such experiences (games, scrolling, binge-watching, among others), whether active or passive, offer pleasure and the seductive possibility that they can continue forever.¹⁴



The user experiences feelings of joy and control over what they do and an increased sense of individuality, where only personal satisfaction matters.



Yet, what are the effects of this immediacy between self and image on the individual? ¶



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Peggy went to dig roots.
She went a long way into
the prairie. She saw some-

at it and approached it
slowly. She thought, "Maybe

8 Things to be Scared of Instead of Death (2021) is a recent work by Greek-British artist Erica Scourti engaging precisely with these issues.



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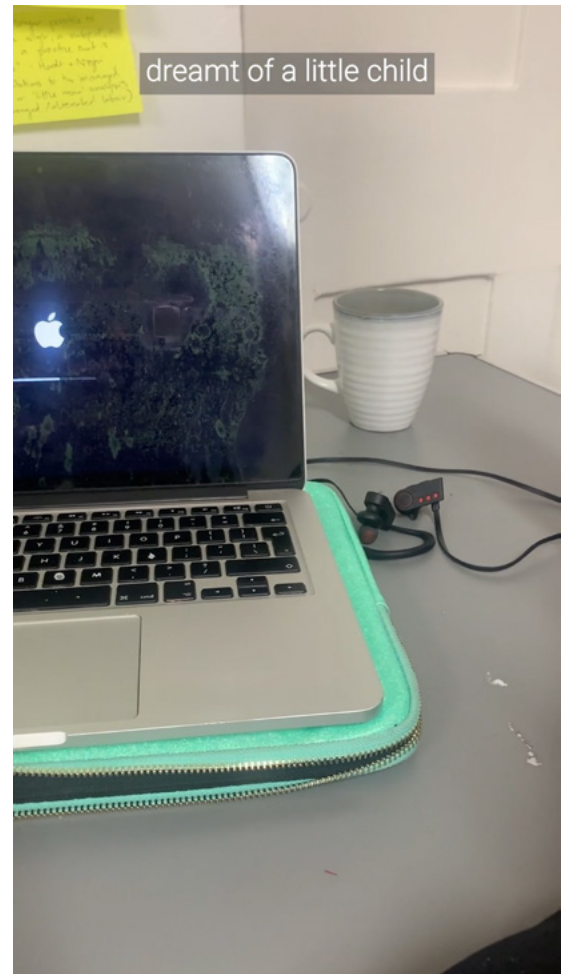
PREVIEW

dreamt of a little child

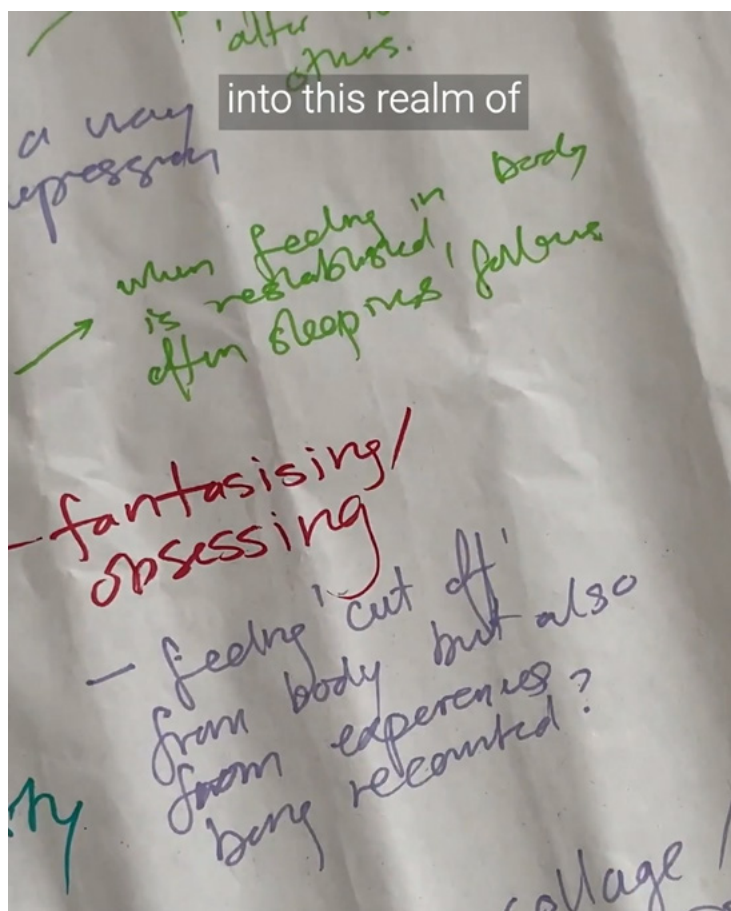
slowly. She thought, "Maybe

The 45-minute video shows the artist making and unmaking herself as she navigates through life.

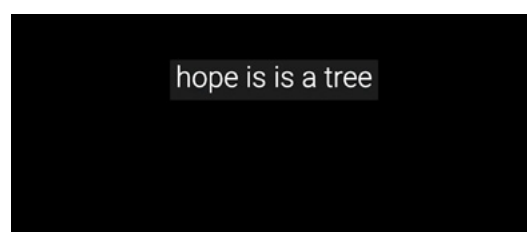
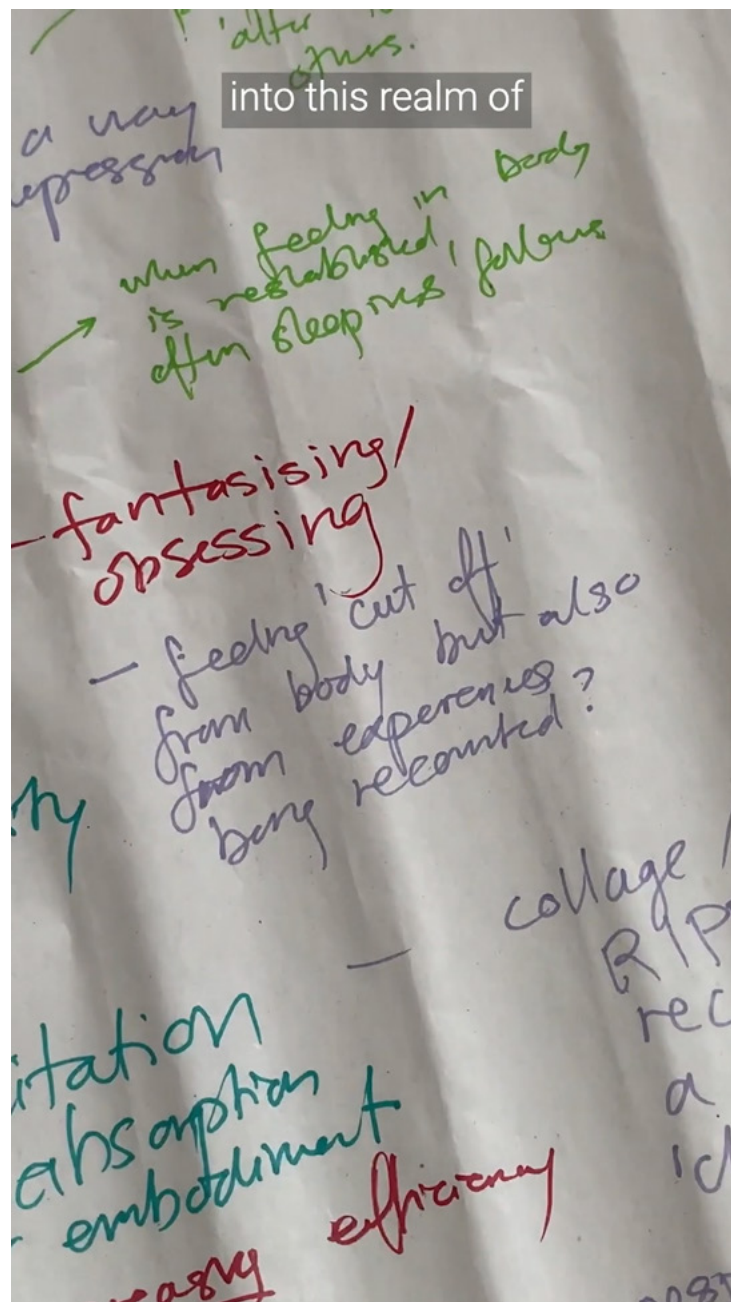
PREVIEW



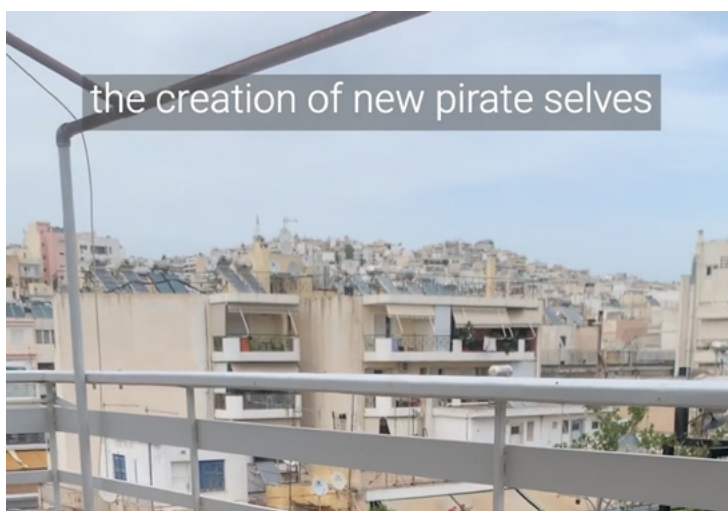
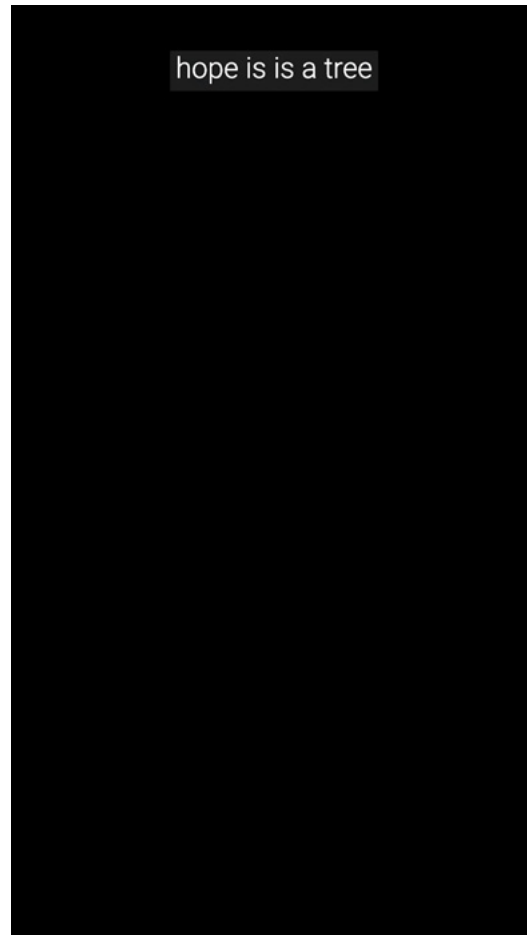
The work comprises non-linear poetic narration over footage from the artist's archive of videos she shot on her phone through the years, as other diary entries.



Scourti uses her database of existing footage to compose the work.



The videos contain footage of herself and her surroundings – walks in the park, getting ready, sitting on a balcony etc., across different countries, always by herself. ¶



Like Peggy and Fred, the artist navigates deserted terrains during lockdowns, the closest we've come in recent history to collective feelings of living through the apocalypse.



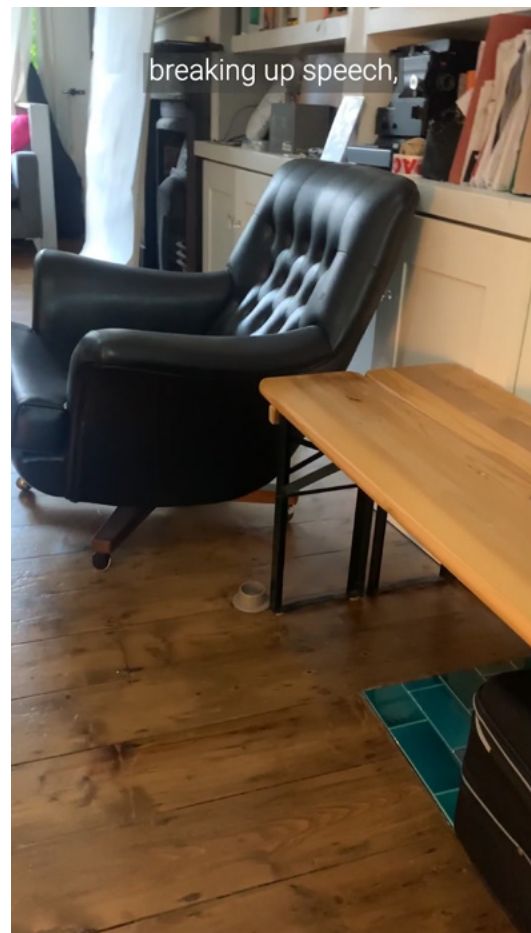
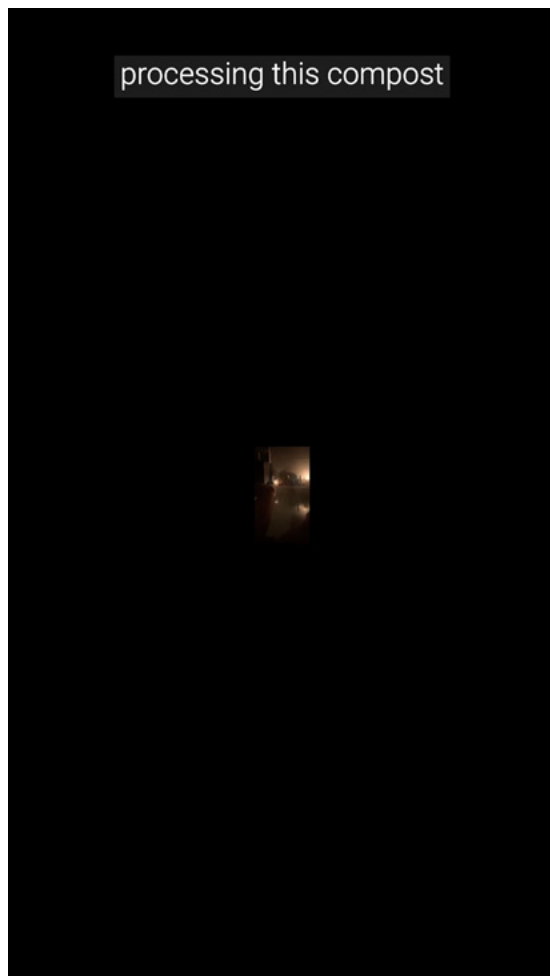
The footage reappears throughout the work, heightening the sense of non-linearity.



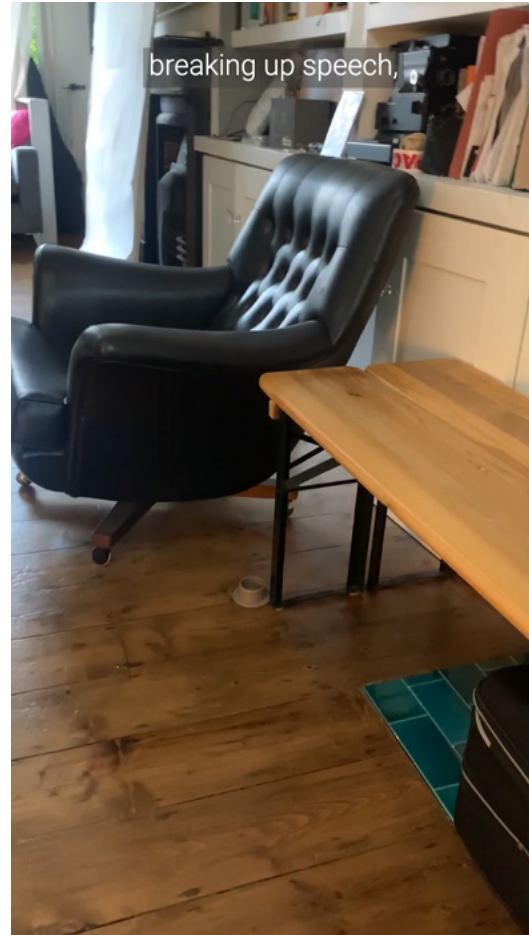
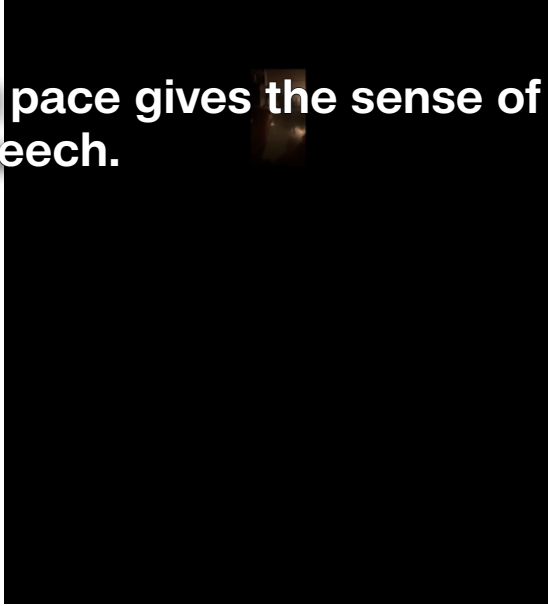
have now come exact their toll.

processing this compost

The narration plays out rhizomatically like a stream of consciousness, personal thoughts entwined with those of others – the artist's references, making it impossible to distinguish between the two.



Its fast pace gives the sense of immediacy between thought and speech.



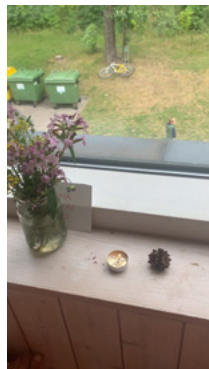
The artist often speaks on top of other voices of herself in the videos; they all harmonize unevenly alongside the transcribed text of the narration we read on the screen. ¶



Scourti becomes the spectator of her own life through the distance of documentation, assembling fragments into a whole.



“Every personal identity is transfixed inside a small box, the size of a postal stamp... Trying to cohere into a coherent self.”



Maybe need to get a small

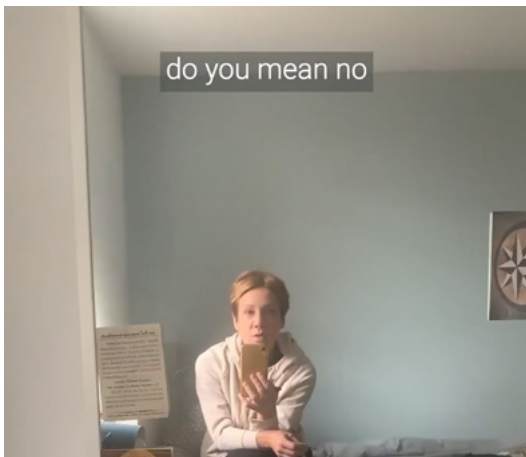
Her voice becomes the voice of her self-reflection.



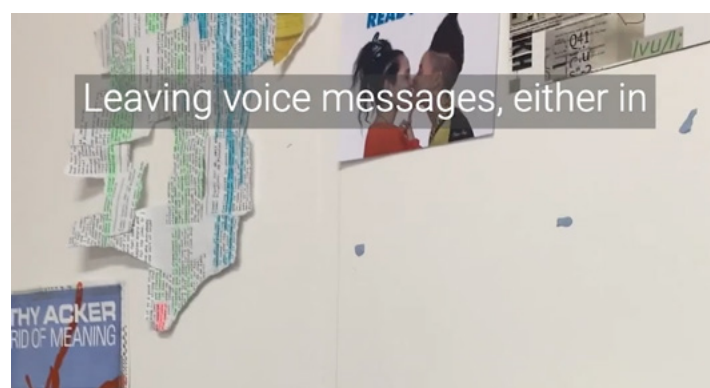
Maybe need to get a small



do you mean no



“Nothing more but a ghostly back projection from the roles performed; they were all strangers to me.”¹⁵

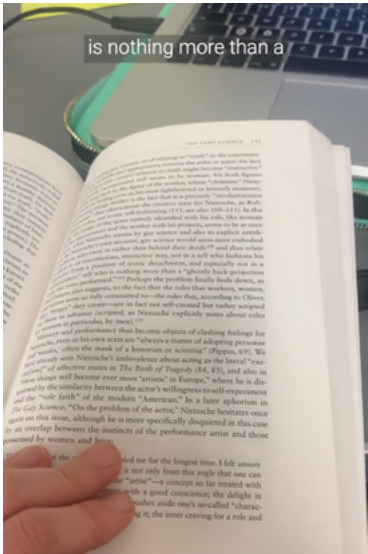




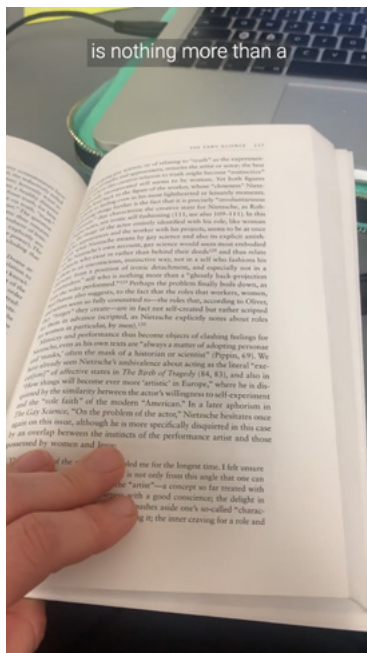
The distance between the sound of her performed speech to the images and sounds of old videos reflects the strange dimension of contemporary existence between embodied presence, its digital documentation and self-imaging.



The documentation of one's own experience and the public circulation of this through media makes us visible and, in a way, confirms our existence; an existence mediated, captured on a device, and uploaded to the cloud, that unlike the embodied one will remain the same and potentially circulate infinitely. ¶



Scourti reflects on the complexities of navigating life under neoliberalism.



is nothing more than a

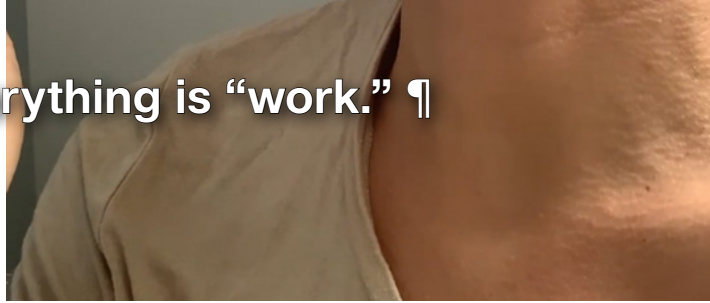


lens in likes Donald Yahoo!

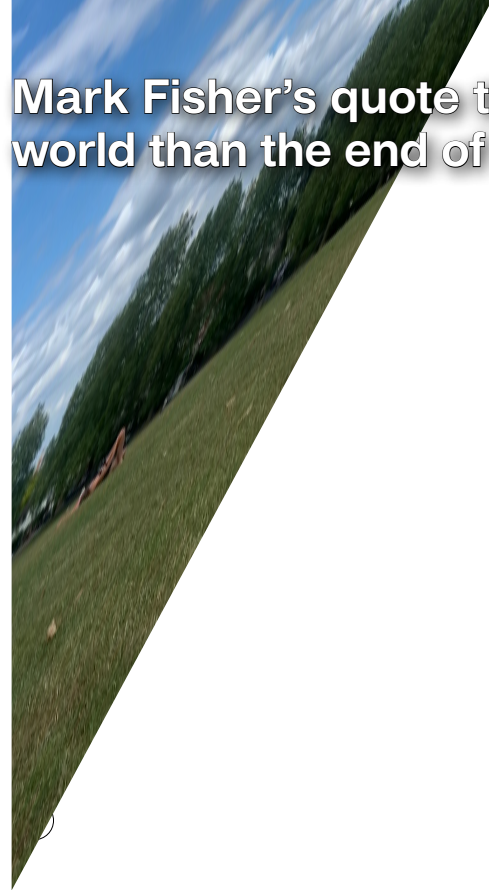
A life defined by entrepreneurship, visibility, precarious living and working conditions, depression, sleep disorders, meditation, concentration drugs, burnouts, efficiency, productivity, adaptability, creativity, health, wellness, agency, or rather the illusion of agency, ambition, being busy as a form of avoidance – avoidance of intimacy, attentiveness, connection to oneself and others, as she states.



A life where everything is “work.” ¶



Mark Fisher's quote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism feels pertinent.

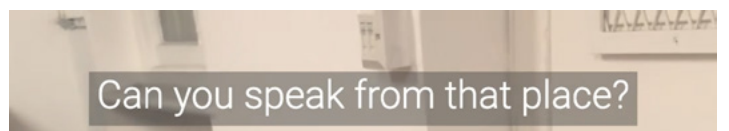


hope is is a tree

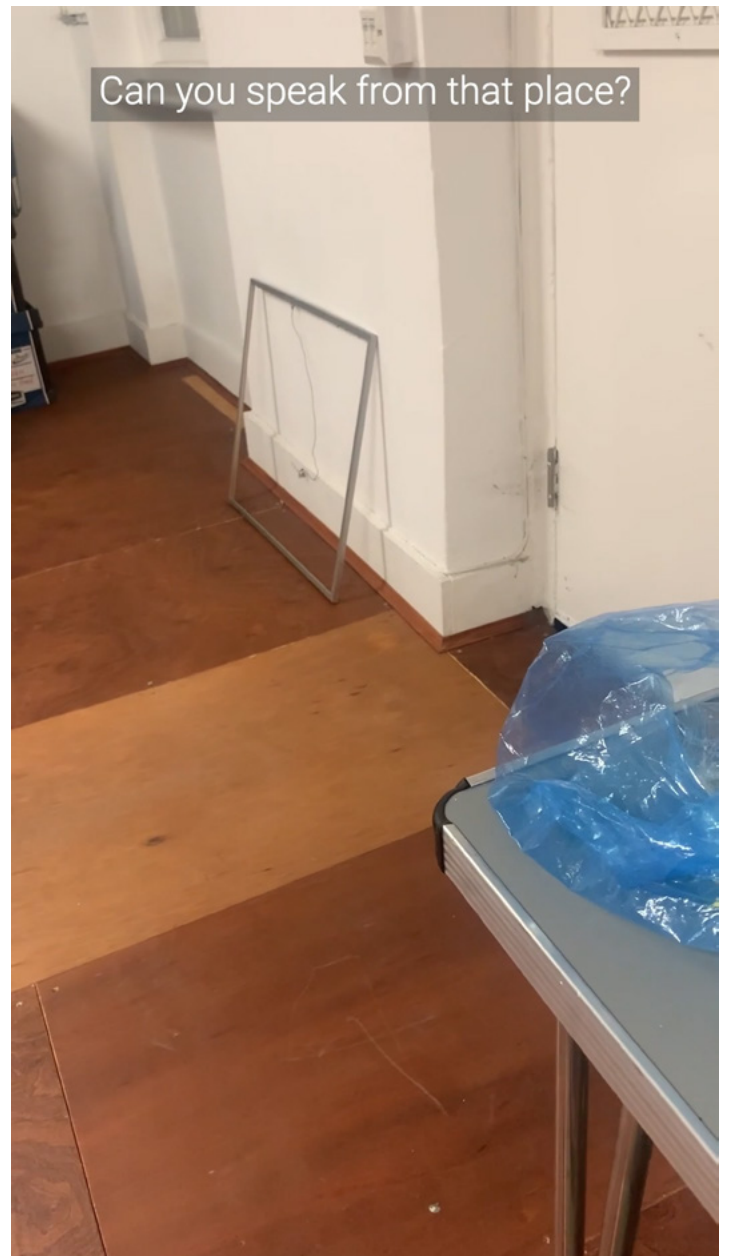


N.8

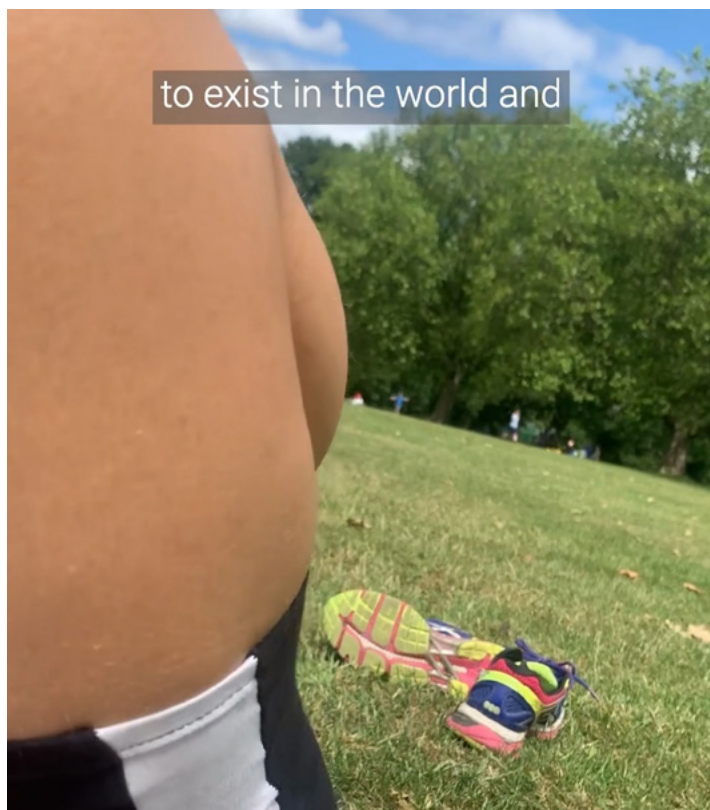
Can you speak from that place?



Death itself is not mentioned once, but in the work's title, perhaps this is a tongue-in-cheek comment that experiencing life today is scarier than the fatality of death. Death is approached as an internalized living condition. ¶



The apocalypse here is documented.



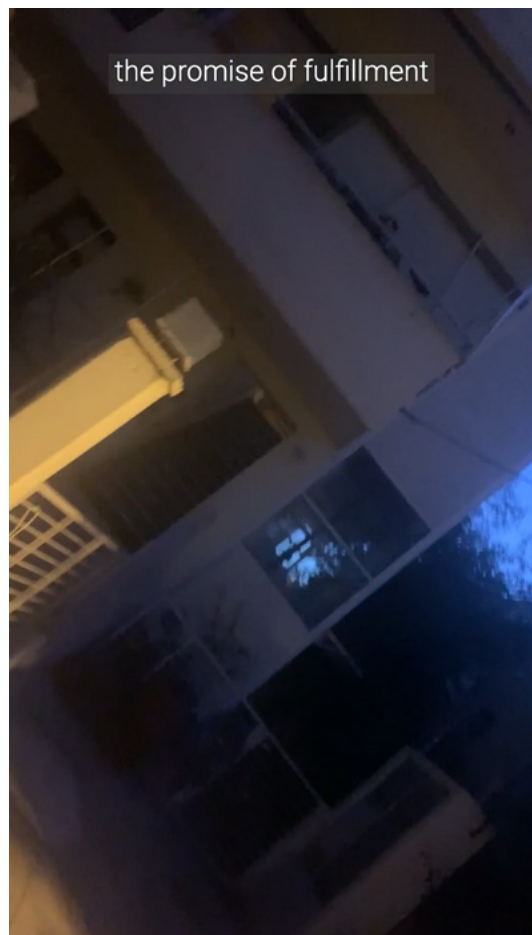
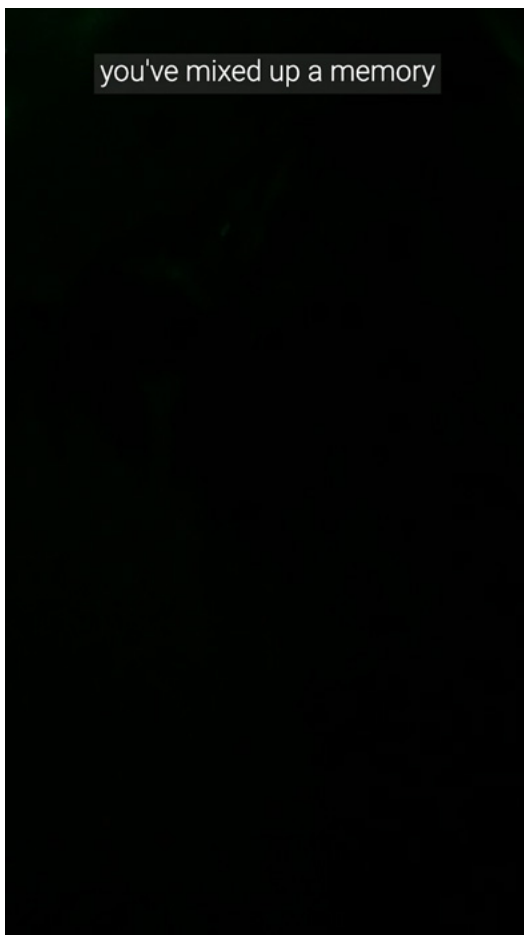
Maybe this is really

A reflection of the time of its production in 2020–21.

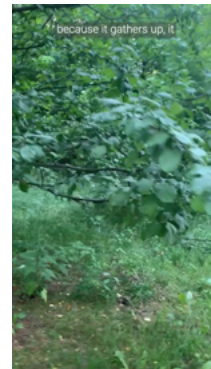


to exist in the world and

An opportunity to question the totalizing structures of living in the present.



8 Things to be Scared of Instead of Death can be read as a critique of late capitalism, reflecting on the production of selfhood and how neoliberalism extracts value out of every “iota of human existence.”



The artist critiques this by using “public interiority” as a political act, as she notes towards the end of the work. Public interiority, meaning openness and expression of vulnerability. Similar to Thornton’s address following her screening.

everything and yet I'm still stuck.



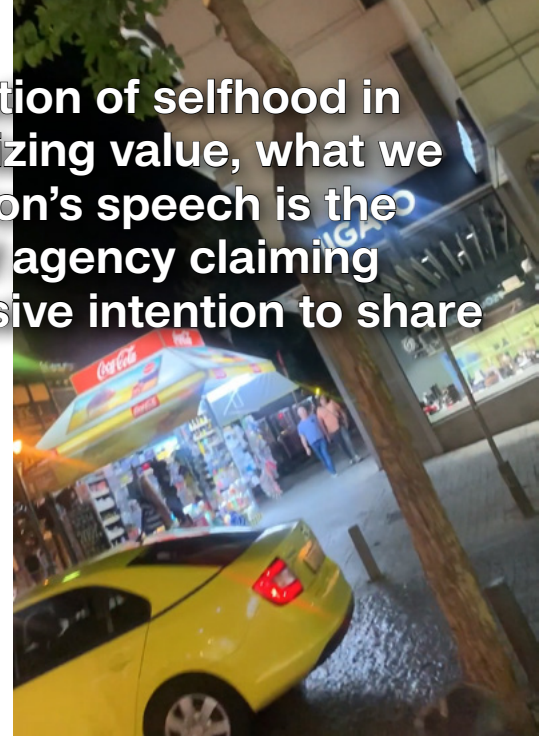
hesitated, wanting to be a

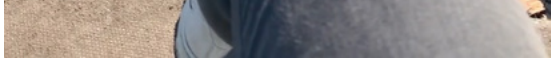


different types of voice.



However, in contrast to the (re)presentation of selfhood in social media platforms as one of monetizing value, what we encounter in Scourti's work, and Thornton's speech is the expression of vulnerability as "a form of agency claiming some agency back, through their extensive intention to share everything."





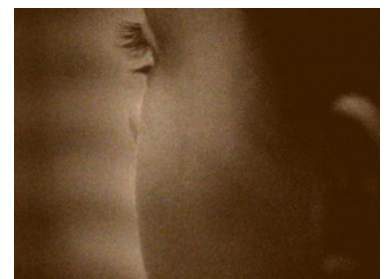
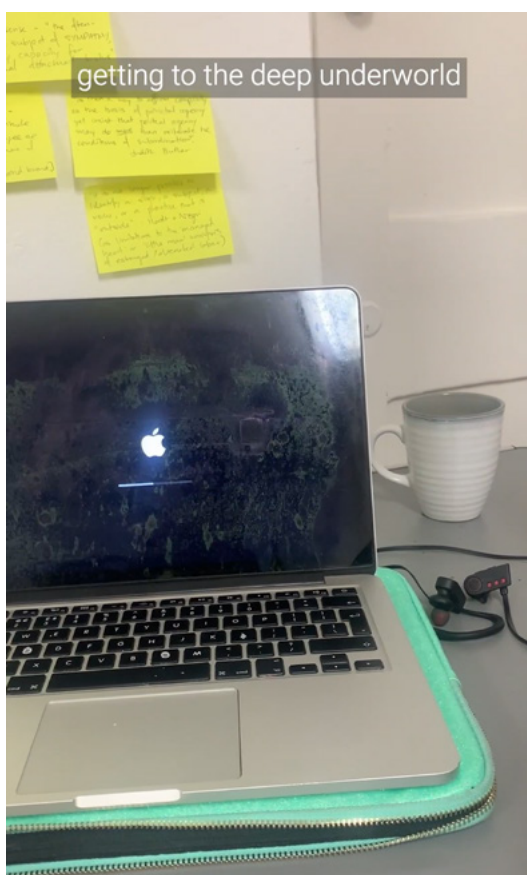
THE END (?)



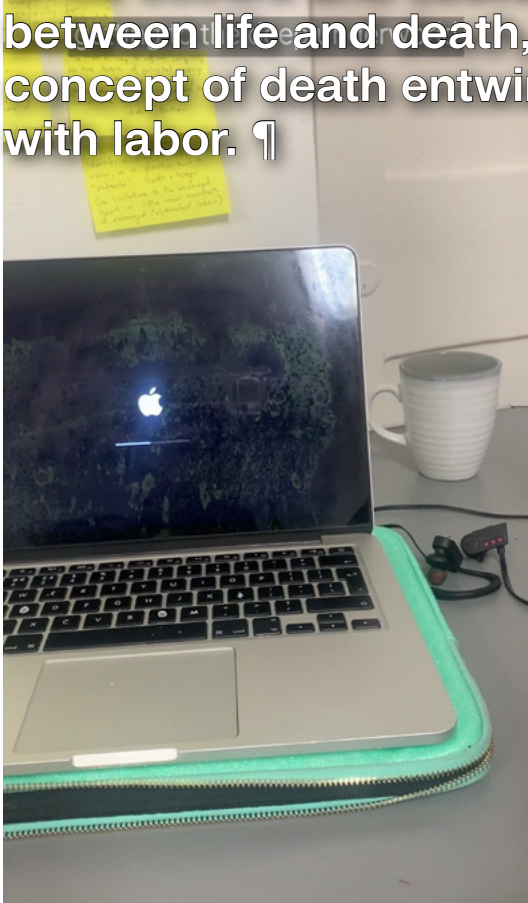
The production of our subjectivities is entwined with the media and cultural landscape we inhabit, as it has always been.

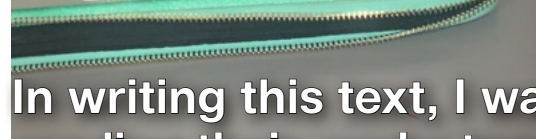


The procedural flatness between different fields (economics, politics, entertainment, art, science etc.) and how what were once considered distinct aspects of one's daily life increasingly collapse onto one another, are defining elements of our present moment, enacted through digital media. These developments shape how we construct thought, our capacity or incapacity to retain attention, our sense of self, and how we relate to ourselves and others.

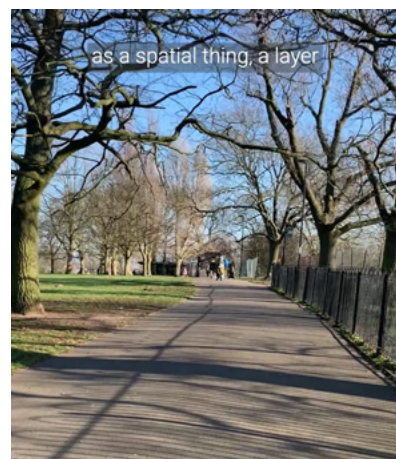
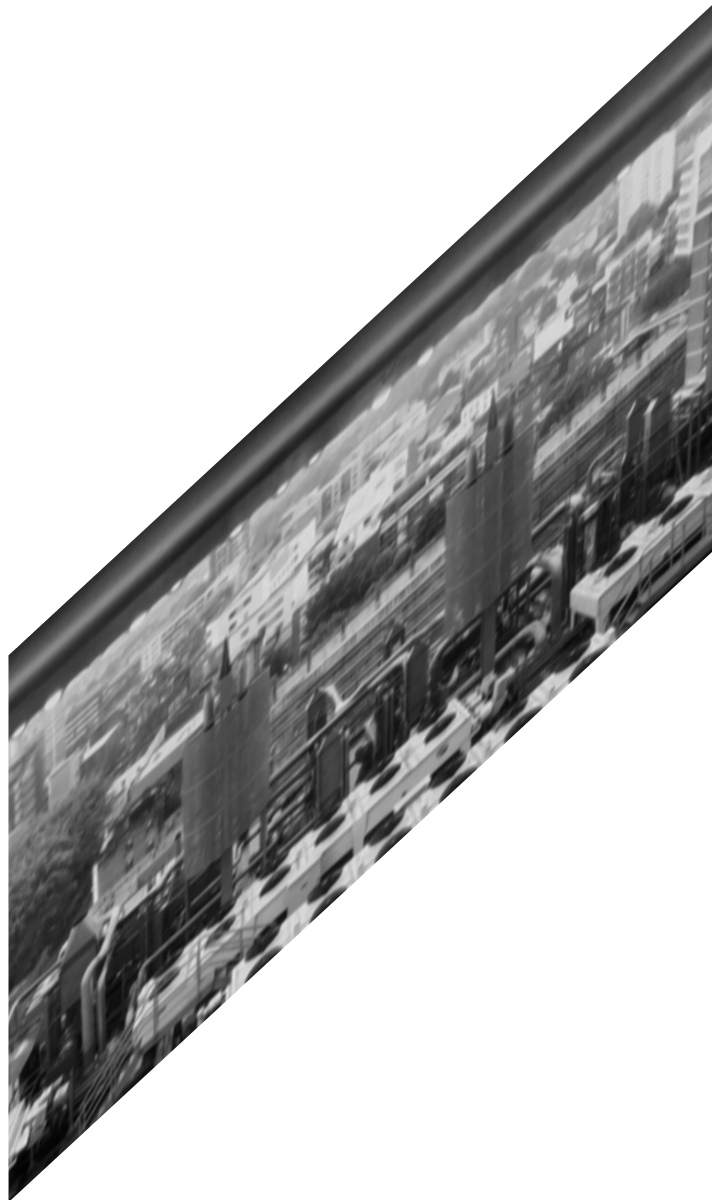


As with the collapse of other binaries in our flattened reality, Erica Scourti and Leslie Thornton consider the entwinement between life and death, and particularly the ways in which the concept of death entwines into life and how life is intertwined with labor. ¶

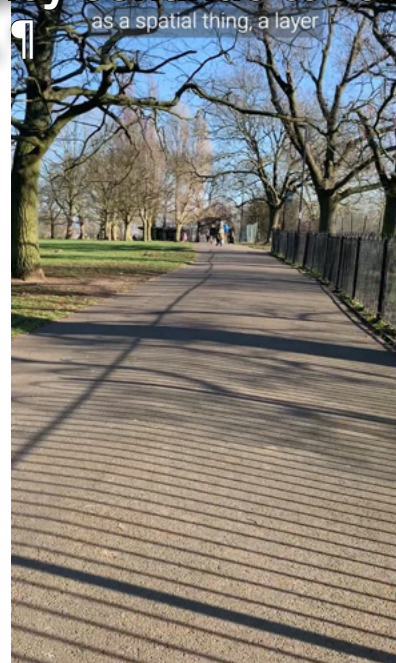




In writing this text, I wanted to reflect upon these issues by reading their works together, approaching them as open-ended continuations of one another.



Both works are non-linear with multiple focal points. There is no traditional beginning, middle and end; the viewer can enter them anytime, encouraged to construct their narrative of what they experience. Both artists remix existing footage from their archives into new narratives. Also, we see the remediation of older media and moving images into new formats; reflecting upon the impossibility of their death as they continue to remediate through various techniques and forms. ¶



In both works, the apocalypse is approached as the revealing of structures that tend to go unnoticed by most. Not a spectacular end but an ongoing one that we live through; through the effects of our hypermediated neoliberal landscape on selfhood, the climate crisis and the development of technology exceeding human scale.

○



Where *Peggy and Fred in Hell* 'predicts' these developments, *8 Things to be Scared of Instead of Death* reflects upon them as they are experienced today; how the procedurality of digital media imprints on our thinking processes, and the ways life is conditioned as a continuous form of labor.



Scourti's work was produced in the midst of the pandemic, a time seen by many as a moment of critical reflection and reconsideration of the ways we live.



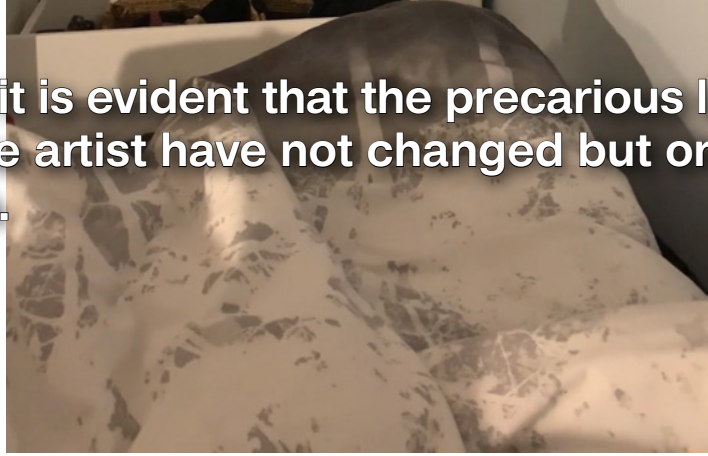
○

Feels weird to be talking.

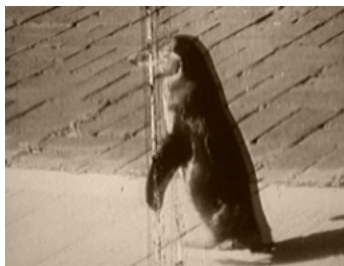



○

Three years on, it is evident that the precarious living conditions described by the artist have not changed but only intensified for most people.



To return to Williams's writings, as these structures are revealed and established 'truths' are dismantled, the way to go past the catastrophe, and become post-apocalyptic is by critically examining and repurposing what is already here, when 'we redraw the maps and battle lines of the sites we occupy.'¹⁶ 'Public interiority' being one such paradigm.

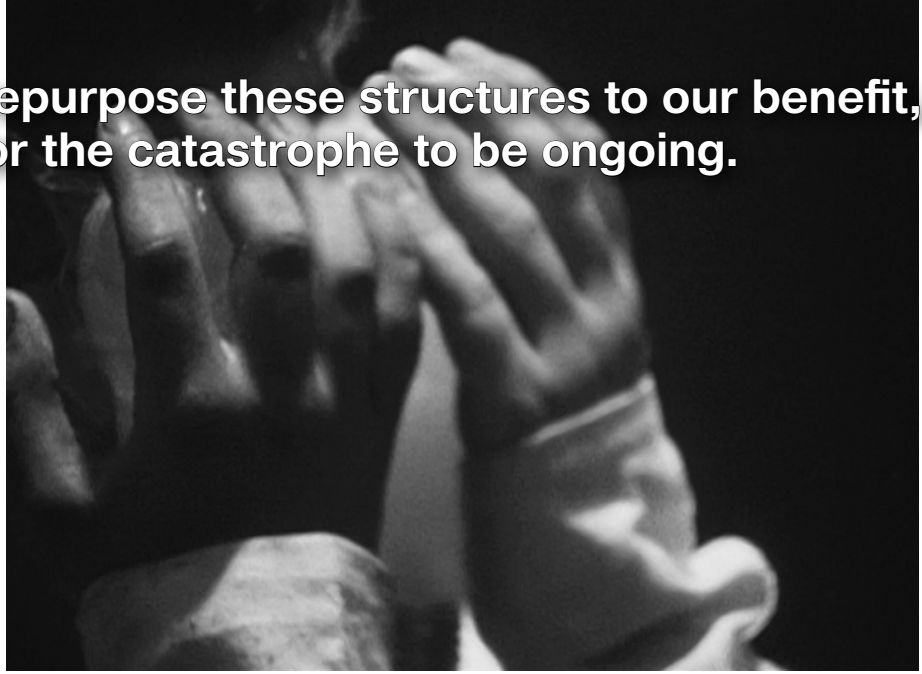


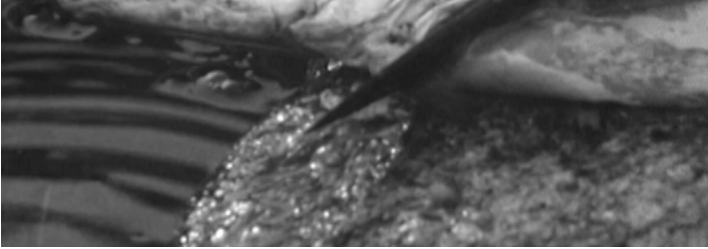


Until then, until both collectively and individually we critically re-examine how we live, how we relate to ourselves and to one another, until we confront what we avoid facing,



dismantle and repurpose these structures to our benefit,
it is inevitable for the catastrophe to be ongoing.







○

○

NOTES

1. Evan Calder Williams, "Introduction," in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester: Zero, 2011), 1–14.
2. Leslie Thornton, as interviewed by Dan Kidner, "Leslie Thornton's 35 Years of Radical Filmmaking," *Frieze*, August 23, 2018, www.frieze.com/article/leslie-thorntons-35-years-radical-filmmaking.

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8. Halter, *op. cit.*
9. Mark Fisher, "The Slow Cancellation of the Future,"

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15. Erica Scourti, *8 Things to be Scared of Instead of Death*, 2021, digital video, color, sound, duration 45 minutes.
16. Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester: Zero, 2011).

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