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PARADISE ENTERTAINMENT'S FEATURE OF THE WEEK: SPLINT

SUBMITTED BY

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Watching television has been part of my daily ritual since childhood. Every time it was turned on, I was able to enter into new worlds that were exotic compared to my house. Each story on the screen filled me with hope, inspired me with passion, and took me to a place where everything, no matter how terrible, seemed to have a purpose, an arc, and an end. These visual narratives birthed the idea of an equational life, one that seemed simple and mathematical. After I realized that life couldn't be firmly calculated, I decided to invent my own alternative realities of which I could control through photography and video.

My primary interest is in self-construction, how identities and personalities are formed, how they manifest and shift, and the characterization of "self". With my current work, I am utilizing the techniques of cinema and theater to construct a fictitious reality, that emulates the surface of a world that I have long-envied and idolized: Hollywood. The process of performing in my designed space is cathartic because, instead of being a passive spectator to someone else's constructed narrative, I create my own and actively participate in it.

Paradise Entertainment's Feature of the Week: Splint is my first attempt at structuring a parafiction that allows me to embody the roles of those in the film industry who fuel my addiction. In this documentary-featurette-interview hybrid, I play the entertainment host, Meghan Trolly, who gives her viewers an inside look at the making of a new Netflix series called *Splint*, on her network, Paradise Entertainment.

During this broadcast, the viewer hears from my personae — writer, director, producer, and production designer — each describing their experiences and challenges while working on *Splint*. At the end of the "documentary" dialogue clips, Trolly has a one-on-one interview with the lead actress persona, Jeanie Callan. This fictional Netflix series has yet to be produced, but this colloquial "promotion" provides a foundation for — and illustration of — my future work.

My occupational background is in art history, photography, and television *watching*, with room for improvement in each. My desire for seamless perfection and demanding expectations outweigh my ability to create a flawless piece, but as an artist, I have the freedom to become a writer, director, producer, production designer, and actress in my perfect,

imagined world. In changing my appearance, mannerisms, and personal history, I create the illusion of credibility.

Generally, a person watching an entertainment featurette might be invested in the careers or lives of those involved. Someone who is inspired to make films because of Martin Scorsese's career would be thrilled to watch interviews where he talks about his movies. An obsessive fan of Leonardo DiCaprio would be eager to hear about his new roles and personal life. After watching multiple entertainment interviews, I observed that nearly every conversation was the same. It is the reverence, mysticism, and idolatry for the interviewee from the viewers that make whatever is being said interesting, not the content itself. The reward of watching is manifested by the fan's hope to be closer to the character they idolize, one that made their dreams palpable.

Entertainment news broadcasts offer distracting visual information and false proof of exceptionalism that complement the bland, conversational material within it. This structure entices viewers and maintains their engagement with each new clip, which is why the viewer of my piece will likely crave the same. They will expect to be visually directed and earn a reward for watching – usually early footage of whatever is being promoted during the show. Without any cut scenes of *Split* between the static clips of each speaker, the viewer is left with only dialogue-based footage. Through this process, the viewer constructs opinions of the characters rather than of the project in which they are involved.

For the structure of my piece, I chose to mimic interviews with M. Night Shyamalan, James McAvoy, and Anya Taylor-Joy discussing their involvement in *Split*, Shyamalan's 2016 thriller about a man, born as Kevin (played by James McAvoy), with twenty-four personalities.¹ Kevin's personalities collaborate in the kidnapping of three teenage girls, until his most suppressed personality, "The Beast", surfaces and morphs his body into a murderous creature. It is scientifically proven that a person with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) changes his or her physical chemistry depending on which personality is at the surface, but *Split* turns this

¹ Tolga Akar, *Interview SPLIT: Possible Sequel, Bad Audition & Being Scary*, (Berlin KISS FM, 2017).

mental illness – usually caused by childhood abuse and trauma – into a preposterous societal terror.

An alter- or separate personality can be created during a person’s traumatic experience as a coping mechanism. This separation allows the host — the first personality born with the body — to live without the memory of the event.² Joan Frances Casey was a married twenty-six-year-old graduate student before she discovered she was one of twenty-four personalities. She attributed her memory loss to stress or lack of sleep until one day she “awoke” standing on the ledge of a building. Like others with DID, Casey’s personalities were unaware of the others and developed their own self-narrative that grew stronger the more Casey suppressed her trauma. Even through therapy, new personalities manifested to help her either combat or digest the challenges of integrating her multiple realities.³

When *Split* was released, a talk-show radio broadcast, *Sway in the Morning*, interviewed Shyamalan and McAvoy and, between questions about their favorite sports teams or personal history, brought up DID. The host asked Shyamalan and the phone-in psychologist if being able to “chime into those chambers of the mind” was “really a suffering”.⁴ Shyamalan responded by expressing his fascination with DID and “what the human mind is capable of, how it defends itself. The things these individuals can do... it’s astounding.”⁵ He described his movie as “a conversation about trauma... and how we react to trauma, and what we are like after trauma has come to us.”⁶ Yet *Split* only uses trauma as a thematic device to vaguely explain Kevin’s creation of his un-killable creature-like personality that sexually devours and kills people. Shyamalan glorifies trauma by making it the catalyst for superhuman powers. His depiction of DID invalidates movies aiming to normalize the disorder such as *Three Faces of Eve*, *Frankie & Alice*, and *Sybil*. Even in these movies, there is distortion about DID because the script, lighting, costuming, and camera angles glamourize the disorder and simplify the people whose lives inspired the story.

² *Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)*, (Psychology Today, Website).

³ Joan Frances Casey, *The Flock: The Autobiography of a Multiple Personality*.

⁴ Sway Calloway, *M. Night Shyamalan and James McAvoy Break Down "Split" Movie on Sway in the Morning*, (YouTube, 2017), 18:06-18:12.

⁵ *Ibid*, 18:14-18:32.

⁶ *Ibid*, 18:34-18:48.

During an interview for Berlin's KISS FM, Shyamalan was asked if there could be a more complicated character than Kevin, to which he responded, "I don't think so. [DID] is the most complicated psychological condition I've ever heard of, so I find that hard to believe."⁷ While Shyamalan implies that he does an extensive amount of research for his projects, his responses to questions about his work often involve instinct, curiosity, and an explicit desire to inspire shock.⁸ After labeling this film as his interpretation of Dissociative Identity Disorder, it became a "plausible" reality for viewers who were not familiar with this condition.⁹ Combined with the usual suspense, violence, and eventual murder that exists in horror films, the use of a real mental disorder elevates the narrative. The only thing that makes Kevin and the story complex is that his body houses most of the characters that appear in the film.

While reading Casey's autobiography, *The Flock*, I almost felt jealous of her ability to house specialized personalities within her. Like Sway, my ignorance of DID allowed me to fantasize about "waking up" not knowing where I was but seeing that the housework was finished, or my paper was immaculately written. But Casey never elected for her father to continuously molest and rape her, for her mother to beat and resent her, for her teacher to drug and rape her, or for everyone she trusted to take advantage of or abuse her. Casey's personalities were not invented out of her free will or fantasy, but out of a necessity to allow her to continue functioning without the paralyzing memory of her traumatic experiences. While Jo was able to think fondly of her father, the minute Josie surfaced, she found a wall to bash her head into until she blacked out. Josie remembered what Jo couldn't.¹⁰

After finishing the book, I began researching dissociation and other mental health disorders such as Bipolar Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder. Even in depressive, anxiety, or eating disorders, each diagnosis has similar degrees of involuntary compulsions that make a person feel out of control of his or her actions, feelings, or mental state resulting in a consistent strain of guilt, burden, isolation, and obsession over imperfections that affect the

⁷ Akar, *Interview: SPLIT*, 7:16-7:24.

⁸ Entertainmentie, *M. Night Shyamalan Explains Split*, (YouTube, 2017).

⁹ Madison Verhulst, *"Psycho," "Fight Club," and "Split:" Dissociative Identity Disorder in Film*, (Wyoming Scholars Repository, 2017).

¹⁰ Casey, *The Flock*,

body as well as the mind.¹¹ During my mental health investigation, I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Severe Depression. At first, I was hesitant to seek help in fear it meant I was too weak to solve my own problems. Regardless of the effort I put into resolving my thoughts, I couldn't change or control what I was feeling or how I acted because of it. My therapist explained that my disorders are formed by ill-developed coping-skills and that together, we have to locate the problems and restructure my approach to solving them.

My research and new-found self-awareness made me wonder if minute identity fragmentation occurs during any form of humiliating, damaging, or challenging mental situations as a coping mechanism disguised as a developed trait or normalized behavior. If so, what binds the fragments together to create an assured sense of self? This is when I decided to name my project *Splint*. It references the structure that holds a fractured object in place until it heals, but also alludes to the fragmentation or splintering of personal identities. While Shyamalan exaggerated and exploited Dissociative Identity Disorder to make his supernatural thriller, I wanted to break down the societal mysticism of my experience with mental health by depicting perfected characters that represent real people.¹²

There was no shortage of costumes in my childhood home, where playing dress-up was a daily occurrence. Wearing one of my many dresses, a pair of glittery heels and an array of plastic jewels, I would imaginatively transport myself to another world where I monitored my loyal stuffed subjects and imagined how I would meet my handsome prince. Together, we would smoothly run our kingdom while the King and Queen were away. When they returned, we would all gather in the throne room where I would lay out my royal tapestry, or "blankie", in an undisturbed flat square at the feet of my parents so we could begin our life lessons for the day.

Hollywood's characters have always influenced my own self-perception, so I turned myself into the *people* I imagined would produce my internal life story. Like drag for drag queens, my "playing pretend" allowed me to become a different version of myself without as

¹¹ NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness, *Mental Health Conditions*.

¹² Verhulst, "*Psycho*," "*Fight Club*," and "*Split*", 19-25.

many repressive social pressures and self-manifested rules.¹³ Sociologists and psychologists have conducted multiple studies on individual identity and its relation to social interactions. In Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the sociologist suggests that a person will act in a way that benefits their desired recognition from others.¹⁴ The Annual Review of Psychology published an article in 2002 titled *Self and Social Identity* which specifies that an individual's "responses may often be strategic, addressing identity-expressive concerns and instrumental concerns directed by goals attuned to the dominant level of self" during an interaction with a self-defined social group.¹⁵ But when and why does a person begin to create rules for herself?

The "self", as we may know it, manifests as a child constructs her core beliefs about herself, others, and the world. Her core beliefs are shaped by the experiences she has and her reactions to them. In order to validate her belief, she looks for evidence to support her thoughts. Every time she encounters a situation like the one she experienced in her past and has a similar reaction or result, her belief is strengthened. In her mind, this confirms her approach to future actions.¹⁶ My core beliefs were legitimized through the movies I watched and the characters I observed. The connection I felt to these stories was as intense as my interpretation of reality. In my mind, life and fiction were not separate. Even now as I look back on my family history, I find it difficult not to view the past as some scripted narrative.

How do we begin to define ourselves? There are numerous and expanding theories in sociology and psychology that try to dissect the development and construction of "self". In a single essay there could be more than twenty different compounded facets of "self". Most frequently used is the term "self-concept" which refers to everything that makes up an individual person. It is the combination of how that person perceives, evaluates, sees, and thinks about herself.¹⁷

¹³ Allure Magazine, "RuPaul's Drag Race" Cast Explains The History of Drag Culture, (2018).

¹⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

¹⁵ Naomi Ellemers, *Self and Social Identity*, (Annual Review of Psychology, 2002), 179

¹⁶ Arnie Cann, *The Core Beliefs Inventory: A Brief Measure of Disruption in the Assumptive World*, (Anxiety, Stress & Coping, 2010), 19-34

¹⁷ Viktor Grekas, *The Self-Concept*, (Annual Review of Sociology, 1982), 3.

One theory on the development of self-concept breaks the process into the “existential-self” and the “categorical-self”. Existential-self is established after a child learns that she is separate from other objects and remains present while things change around her. The categorical-self is the ongoing process of self-labeling and self-defining. After having established a sense of her existential-self the child begins to view herself as an object with experiential properties that can be categorized. Both of these stages begin in the first few months of a child’s life.¹⁸

Like most children, my existential-self was developed by observing the people around me. Eventually, I understood that my parents existed even when I could not sense their presence. I existed separate from them. This logic fortified my belief in things unseen, like magic, other worlds, and God. When the kids at school started saying that the Easter Bunny, Santa, and Tooth Fairy were not real, I was trying to secure proof of their existence. I had read nearly every *Nancy Drew* book and watched enough spy-related movies to feel confident in my ability to locate evidence, but the Callahan mysteries were never solved.

Much of human history is written in the form of stories designed to educate, inspire, and entertain. Most narratives are curated to provide a clear message, remove unnecessary information, and maintain the reader’s interest. If the story is written from reality, the boring or un-relatable bits of people’s lives are stripped away to make better characters. They turn “the automatic chaos of events, actions, and isolated facts into order and gives form and meaning to a reality that is formless and meaningless”.¹⁹ This process creates a structured series of events that simplify history in a way that seems solely cause- and effect-based. Whether fiction or non-fiction, each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end that is temporally situated and features the most important events that happen to idealized characters. The more I experienced narrative in relaying facts, the easier it was to accept fictional narratives as plausible re-tellings of truth.

¹⁸ Saul McLeod, *Self Concept*, (Simply Psychology, 2008)

¹⁹ Jens Brockmeier, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, 14.

My first self-categorizations involved physical and personality traits.²⁰ I observed that I was a girl, with dark hair, fair complexion, and green eyes. As the first-born child to my parents and grandchild to my grandparents, I was special and treated as such. My parents and their friends would tell me how beautiful and smart I was, so I gathered it must be true. Everyone treated me like a princess, so in my mind I believed it was possible for me to be one. I related my self-categorizations to Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and believed that, because I resembled her and had similar interests, in some way her story was a creative version of my own, a premonition of my own life.

When I was four, my grandparents took me, my cousin, and our parents to Disney World. For the first time in my life, I didn't have to use my imagination to be a part of a different world and interact with the characters that existed inside them. Being able to touch, see, hear, and smell these magical places fortified my belief that the movies were based on truth. I was able to hold conversations with the characters I was previously only allowed to surveil. My assessment of this evidence reaffirmed my faith in the factuality of how life was presented in the movies.

My entire teenage years were spent writing love letters to boys I never talked to and fantasizing about our shared future. After I saw a boy that acted or looked similar to a character I admired, I wanted to be a part of his world, but more importantly I wanted him to willingly participate in mine. Instead of getting to know them, I labeled them as my Jack Dawson, Aladdin, or Benjamin Barry and tried to play their Rose DeWitt Bukater, Jasmine, or Andie Anderson.²¹ Every rejection was interpreted as a personal failure to find my story. Each night, I would mentally re-run every moment of my performance to see what I did incorrectly, what lines I flopped, what gestures I forgot to display. I was Rebecca Bunch from the TV show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, placing my hope of finding happiness in a boy who had no interest in the lengths I would take to be with him. After an extended series of disappointing experiences and increasing depression, I began to finally understand the differences between my expectation of reality versus factuality.

²⁰ Saul McLeod, *Self Concept*.

²¹ James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), Donald Petrie's *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003)

The *Annual Review of Sociology* published an article by Viktor Grecas, citing a 1980 study that found “clinically depressed patients were more realistic in their self-perceptions... than were those in the ‘normal’ control group, who were more likely to engage in self-enhancing distortion”.²² In Professor of Sociology Peter Callero’s comprehensive essay on the theories of self, he describes self-narrative as a tool used to “sustain a sense of stability and predictable understanding in the world”.²³ In self-narratives, a person constructs her past experiences to understand the present and potentially predict the future outcomes of his or her story.²⁴ For most of my life, I was using fictional narratives to create my understanding of the world and self. As my self- and life-perceptions became more realistic and less desirable, I realized I needed a way to escape.

Entering my second semester of undergrad, I had no knowledge of fine art photography, but Anthony Goicolea was the artist I chose to emulate for my first photography class. I was impressed by his ability to create a boisterous, intimate moment with his costumed self as the repeated subject. He manifested his fantasy of multiple selves into a tangible visual object that other people could witness. It was evidence of his way of seeing the world and how he thought about it. This playful, imaginative way of making pictures is one that continues to influence me.

Like Goicolea, the character Willy Wonka uses his creation to reveal a part of his inner-self and create a space to live out his fantasies. In *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, Wonka leads his guests through an *Alice in Wonderland* inspired hallway and into the “Chocolate Room”, an indoor park where the trees, the river, and the plants are all made of candy. As he watches the visitors enjoying his creation, he sings “There is no life I know to compare with pure imagination, living there, you’ll be free if you truly wish to be” — equal parts proud, annoyed, and lonely.²⁵ This song is why I chose to name the entertainment network “Paradise Entertainment”.

²² Grecas, *The Self-Concept*, 22-23.

²³ Peter L. Callero, *The Sociology of the Self*, (Annual Review of Sociology, 2003), 124.

²⁴ Ibid. 123-125.

²⁵ *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory: Pure Imagination*, (1971)

There *was* no life I knew that compared to my imagination. Everything that I experienced or achieved never satisfied my expectations. I found solace in using Photoshop to make digital manipulations of versions of myself in my intentionally perfect worlds. In these two-dimensional spaces, I could become anyone I wanted, whenever and wherever I wanted. While narratives provided an escape from reality and illusions of the potential realm of happiness, my images granted me an opportunity to control my experience.

Cindy Sherman's self-portraits are often referenced during discussions of my earlier work because we both acted as subject in our photographs. In Sherman's *Untitled* series, she uses wigs, costumes, and deliberate poses with cinematic compositions to create images that refer to Hollywood film stills. Throughout her work, Sherman relies on gesture and prop to inform the viewer of the individual photograph's narrative, but her characters all maintain a similar lack-luster expression on their faces, connecting them in a way that suggests their stories aren't all that different.

British multimedia artist, Oriana Fox, uses a similar approach when creating her performative short films where she uses dialogue to reference character correlations. In her 2003 video *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Fox uses an audio clip from a *Sex and the City* episode and re-contextualizes it by acting out the parts dressed as different 1970s feminists. Fox's recent productions are episodes for her web-series, *The O Show*, where she plays her invented talk-show host persona. Like Sherman, Fox constructs her characters to playfully reference identities in the real world, but her videos allow the viewer to experience more of each individual character's fictional life.

The show *Portlandia* takes both Sherman's and Fox's critical view of society and translates it for a wider audience. Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein play the main characters in each episode comprised of short skits about a variety of different exaggerated stereotypes in Portland. Although their skits are nonsensical, they exemplify the fluidity of identity and individuality.

Art and cinema both heavily influence my way of seeing the world. Though I realize I will never become Belle in reality, I can still escape into her story whenever I like. In my future

work, I hope to further dive into revealing each of my imagined character's "true" selves through stills, video, and installation – important and uninteresting events alike. I am fully embracing my interest in performing by becoming an actress on film, writer and producer behind the camera, and aspiring activist for social psychological change.

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