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Realism Through Video:
New Media Artists

Ever since the beginning of time humanity has had a thirst for life; a passion for the real. It provided us with the key to understand the human condition as we are living it now. In the early 1900s many would congregate to the Paris morgue in order to observe the newly lifeless corpse announced in the newspapers. Not only for the visual auxiliary for the articles but the curiosity for the real thing is what compelled them. It undoubtedly became the social norm to appear at the morgue in order to say that you were there, that you saw the corpse of the person that was murdered. It was not until a moment in history that the proliferation of institutions started to devote themselves exclusively to cinema (Slopek). Thus making theaters the new exposition of the public rather than the morgue. At this point in time Film is considered to be new media. It was a cultural and social innovative framework that was technology independent. As the appearance and dissemination of this technology, a new connection between humans started to evolve. It started to morph into different medias that people were able to capture through their lenses. It allowed others to share their reality, a newer way to search and learn about diverse ways of living life. It quenched their thirst for the real.

With the invention and development of film, came a long list of artists that influenced its development, but what really is of interest are the ones that have taken the aspect of video and have placed a realistic aesthetic to its concept. They took the notion of real time and applied it to their practice in order to create their work. These experiments, rather new media projects, transfigure and help develop new practices and ideas that come in the future. From Dziga Vertov, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Mike Figgis, Justine Ezarik, to Rob Spence, these people are new media artists and can be considered cultural innovators, that have contributed to the cultural evolution of their times.

The definition of new media is very vast in complexity. Everyone can have their own definition but there are similar ideas that are shared. Firstly, new media can be interpreted as people experimenting with technology and trying new things with different mediums. Cinema for example was invented during the 1890s (Thompson). It appeared during the industrial revolution, and before it could be invented, several technologies needed to be explored. They needed to understand the human eye, the ability to show rapid series of images, the use of photography for a clearer picture, they required the images to be printed on a flexible material, and finally it was vital that they had a suitable mechanism to display their images (Thompson). By using the technologies associated with the time period and experimenting with them, it made it possible for film to be invented and became a new medium for people to explore aesthetics. Secondly, new media is not considered a technology but it is a period in time that marks a specific moment in the life of the ITC (life cycle) technology (Bal). The technology life cycle first begins with an experiment, then continues to technology standard innovation, then new media, followed by emerging media. In this context new media is when a creative framework and new aesthetics are developed for a certain medium. For example in the present day some robotics are now being developed to show human emotion, like *Nexi* the social robot. The aesthetic of human features are being applied to *Nexi* in order to help the military and scientists interpret the autonomy of our bodies (PCR). The life of technology is a very important tool to define when new media occurs. As clearly stated above new media is in the middle of the cycle and this is where many of the artists chosen below can be clearly defined.

Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) was a new media artist of his time. He was a unorthodox film maker that believed the primacy of the camera over the human eye. Founding a group in 1919

called the Kinoks (meaning 'cinemas eyes'), he rejected, along with his peers, 'staged' cinema, with its stars, props, plots, and studio shooting (Dawson). Rather Dziga Vertov believed that the future of cinema was in fact news reels recording the real world, as 'life caught unaware.' Vertov can be considered a new media artist due to the fact that he was one of the first to show the documentary aesthetic through film. Vertov also dealt with the notion of realism; experiencing the real, which at the time was a new concept. A film of interest created by Vertov is titled, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), made up of 'bits and pieces' of cities from Moscow to the Ukraine. Within this film he deals with real life issues of work, transportation, etc., making it appear as if no one is aware of the camera. With this we can see a new media artist at work, he was able to use technology and try unorthodox ideas to create a film. This concept allowed regular viewers of the film to associate themselves with his work and opening up a new genre of life seeking video makers, which in turn meant that he was part of a cultural evolution. After his death in 1954, his work has been recognized as the most innovative and free with the new genre of *city-film* (Dawson). These are strong reminders that Vertov was one of the greatest of all the new media filmmakers.

Michael Figgis is a new media artist and social innovator within the medium of film. He is a director described to have crossed the boundaries, refusing to degrade his work into what is 'normal.' Through his works he is constantly playing with and extending the aesthetics and framework of film and real time. In 2000, Mike Figgis directed a movie titled *Time Code*. What is interesting about the film is that he split the screen into quarters, showing four separate scenes in each quarter, all of which come together into one intertwining story almost as if it was happening in real time (Falk). Real time filming can be classified as a continuous filming process

where the scenes are continuous until the story is over. This concept of filming by Figgis is very innovative and a new media. Dealing with realism, the filming never shuts off so the audience is able to dive into the lives of all the characters, no secrets only stories. A new media artist contributes heavily into a modernized concept, Mike Figgis is no exception. Having the ability to show the audience what is going on around them, issues dealing with sex, betrayal, a natural disaster, human connections and everyday life, shows that he is able to dig within the human psyche, he states his understandings, “there’s a surface, which is beautiful, but it’s the surface. When we see a person we see the surface, but as they begin to talk we get glimpses of something more” (qtd. in *Into the Abstract*). His Film sets up frameworks for other mediums to use ‘real time’ in video, and social commonalities between people to create a network, almost foreshadowing of what is to come in the future. His advancements correlates to film making itself, developing a range of concepts for the filming process , that intertwines social composition, before and behind the lens.

Guillermo Gomez-Pena a journalist, performer, radio host. director, instrumentalist, and a new media artist. In many of Gomez-Pena’s work he speaks of the real relationship between the Latinos and the culture of Americans. He investigates the border culture and transcultural identity. Gomez-Pena in 1994, during Thanks Giving programming in the United States, he took over an American station and began broadcasting himself discussing the complications of the American identity. He expropriates the television signal from his underground “*Vato bunker*”, where virtual reality meets Aztec ritual (*Naftazteca*). Gomez-Pena also continues on by stating this, “...direct access to the labyrinthic mind of a Mexican... not just any Mexican, but one who talks back...” (qtd. by Ed Slopek). This can be considered as a new media project since he is

using video, hacking himself in to American television stations, and as a revolutionist performing aesthetics no one else has done before. In another of his videos, which can be viewed on YouTube, Gomez-Pena begins by stating that he has a loaded gun and then proceeds to point it at the camera. As an audience they are receiving the visual of what a gun to the head would look like or feel like (Gomez). As a new media artist Gomez-Pena is able to use peoples social connections, their thirst for the real, and the medium of video to show real life. Either through a gun, cutting himself with a dull pair of scissors, or drinking hot sauce Gomez-Pena pushes the limits on the public scenery. He is a social revolutionist who is able to altar the relationship of cultures and opens up the path for others who are wanting to strive for diversity, using his new media techniques with video in the process.

As the internet evolved so did life casting and on February 15, 2005 YouTube was founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim (YouTube Wiki). The new advancements created by the founders of YouTube, this new social media became a phenomenon. Having regular people being able to place online videos onto YouTube has changed the internet forever. Within its beginning stages YouTube is considered to be a new media and is still continuing to develop, dealing with social connections and drastically changing the idea of the home video. The site sparked a generation of online actors, directors, comedians, and tutorial gurus, that on a daily basis post 'real time' videos about their lives. One of forefront leaders of this generation is Justine Ezarik. She is special artist in particular who is actively within the YouTube world and has been since the beginning. Her online alias, ijustine, embodies everything about YouTube. She is constantly posting video logs about her life, spoofing popular music, shows, and characters, she also participates in many of the interactive events that happen

on YouTube (Ezarik Wiki). Justine can be considered a new media artist; she is using video as the medium and experiments with different social connections, such as an interactive web show. For example Justine has asked her viewers in a web series called Vlog University on YouTube (ijustine), to create music videos and perform funny stunts to build a web community. Justine uses these methods to communicate with and inspire an audience. As a new media artist Justine is constantly pushing the boundaries of real life video. In 2007, Justine took it to the next level where she placed a wireless webcam into her hat and for several months she went about her daily activities, live streaming on a website for any user to watch (Ezarik Wiki). Justine Ezarik is usually described as a "life casting star," a "new media star," and one of the Internets most popular life casters.

Rob Spence, native documentary film maker in the Toronto area, is a new media artist impacting the way we look at our eyes and experiencing the world around us. At the age of nine Rob had sustained permanent damage and loss to his right eye (Time). Teaming up with University of Toronto professor Steve Mann, and engineer Kosta Grammatis, Rob Spence questioned why, if a mobile phone could encase a digital camera, why could his eye socket not do the same. With his team he answered his own question, which was to replace his optical prosthesis for one with a video camera. The results can be said to help form the background of a revolution in optical, and life casting technology. As of March 2009 Rob was able to record two minutes of footage from the wireless compact camera in his eye prosthesis (Vitaliev). At the moment, this medium is still in the new media period, for it has not been fully completed, with his team they are building on the aesthetic and technical framework in order to have it mastered. Rob Spence himself says, "For a documentary film maker, a camera eye opens up a whole new

point of view that is closer to the human experience.” (qtd. by Vitaliev) For those who can watch, they will be able to see a new perspective never truly explored in the past, Rob Spence capturing his films through his eyes will be a new media. Another reason his work can also be considered new media is because it can revolutionize the way others with a lost eye, or people who are completely blind to see through this technology. Technology based implants are in our near future, and Rob Spence a new media artist will be one of the first to put the medium to work.

In conclusion, Dziga Vertov, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Mike Figgis, Justine Ezarik, and Rob Spence, all illustrate how they have contributed and will be contributing to the cultural evolution in the department of new media incorporated with realism and video. In fact these artists can be shown to have been connected through their practices. Dziga Vertov was on the first to incorporate real life news reels, inside his films believing that life should be caught unaware. With Guillermo Gomez-Pena taking over the network in 1994, in order to spread a cultural message to a mass population. Mike Figgis was part of developing the concept of real time filming, having a constant video with no jump cuts only story, shining light upon a persons reality. All of the artists above can then contribute to the idea of YouTube allowing artist such as Justine Ezarik, to create an online identity and then through that inspire others with her virtual interactions. Finally Rob Spence is taking it to the next level, where he is incorporating a video as an implant. All of these new media artists either have or are still developing and changing the aesthetic of realism through video. They have shown that their main focuses are on real time, real life. They have created technical framework that will be used for all developing social artists and new media in video for the future.

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