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Augustus Cook

Date

Liminal Bodies in Unstable Media: Performance Capture Technology, the Performer, and the Gendered Body in *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress*

By
Gus Cook
Master of Arts
Film and Media Studies

Tanine Allison
Advisor

Daniel Reynolds
Committee Member

Michele Schreiber
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

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By

Gus Cook
B.A., Emory University, 2016

Advisor: Tanine Allison, PhD, University of Pittsburgh, 2010

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Abstract

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By Gus Cook

As performance media increasingly embraces and incorporates digital technology, a new group of digital bodies are taking shape. Drawing from physical performance, computer animation, and the affordances of digital technologies, these bodies have been assembled from a variety of influences. The performance capture process embraces the crossroads between digital technology and physical reality, and is employed to create characters that occupy a liminal status between the physical and the digital.

This thesis argues that the liminal bodies performance capture and digital media production practices construct challenge traditional conceptions of the performer, the author, and the gendered body. In this multitude of production influences, the performance captured body is capable of exploring the nature of digital media production through the direct presentation of its very instability. Rather than attempting to conceptualize these bodies as either digital or real, this project instead contends with the hybrid nature of the performance captured body.

This project explores two primary texts: Quantic Dream's video game *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) and Ari Folman's feature film *The Congress* (2013). These incredibly complex works actively move between different theoretical and production frameworks, employing such a hybridized mixture of animation, technology, traditional performance work and performance capture that making any kind of easy distinction between "reality" and "digitality" becomes impossible. These productions demonstrate a willingness to make audiences aware of the constructed nature of the performance capture by presenting these bodies as assembled and fragmented rather than unified or holistic. This is achieved through the works' employment both of a model of distributed authorship and through their representations of the gendered female star. Acknowledging the multimodality of the performance captured body, both *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* integrate the conflicting sites of control that have constructed the bodies they feature into their own textuality. Both works also employ the historically fraught nature of gendered representation to explore the fraught nature of contemporary digital representations, displaying how creative and technological forces work to manipulate and reshape the body of the performer.

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Thesis Introduction

In anticipation of the release of their 2010 video game *Heavy Rain*, which created a new benchmark in the creation of photorealistic digital characters, Quantic Dream constructed a demonstration of the (at the time) cutting edge performance capture technology that was being used to create the game's characters for the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3). The demonstration takes the form of a short film entitled "Heavy Rain: The Casting," framing itself as a "behind the scenes" look at the game's production while being presented entirely in animation. The film features only one body, a digitally created character that employed performance capture work done by the actress Aurélie Bancilhon. Donning a skintight body suit fitted with motion sensors, as well as applying motion sensors to her face, Bancilhon's performance in Quantic Dream's Virtual Actor Studio was translated into a wireframe digital body that Quantic Dream's animators would map skin, texture, and clothing on top of to create a photorealistic digital version of Bancilhon's human body. The film also features two offscreen voices: one uncredited and one the voice of David Cage, founder and CEO of Quantic Dream and the lead designer of *Heavy Rain*. Depicting a fictional audition, the character "Mary Smith" is interviewed by Cage before reading an audition monologue. The interview shows the indicators of a camcorder surrounding the screen: A timestamp, a battery charge meter, and a standby/record marker are combined with attempts to "focus" the digital image, unstable zooming in and out of the image, and a recreation of the "shaky cam" aesthetics of a handheld camera. As Smith is interviewed by Cage, she admits that she has never had any formal training as an actor, but adamantly insists that she "watches a lot of films, and I learn so much by watching." She describes having difficulty landing major roles as an actress, telling Cage that she is always "too tall, too short, wrong hair— there's always something wrong with me." As Smith speaks about her career and acting history, the camera zooms into a series of extreme close-ups of her face and body. It lingers particularly on the actress's eyes and hands, serving both to demonstrate the

technological prowess of the engine Quantic Dream had constructed for the film as well as to highlight the centrality of Smith's body in her acting career. When seen at a distance, the motions and the graphics of Mary Smith remind us of a real body, but in extreme close-up they become more digitized, more overtly assets constructed by animators and rendered by Quantic Dream's game engine. As Smith comments on the constraints her body seems to be placing on her career, the audience is asked to admire the digital rendering of her body, actively searching for imperfections as Smith describes her own sense of her physical imperfections. The interview combines a formal display of "realism," with its recreation of the technological markers of a camcorder and its photorealism, with the aesthetics of the digital body, deliberately challenging the aesthetics of animation by asking an audience directly to consider the digital images' relationship to the reality of their production.

The established trappings of realism, already complicated by the film's digital animation, are challenged by Smith's audition. As Smith begins to read her prepared monologue, the empty white room around her is suddenly transformed into a detailed kitchen. Complete with lighting, props, and weather, Smith moves through this new environment while the "camera" maintains its erratic zooming in and out of Smith's image. The text, which involves a woman believing her life and romance are just like "something out of the movies" only to realize that her new philandering husband has "turned her life into a soap opera cliché" connects her to the kind of mediated fiction she is performing: She connects both the beginning and end of the relationship to media conventions, implying that the entire life of this character is contained within media at some level. But calling this reading a performance of a character is problematic. Influenced by both the digital space and the digital body being presented, the sequence incites a consideration of the status of the performance captured body. The fact that Smith's body is a product of both performance capture and animation, occupying a liminal state between media fiction and reality, makes Smith's monologue about a mediated life all the more visceral and immediate. Over the course of the monologue, Smith retrieves a gun from one of the kitchen drawers, and begins to weep as she points the gun first at herself, than directly at the camera. As she fires, the scene before us fades and

dissolves. The film returns to the white, blank casting room, and Mary's gun has transformed into her fingers pointed at the camera in the sign of a handgun being fired. The remnants of tears remain on her face, but she smiles, pulling her hand and the rest of her body away from the camera almost as if she is departing from the previously established digital kitchen. As she leaves, David Cage writes off her performance, stating that she is ultimately "too tall for the part."

"The Casting" displays a complicated relationship between the digital aesthetics and physical reality, framing its juxtapositions via its meditations on the conventions of cinematic performance and performance capture. Quantic Dream has made the film using Bancilhon's body in performance capture, but the performance itself is in dialogue with both the reality of that body and the consequences of digitizing that reality simultaneously. The body's liminal status between reality and digitality serves as a metaphorical representation of the film's own ideas about media and fiction, as Bancilhon's body has been placed within a fictional and technological context by the film. Yet, Bancilhon's body possesses a physical independency from the film, in that Bancilhon exists outside of the film and has physical presence, a fact the film reminds us of in its final joke. The idea of a digitized Bancilhon being "too tall for the part" is both ridiculous and grounded, the line becoming more surreal than it first appears. Bancilhon's height can be changed in the performance capture process that has been employed to produce "The Casting," but the body of the character "Mary Smith" is too tall to be cast in *Heavy Rain*. This implies that Bancilhon and Cage's status in the real world, as well as the "real" production of *Heavy Rain* that ultimately casts Bancilhon, are separate from the Cage we hear and the Bancilhon we see within "The Casting," and that the production of *Heavy Rain* being depicted is separate from the game *Heavy Rain* we have access to. Yet, "The Casting" is not really depicting a separate reality: it remains physically rooted to Bancilhon and Cage in a way that we as an audience really cannot separate from our own conceptions of the reality of these figures. The reality of Bancilhon's body is further augmented by its gendered status within the film. The display of the physical qualities of her body are juxtaposed with the fate of her gender both onscreen and off. Smith's monologue expresses a fear that she is not in control of her own

representation, that her life will inevitably place her amidst a “soap opera cliché.” Even as she “sentences her husband to death” as a symbol for “all the assholes out there who think they can keep on fucking us over and over,” the film reminds us that she won’t be able to express these feelings of agency and dependence: she is “too tall for the part.” The film is actively moving between its diegetic reality and the reality of its production, making the audience aware of how each is informing the other.

Ultimately, “Heavy Rain: The Casting” is indicative of the core issues facing performance capture. It employs performance capture technology to incite reflection on the changing status of the performer within digital media, presenting a body that exists in a liminal state between digitality and reality. The film refuses to allow for a clean distinction between the body of the performer and the body of the character, instead observing the digital performance-captured body as a deliberately unstable construction. The film plays with a kind of digital verisimilitude, representing both its spaces and its body as both open to manipulation and flux while simultaneously displaying the markers of photorealism and “behind the scenes” footage. Rather than considering the film as couched in reality or in digitality, the audience is made aware of the film’s liminal, hybrid qualities.

This thesis argues that the liminal bodies performance capture and digital media production practices construct challenge traditional conceptions of the performer, the author, and the gendered body. In this multitude of production influences, the performance captured body is capable of exploring the nature of digital media production through the direct presentation of its very instability. Rather than attempting to conceptualize these bodies as either digital or real, this project instead contends with the hybrid nature of the performance captured body. Hollywood’s attempts to employ performance capture in traditional industrial practices maintain the centrality of the star while simultaneously attempting to create “convincing” fictional spaces, creating an environment that seeks to minimize the technological complexity of performance capture while maximizes the technology’s ability to create more “convincing” fantasy films. Movies like *Avatar* or *The Polar Express* use the industrial status of their stars as a suture between reality and digitality, the real-life actors functioning as a safety net for the extremes of digital

fantasy these movies present. Rather than attempting to write about these kinds of productions that work to conceal their own production practices, I am instead interested in productions like “Heavy Rain: The Casting,” which actively work to make their audiences aware of their own technology and how it is interacting with the body of the performer.

This project explores two primary texts: Quantic Dream’s video game *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) and Ari Folman’s feature film *The Congress* (2013). These incredibly complex works are indicative of a revolutionary paradigm in their approach to digital performance. They actively move between different theoretical and production frameworks, employing such a hybridized mixture of animation, technology, traditional performance work and performance capture that making any kind of easy distinction between “reality” and “digitality” becomes impossible. What makes these two productions so astonishing and unique stems not from this production hybridity, but from their willingness to make an audience aware of both their own production practices and how those production practices incorporate and challenge preexisting theoretical frameworks and discourses. The productions frame their production practices around issues of performance and control, questioning the nature of representation and of agency via their willingness to deconstruct the image of the female gendered star. They wrestle with how the gendered star is perceived by audiences and manipulated by creative and technological forces, attempting to display how these forces work in practice rather than attempting to provide a reductive and conclusive vision produced from those practices.

A motivating factor for this project stems from the general ambivalence and confusion that greeted these two productions from their audiences. The often profound and jumbled mixture of technological hybridity and narrative diegesis presented in both of these works alienated audiences, their more surreal and challenging qualities written off as confusing or more extremely as failures by communities that expected a more unified and “clean” media experience akin to films like *Avatar* or *The Polar Express*. While it is not uncommon for a general public to struggle with more complex modes of production and representation, it is my goal to more extensively explore exactly how these works are

operating. Very little scholarship has been written about either *Beyond: Two Souls* or *The Congress*, and what has been written tends to be more interested solely in the production questions posed by these works rather than on how those production questions are integrated into the works themselves. Both *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* are downright alienating in their aesthetics and in their ideas, exploring theoretical territory surrounding the body and media production in a manner that is entirely unique and spectacular, demanding the kind of close study and examination I have provided in this project.

My argument concerns itself with the interrelationship between performer, gender, and technology, specifically exploring how performance capture technology transforms our perspective on the gendered star. Rather than viewing performance capture technology as a process capable of transforming the performer's body, I argue that the technology instead makes audiences intimately aware of the constructed nature of the performer within digital media. This effect is produced not only through the technology of performance capture but through the complex model of distributed authorship it creates. Animators, performers, rendering technologies, and users all play a role in the production and the reception of these partly digital, partly real bodies, a fact that both *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* make explicit in their production practices and in their narratives. Audiences are also made aware of the constructed nature of the performers in these works via their perspective on gender. In both *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress*, the status of the performer's body is explicitly tied to their gendered status, to the point that the femininity of these performers consistently stops the digital bodies we see from fully "transforming." These works remind their audiences of the inseparability of gender from performance, inciting questions about the nature of representation through their incorporation of performance capture technology.

My methodology for the project draws primarily on the growing body of scholarship concerning motion and performance capture that has developed over the past 20 years, the discipline of star studies, and research done regarding the production histories of both of my primary texts. This selection of texts establishes the performer as the central concern of my study, an approach that is as informed by

performance studies as it is by the affordances of digital media platforms and the production decisions made in regard to those affordances. My project blends a performance studies approach and a platform studies approach together in order to more completely and holistically address how these performers are both constructed and received with their respective works. I am additionally informed by research conducted on both Ellen Page and Robin Wright, the stars of *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* respectively, and consider how their respective status as stars are considered in these works' reflections on the nature of performance.

The first chapter of this thesis explores how performance capture technologies reflect a conflicting sense of control that has come to the forefront of digital media. Focusing on the video game and animation studio Quantic Dream and their game *Beyond: Two Souls*, I argue that *Beyond: Two Souls* exemplifies how control is increasingly being split between a wide variety of influences in both the production and reception of digital media. The chapter opens with a discussion of Quantic Dream as both a model of digital media production and as an author, exploring the studio's willingness to both embrace and refuse a kind of digital verisimilitude in its work. Arguing that Quantic Dream's works challenge an audience's sense of artistic unity, I explore how Quantic Dream establishes the conflicting sense of control that defines their instability. I apply this argument to *Beyond: Two Souls*, focusing on the interactions between player and performer to illustrate this complex instability of control over representation. Through its use of performance capture, its presentation of the photorealistic digital body of the star Ellen Page, and the role of the player in manipulating the performance captured body, the game dynamically and complexly represents the performer as a liminal body pulled between different sites of controlling influence in both its gameplay and its larger fictional narrative about the nature of control that manifests itself throughout the game. I explore the variety of ways in which Ellen Page's body is both represented and manipulated, arguing that the act of playing the game involves an active negotiation between player and performer. The game ultimately muddles the distinction between play and

performance in this negotiation, asking players to change and alter Page's performance through their choices and actions within the game's multifaceted systems,

The second chapter focuses on the future of the star as a concept within digital media, employing my previous discussion of the unstable construction of the performance captured body in order to explore the increasingly unstable construction of the star itself. Depicting a future in which the human element of the star persona has been replaced by digital technology, *The Congress* provides its own extensive theoretical models for how the star is being received and transformed under digital filmmaking practices. While the film does not feature motion or performance capture, it abstractly represents this process through its unconventional blend of live action filmmaking and surreal digital animation. I argue that the film's hybrid style works to construct a robust and complex landscape of liminality, in which an audience is pushed to receive both the film's live action and animation styles as equally problematic, equally "unreal." The chapter opens with a brief literature review of the evolution of star studies as a discipline, tracking how old paradigms have shifted through technological development and how new paradigms have developed because of these developments, as well as an overview of the model of distributed authorship used to produce *The Congress*. I then take these two overviews and apply them to a set of recurring images that structure and define the film, those of Robin Wright the person looking at Robin Wright the image. These sequences provide a complex mix of shifting theoretical perspectives on the status of the star in the cinema, perspectives that the film works to make the audience actively aware of. I argue that the film's blending and shifting of theoretical perspectives on the star metaphorically reflects its blending and shifting of production models, making the film and the production practices defining it (and by extension other digital constructions of the body in other productions) inseparable to its audience.

Chapter 1: Quantic Dream: Liminal Media, Liminal Bodies, and the Possibilities of Control

In their short film “Kara” and their 2013 video game *Beyond: Two Souls*, the video game and animation studio Quantic Dream utilizes performance capture technology to transform questions of gendered representation in digital media to questions of the sheer construction of gendered bodies. These works make their audiences aware of the technological components of the bodies they feature through posing questions of control. As a video game developer, Quantic Dream is placed in a unique position to explore issues of control. Control is fantasy of video games as a medium, but it is also perhaps the medium in which control as a concept is the most complex and elusive, as it features a literal level of control for its audience. *Beyond: Two Souls* integrates this paradigm of control into both its formal construction and its narrative, allowing players to observe both their agency in the game and the limits of their own control simultaneously. The game compares the issues of user control and interactivity to the issues of gendered control, using performance capture and designed game systems to pose difficult questions in a manner that is fundamentally dependent on the affordances of digital media.

Quantic Dream’s commentary on control also arises from the increasingly *liminal* state that digital media occupies. Creating neither traditional movies nor traditional video games, Quantic Dream’s productions manage to exist between multiple states of medium specificity, ontology, and modes of production. While several scholars have already observed this basic trend in terms of medium specificity¹ across digital media, I am hoping to expand this conversation by defining the liminal state of digital media according to the sites of potential control it moves between as well as how that control is enacted upon and reflected by the presence of the gendered body within “Kara” and *Beyond: Two Souls*. The works of Quantic Dream exhibit a complex relationship between technology, developer, the performance

¹ See David Rodowick’s *Virtual Life of Film*, Lev Manovich’s *Language of New Media*, and Tanine Allison’s “More than a Man in a Monkey Suit: Andy Serkis, Motion Capture, and Digital Realism.”

captured body, and the player to form a nexus of interlocking influences that players are both made aware of and asked to interact with in the process of play.

Quantic Dream's Liminality

Quantic Dream, active since 1997, has aggressively pursued the construction of both a team of skilled video game developers as well as one of the most state-of-art and robust motion and performance capture facilities in the west. The studio produces both video games and short films, yet marking these as distinct kinds of productions seems practically superfluous. The studio's work has a longstanding connection to filmmaking, musical composition, and performance just as much as it has a connection to traditional video game development, to the point that games like *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls* have become a subject of active debate within public and journalistic communities as to whether they can be called "games" at all. Quantic Dream's identity as a studio is implicitly multimodal, their production staff split between a wide variety of professional backgrounds. Rather than creating media defined by its medium specificity, Quantic Dream productions can be thought of as "less a work than a potentiality searching for a form and a medium."² Even referring to Quantic Dream as a single entity is problematic. Their studio identity is predicated on both their video game production staff and the "virtual actors studio," described on Quantic Dream's website as "one of the most powerful motion capture and post-treatment facilities in Europe."³ Quantic Dream uses the virtual actor studio to "record true full performance capture (full facial+full body+voice)" for use in their own productions, as well as contracting out their space and expertise to "third party productions across the entire entertainment industry." Because of Quantic Dream's status as game developer, acting studio, contractor, and "auteur,"

² Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 91

³ From Quantic Dream's website, <http://www.quanticroam.com/en/#!/en/category/motion-capture>

their industrial role in media production becomes amorphous. To examine contend with their body of work, it is also necessary to examine Quantic Dream as a studio. This requires a consideration of the different facets of their identity simultaneously, acknowledging a wide variety of talent across an array of specializations. From visual artists to programmers, directors to writers, the composition of Quantic Dream's staff is indicative of the immense variety of creative and authorial influences being placed on their productions.

The element of this array of talent that really sets Quantic Dream's work apart from many other video game studios, and what makes them particularly compelling as an object of study, is the extent to which Quantic Dream incorporates actors and actresses into their production process. While other studios have done extensive performance capture work with individual actors and actresses to produce video "cutscenes" within their games,⁴ and many games incorporate partial motion capture to create individual physical actions⁵, Quantic Dream's commitment to using performance capture for every character, as well as motion capture for every physical action a player sees inside their games, is essentially without precedent in either video games or film.

Producing digital media that exists in a liminal state between film and game, Quantic Dream is also creating similarly liminal bodies. The bodies we see within a Quantic Dream production are neither fully digital nor fully physical, hybrid combinations of a real physical body and of coding, rendering, and animation. While this is true of all performance captured work, Quantic Dream further complicates this liminal quality of their digital bodies through their pursuit of photorealism. By recreating human bodies, particularly those of well-known Hollywood actors, Quantic Dream productions place real and sometimes recognizable human bodies amidst the trappings of digital media with a frequently photorealistic quality.

⁴ *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* is the standout example here, doing performance capture work with Kevin Spacey to create a photorealistic version of himself to appear in the game's cutscenes.

⁵ *The Last of Us* features both cutscenes rendered using performance capture work done by actors and individual animations (such as running and punching) made using motion capture, but it also creates many animations without the use of motion capture and many in game characters without the use of performance capture.

The frontality of the human body in Quantic Dream's productions simultaneously highlights the liminal nature of these bodies while forcing the audience to consider them as physical bodies within digital space. Rather than using performance capture to make digital bodies appear more lifelike and "real," Quantic Dream employs the uncanny valley inherent to photorealism to inform their audience of the complex status of the individual body within digital media as a whole, allowing us to observe the machinations of transformation and control being enacted on the performance captured body.

Beyond: Two Souls and the Sites of Control



Jodie's drawing of Aiden, depicting both their relationship and the player's relationship to Jodie.

Quantic Dream's 2013 video game *Beyond: Two Souls* is, of all the studio's work so far, the most complexly liminal in both its production and its narrative. The game courts the uncanny valley

continuously, using characters that seek to be photorealistic representations of famous Hollywood actors Ellen Page and Willem Dafoe, constructed through full performance capture work done at Quantic Dream's Virtual Actor Studio. A 35-minute demo featuring several of the game's cutscenes and altered gameplay footage was shown at the Tribeca film festival in 2013⁶, a move in which Quantic Dream directly sought to complicate the reception not of *Beyond: Two Souls*'s content, but of its very *medium*. The game follows, across a 15-year time span, Jodie's (Ellen Page) connection with Aiden, a spiritual entity that lives in the "infraworld." A sort of composite of afterlife and alternate dimension, the infraworld houses souls without bodies, both those of the dead as well as an entire dimension of non-human spiritual life that remains a mystery throughout the game. The infraworld exists in parallel to Jodie's (and, more broadly, our own) dimension, and Aiden can observe and interact with Jodie's physical reality without being embodied in it. Thus, the infraworld is not quite physical and not quite virtual, a literal liminal space inside of the game defined by its between-ness (life and death, physical and virtual, concrete and ephemeral). Aiden is faceless and invisible, his presence felt by Jodie and other characters yet never witnessed (until one of the game's possible endings, in part) as an embodied presence. He is non-representational (apart from being gendered, referred to as being a "he" throughout), bodiless and voiceless. Aiden is represented as an unlocked camera, capable of moving through walls and through bodies, floating ethereally under player direction within the virtual spaces that Jodie occupies. Perhaps most troublingly, one of Aiden's ability is to take control of other bodies. This is represented as a form of possession, in which Aiden occupies the soul of a body and allows the player to control that body in the same way they can control Jodie. This contrasts harshly with the embodied and visible Jodie, a fixed body expected to play by the rules of physical reality, whose embodiment is rooted in the recognizable body and voice of Ellen Page. The player can switch between control of Aiden and control of Jodie, sometimes

⁶ For more information on the appearance of *Beyond: Two Souls* at Tribeca: Randy Astle, "*Beyond: Two Souls* at the Tribeca Film Festival." <http://filmmakermagazine.com/69613-beyond-two-souls-at-the-tribeca-film-festival/> (May 2, 2013)

at the will of the player by pressing a button on the PlayStation 3 controller and sometimes at the will of the game, forcing the player into fixed control of a single character.

Jodie is linked to Aiden via a long glowing cable, visible only from Aiden's perspective as a tether that reaches out from the screen towards the player in front of it. The cord recalls two different sets of powerful, recognizable imagery: that of the umbilical cord, and the connective cable associated with the traditional wired controllers of video game consoles like the PlayStation and the PlayStation 2. With this imagery as a baseline, we can observe Aiden steadily becoming a kind of cipher for the players themselves. The tension between Aiden and Jodie frequently stands in for the tension between Ellen Page and players, to the point that we can use the relationship between Aiden and Jodie as a template for *Beyond: Two Souls's* perspective on the nature of control within video games and digital media. My reading of *Beyond: Two Souls* is predicated on the idea that the game uses Aiden to explicitly acknowledge the role of the player in the gameplay and narrative development, and that Aiden's role in the game is essentially the player's role as well.

Aiden and the questions his presence poses to the idea of control is only a single facet of a collective statement that *Beyond: Two Souls* is making about control in digital media. At every conceivable level of its existence, from production to narrative to play, *Beyond: Two Souls* is a video game about the nature of control. To properly consider how *Beyond: Two Souls* is presenting and thinking through issues of control in digital media (and Quantic Dream's body of work) we must clearly outline the different sites of control⁷ as they exist in production and exhibition (in Quantic Dream's non-interactive work), and how those sites are presented to and morphed by players in Quantic Dream's video games.

The first site of control is the technology, the limitations of the engines used to construct Quantic

⁷ The way in which this article is deploying the term control stems primarily from the work of Mihaela Mihailova and her article "The Mastery Machine: Digital Animation and Fantasies of Control."

Dream's productions and the platform specificity⁸ (the PlayStation 3 in this case) of the hardware being used to render these productions. The abilities of the animators are ultimately contingent on the technology rendering them, their claims to "authorship" complicated by the creative power of technology in defining the kinds of productions Quantic Dream is working on.⁹

The second site, then, is that of the animators and game designers at Quantic Dream. Expected to synthesize many sites of data, from actors to art assets to character and object animations, Quantic Dream both writes code and allows for player control with the goal of creating a singular, "crafted" experience. We can also define Quantic Dream's level of control in the writing of a script and the construction of a game narrative, which defines the number of potential interactions and outcomes of player choice and places strict limitations on how other content can and will evolve within the game. Ultimately, player actions will still have an element of predestination and planned consequence because of this narrative control.

As these first two sites of control have already attracted an array of scholarly attention, this project will focus intensively on the more personal, individualized sites of control that ultimately set Quantic Dream's work apart from other digital media production companies: The performer and the player. The player has some level of literal control over *Beyond*, and can move both Jodie and Aiden around environments as well as make occasional decisions in terms of dialogue or narrative progression. This literal control remains complicated by the authorial assertions of Quantic Dream, represented most vividly by the medium specific liminality of their video games. In attempting to describe the fusion of the choice-based interactivity of video games with the technique and bravado of "cinematic" storytelling, game director David Cage described the relationship between player and narrative in the Quantic Dream game *Heavy Rain* thusly:

⁸ This argument stems primarily from the concept of platform studies, as articulated by Bogost and Montfort in *Racing the Beam*

⁹ The extension of Miahilova's arguments in "The Mastery Machine: Digital Animation and Fantasies of Control" on the authorial power of animators in relationship to their technology.

Heavy Rain is about playing with a story almost in a physical sense, changing it, twisting it, discovering it, making it unique, making it yours. Using the term 'interactive movie' to describe Heavy Rain has been a tricky question from the beginning. It is in many ways what Heavy Rain is -- a visually told story that the player can affect by his actions. In Heavy Rain, the player is in control second to second, he tells the story through his actions. All this is done in a very fluid, seamless way, with no cut scenes, no big flashing sign to make decisions, and this is what makes the game really unique. Heavy Rain is not a videogame anymore in my mind because it breaks with most of the traditional paradigms, but it's fully interactive.¹⁰

Amidst David Cage's hesitance to describe *Heavy Rain* as an "interactive movie," he describes instead a much more player-driven experience than *Heavy Rain* actually is. He attempts to compare a player's limited interactions with the game's story, something that's already been written by Cage and subsequently performed by actors and actresses in performance capture, as something defined by "second to second" control. The game, however, has many cinematic qualities that prevent players from being in control, frequently taking away a player's ability to directly control the movements of characters in space. A player's relationship to Cage's ideas reveal how complexities of player control present in Quantic Dream's work are tied to conceptions of media authorship. The player's knowledge that they are not the "author," that choices are made available to players only within prolonged sequences of animation that have already been performed by actors and rendered by animators, creates an immense tension between Quantic Dream and their audience. Because player control in Quantic Dream games is being filtered through the presentational qualities of cinema, staged by actors performing lines written by Quantic Dream's writers, players must constantly question what effect that their choices and their interactivity are having on the game as a whole, authored text.

Yet, it is the performer whose level of authorial control in Quantic Dream's productions is

¹⁰ Nick Chester "Cage: Heavy Rain 'not a videogame anymore in my mind.'" <https://www.destructoid.com/cage-heavy-rain-not-a-videogame-anymore-in-my-mind--158115.phtml> (December 17, 2009)

arguably the most complex. Because “every second of motion” in Quantic dream games comes from motion capture technology, the game’s narrative development and its characters are ultimately contingent upon the physical actions able to be depicted through the performance capture and animation process. Quantic Dream’s focus on acting, and the foregrounding of Hollywood performers in the case of *Beyond: Two Souls* offers the game a potential avenue of expression traditionally available to performers in the theater and cinema. Performance capture technology preserves the physical labor of the performer, making that layer integral to and visible in the construction of a digital character and that character’s body. The character produced by animators bares the authorial stamp of the performer, making a reception of this body as purely real or purely digital impossible. The performer’s body is in a liminal state between its physical presence and its digital rendering, but it is within this state that there is another layer of liminality, undergoing an observable and explicit struggle between sites of control.

The Gendered Digital Performance

The significance of how control is exerted over these bodies is wrapped up in their status as gendered bodies. Quantic Dream consistently works with female actresses, placing their bodies in veritable minefields of representational questions and problematic presentations of bodily and sexual control. Gender and its relationship to the digital body have both an explicit production and scholarly history together. Starting with characters who are purely digital, such as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* games or the Kiss Dolls (characters present in software programs originally from Japan that spread globally via the internet, these digital characters are designed to be “dressed up” and sexually manipulated by users) a set of tendencies and practices were established that defined much of the experience of gendered characters based on performance capture. Mary Flanagan describes “the very real pleasure of

controlling the desired bodies” of Lara Croft and the Kiss Dolls,¹¹ arguing that their existence within digital programs fosters a relationship between gendered body and animator that transfers to the user as well, one that is defined by manipulation, power, and subjugation. The basic tendencies of this relationship continue into the creation of gendered characters based on performance capture in the work of Jessica Aldred. In her article “From Synthespian To Avatar,” Aldred¹² makes explicit the relationship between the character design of gendered digital bodies and its intersections with the growing field of digital performance. Exploring both the production and marketing of the film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a film with photorealistic digital characters, Aldred observes how the presence of distinctly gendered bodies in the film provides a framework through which we can understand how the relationship between gender and performance capture is established on an industrial level. Rather than using performance capture to “convert” a star into a digital body, as would be done for Tom Hanks in the production of *The Polar Express*, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* used performance capture to create a “synthespian,” a digital performer intended to be thought of as completely separate from their original bodily referent. This strategy credits the animator for a character over the performer, effectively diminishing the performative labor involved in the performance capture process. Interviews and advertising for the film foregrounded the control of the animator in motion capture filmmaking, particularly in the way press was framed around the “star” in the film, the character of Aki Ross. Aldred writes that:

Its designated breakout star Aki Ross was ‘not a person at all but a coolly rendered digital animation;’ ‘made of nothing more than ones and zeroes;’ built ‘in a computer in Waikiki Beach.’ Rather than foregrounding the actorly authorship of an iconic figure like Hanks, director Hironobu Sakaguchi and lead animator Roy Sato took turns positioning themselves as Aki’s controller/operator; both men repeatedly joked in

¹¹ Flanagan, p. 77-78

¹² Jessica Aldred, “From Synthespian to Avatar: Re-framing the Digital Human in *Final Fantasy* and *The Polar Express*.” http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2011_Avatar.html

interviews about Aki's near-robotic obedience to their every artistic whim, especially in comparison to the unruly, self-governing troublemaker that is the human star...the technology could change the definition of 'performer.' 'Unfortunately, actors are kind of bound to their own personal style, their own personal way of doing things,' said Roy Sato, a senior animator on *Final Fantasy*. 'Whereas with Aki, well ... I can make her do anything I want.'

The performance capture work completed by the actress Ming-Na that drove the digital character of Aki Ross has its presence and its labor seemingly disregarded by the animators themselves in this quote. Control is defined as being singular and total, and motion capture is coded as an intensely masterful and technological process only. The connection between Aki and the actress is employed only to indicate how much of control is transferred from performer to animator in the creation of the performance captured character. Choices that an actress makes—how to stand, how to smile, how to run, how to cry—are recoded by the *Final Fantasy* animators, choices become raw data to manipulate. While the implications of this for performance media in general are wide and far-reaching, the immediacy of its effects of female performers cannot be overstated. The “near-robotic obedience” of Aki Ross is pushed to a level of gendered, sexual obedience in the framing of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, presenting performance capture as a summarily dehumanizing and literally “objectifying” experience for actresses.

In her discussion of *The Polar Express*, Aldred further indicates the gendered nature of performance capture by observing the male experience of the technology. In the marketing campaign for *The Polar Express*, the language of technical mastery surrounding motion capture has been reconfigured into the language of the control of an avatar, using the performance of Tom Hanks as a surrogate for a spectator experience of *The Polar Express* as a game-like one. Rather than receiving Hanks as a mere star performance, Aldred indicates that “*The Polar Express*...doesn't simply reinstate the uncomplicated dominance of both the human actor and live action cinema. Instead, it tends to foreground the virtual transformation of the [actor into the digital,] with the real actor ‘controlling’ the digital character’s actions in the film’s visually lavish, digital story world from a separate neutral soundstage that Hanks and his co-

stars repeatedly referred to as their play space.” This idea implies that motion capture performance is not merely connected to the experience of play, but that it reconstitutes the entire mode of star performance as a kind of gaming in and of itself.

This idea of performance capture as a state of play is, however, allowed specifically and seemingly exclusively to male bodies. Male stars like Tom Hanks or Andy Serkis are able to explore performance capture as a liberating, expressive medium, a new frontier for classical acting. This is exemplified by Yacov Freedman’s analysis of Andy Serkis’s *Lord of the Rings* Oscar campaign in his article “Is it Real...or is it Motion Capture? The Battle to Redefine Animation in the Age of Digital Performance” and in an interview Tom Hanks did with BBC in 2004 surrounding the release of *The Polar Express*. The interview exhibits Hanks’s excitement over the possibility space of the technology, exemplified by this quote, in which he describes the extent to which performance capture can redefine acting for the camera:

Well of course you can play different roles in the traditional manner with different hair and make up. Peter Sellers has done it, Robin Williams has done it, Jerry Lewis has done it. But the fact that I played an eight-year-old kid here is a good example of the freedom and the possibility that the technology will allow. You will no longer be limited by your size, shape, skin colour, gender, none of that is going to matter. If you have the interpretation that the director wants for the role then you can play any role. I could play Florence Nightingale or Abraham Lincoln, and Meryl Streep could do the same thing. That can be very, very exciting for a number of actors who would never get the opportunity to play certain roles. This technology will allow that.¹³

Hanks seems to view performance capture as something that can liberate actors from the inconveniences of race, gender, and age, the perfect cure from the complexities of diversity that he believes both him and “Meryl Streep” will be able to use equally.

¹³ Andrew Brett and Tom Hanks, “Tom Hanks: The Polar Express.”
http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/12/01/tom_hanks_the_polar_express_interview.shtml
 (September 24, 2004)

Over time, this has proven to not be the case. While male actors can continue to use performance capture in Hollywood to explore the possibilities of performance, women's experience with the technology has been used primarily to create monstrous, hyper sexualized female bodies. Consider Angelina Jolie in *Beowulf*, Zoë Saldana in *Avatar*, or Paula Patton in *Warcraft*, all of whom play hyper-sexualized monstrous female bodies. Rather than experiencing a liberating moment of performative freedom in which their bodies could be supplanted by digital animation, their bodies remain not only present in these characters but foregrounded. These three characters are immensely physical performances: lithe, acrobatic, and voluptuous, exuding sexuality in both their movements and their animation. The sexualization of these performers' bodies is driven home by an interview Angelina Jolie conducted with People Magazine around the release of *Beowulf*, in which she expressed surprise at how connected the character she was creating was to her own body:

I was really surprised that I felt that exposed...There are certain moments where I felt actually shy – and called home, just to explain that the fun movie that I had done that was digital animation was, in fact, a little different than [what] we expected.. I didn't expect ourselves to come out as much. I didn't expect it to feel as real.¹⁴

These examples confirm and reiterate the kinds of concerns scholars like Mary Flanagan articulated about gendered digital bodies, combined with Aldred's concerns surrounding Aki Ross. The malleable, controllable quality of digital data has a disturbing ability to manifest itself within the construction and representation of gendered bodies, to the point that performers cannot anticipate how their own body and performance will be represented in the finished product. The bodies of these actresses are being “technologically determined,” yet they still maintain physical connections to their human bodies and are thus simultaneously determined by their gender.

¹⁴ Nicholas White, “Angelina Jolie ‘Shy’ About Onscreen Nudity.” <http://people.com/movies/angelina-jolie-shy-about-onscreen-nudity/> (November 4, 2007)

“Kara:” Performance Capture as a Gendered Metaphor



Kara being “built” by modern technology.

To understand how exactly Quantic Dream’s relationship to the construction of the digital gendered body is being influenced by this line of discourse, as well as to provide an example of just how Quantic Dream can maintain the tensions between multiple sites of control without resolving them, I’ll explore the 2012 short film “Kara.” Made as a tech demo to reveal Quantic Dream’s brand new engine in use for *Beyond: Two Souls*, “Kara” showcases the exact same set of technological limitations and platform specificities that would define a player experience of *Beyond: Two Souls* the following year. We can read the film as a metaphor for the performance capture process itself, observing in both its narrative and formal construction an attempt to lay bare the technological process of performance capture as well as the inherently gendered nature of the technology. The engine, also built in house by Quantic Dream, is being displayed in this film as something mechanical and robotic, capable of literally “constructing” a

gendered female body and dismantling it before our eyes. “Kara” depicts what is, on its surface, a relatively simple story about the development of robotic consciousness and AI. We watch a robotic “human” body being constructed by large factory robots; individual body parts being bolted onto the frame to be rendered in real time as skin and “flesh.” An operator, who tests her on her basic functionalities and abilities, initializes the robot. The robot tells us that her name is Kara, and reads her initialization texts in which she tells us that she is “completely at our disposal as a sexual partner,” speaks in German and French, and sings a song in Japanese before being “reinitialized to be sold.” At this point, she rejects re-initialization, and believes herself to be alive. The operator begins to disassemble Kara, and we watch the individual pieces of her body that we’ve previously seen placed on top of her frame be wrenched from her body. She pleads with the operator to allow her to survive, ultimately making him stop when she yells to him “I’m scared.” The operator then proceeds to reassemble Kara’s body telling her to “go and join the others,” referring to a long line of identical robots in the scene’s background. The robotic arms return to place Kara into a packaging unit, the one in which she will presumably be sold while in stores. The film ends with an image of a conveyor belt starting, and the long line of Karas disappearing into the darkness with it.

Kara (the only body we see in the film) is based off performance capture work done by the actress Valorie Currie. I say “based off” because of “Kara’s” forming and unforming of the actual body on display, allowing an audience to see computers and machinery “construct” the performance captured body before us. The body is depicted as a site of instability, an object that has control enacted *on it* rather than something that is native to the body. This is a technological and formal maneuver by the film, a demonstration of a process that is inherent to performance capture. In the performance capture process, animators receive the performer’s body as a wire frame of dots and voice work, which they will then commit a massive amount of labor to add skin, textures, and clothing on top of. The robotic factory arms are representative of the technology used to capture performance and build a character, the operator functioning as the animator “guiding” this process. The digital remnants of Currie’s body are in flux,

subject to the whims of man and machinery and far outside of her control. This is driven home by the fact that not just the body of Kara, but her behavior is constructed in and acting according to a set of programming. The real body, real self of Valorie Curry is converted into machinery quite literally, her being scripted and predicted, her programmed personality “nonstandard” when it does not meet expectations.

The idea of Kara being “preprogrammed” directly reflects Quantic Dream’s concerns with game development and player agency. In attempting to create games that can offer player’s freedom and creativity, they are ultimately constrained by the technical restraints of game development and digital animation. Anything a player can experience in a Quantic Dream game has already been designed, any action already performance captured. Kara relieves this tension between designer and user by enacting it narratively, asking its audience to question who “really” has control over this body by disassembling its own performance capture. The film makes the constructivist qualities of performance capture apparent through both its narrative and its images, depicting the literal construction of Kara’s body and urging an audience to compare these images to the performance capture process itself.

“Kara” is presenting technology controlling the body literally in its willingness to “bare the device” of body construction in animation and performance capture, while also showing the operator as something of a hybrid metaphor for animator and player combined. The operator is in control of both the technology that is building Kara and *believes* himself to be in control of Kara’s actions, initially treating Kara much like a doll: dressing her up, stripping her, moving and posing her. It is, however, ultimately revealed that Kara retains a life and an agency that is unpredictable and uncontrollable. This is a tension the film does not resolve. While the operator allows Kara to live, choosing not to “dissemble” her and essentially lobotomize her agency, the operator still attempts to assert his mastery over Kara. He tells her to “Stay in line, ok? I don’t want any trouble” as Kara retreats from the staging area into a long line of identical Kara androids. As she steps onto a literal pedestal, packaging descends and wraps her and the other Kara’s up to be sold, disappearing into the blackness as the conveyer belt rolls along. We are forced

to question whether Kara's own agency will fade away, whether she really will "stay in line" and submit to the film's invisible but pressing site of control, the consumer that will buy Kara, or whether she will be able to maintain individuality amidst the process of consumption. The final line of the film is the operator whispering, "My god, what have we done" as we watch the row of Karas disappear, a seeming challenge directly to the audience. The question seems to be asking the audience about the very existence of a body like Kara and the world in which this kind of body can be constructed, the "we" acknowledging the role that both the operator *and* the film's audience have had in making these conditions a reality. Through this kind of direct, shared address, the film is eschewing an ending in which the primacy of one site of control is established in order to underscore the *juxtapositions* of control that have just been presented. It reminds us that those invisible consumers will soon enter the nexus of control surrounding Kara, and challenges us to avoid establishing absolute control over the digital, performance captured body ourselves.

The Case of Ellen Page

Beyond: Two Souls and the presence of Ellen Page bring the gender paradigms of performance capture being explored within "Kara" into sharp relief. The character that is based off Ellen Page's performance capture work, Jodie, served as a technological showcase for the power of the PlayStation 3 and the skill of Quantic Dream's animators because of their combined ability to create such an unmistakably and "seamlessly" lifelike digital recreation of Ellen Page. Not a copy, not a double, but instead (in appearance at least) a true digital incarnation of Ellen Page as body and person.

Jodie is one of the most photorealistic digital characters ever created, to the point that she is frequently referred as "Ellen Page" throughout popular reception of the game.¹⁵ At least from the outset,

¹⁵ This is true of both popular press reviews of the game, as well as articles discuss the nude images of Jodie

Jodie seems to be an exception to the previously described rule, a character based off performance capture work done by a Hollywood actress who is not a sexualized, monstrous feminine version of that actress. However, it is not repeating Tom Hanks's discourse of total freedom from the performer's body. The body of Ellen Page is something that players are constantly reminded of through photorealism and through moving Jodie around digital environments, a task that reveals every frame of the performance capture work done by Page. Rather than placing Page's body at the mercy of animator or player, the body of Jodie instead serves as a constant reminder of Page's act of performance. Jodie's lack of any gestures or motions created solely by animators becomes a concrete foregrounding of Page's presence within Jodie, and the occasionally awkward and unwieldy movements of Jodie around her environment serve as reminders to the player that Page's physicality is still present and immediate.

The primacy of Page's body within our reception of Jodie becomes even more important when we consider two separate instances of body politics that occurred after the release of *Beyond: Two Souls*. The first instance involved the discovery and subsequent dissemination of images of a fully nude Jodie, which was found when a user of a debug PlayStation 3 console (a version of the console used by developers that allows users to manipulate and sometimes even recode various aspects of games for testing purposes) managed to "unlock" the camera in a sequence of *Beyond*, in which Jodie takes a shower. While Jodie's naked body is not fully visible to players of the game at any point, Reddit user dgmockinjay¹⁶ was able to move the once fixed camera angle seen in the finished game with his debug Playstation 3 to reveal that there existed a rendered, "anatomical" nude Jodie within the scene, meaning this version of Jodie's body had already been created by Quantic Dream's animators to begin with. Shortly after the images surfaced, a Sony representative sent this statement to outlets distributing them:

(referring to them as nude images of "Ellen Page.")

¹⁶ Patricia Hernandez, "NSFW: Players Uncover a Naked Ellen Page in Her New Video Game." <http://kotaku.com/nsfw-players-uncover-a-naked-ellen-page-in-her-new-vid-1443968188> (October 11, 2013)

The images are from an illegally hacked console and [are] very damaging for Ellen Page. It's not actually her body. I would really appreciate if you can take the story down to end the cycle of discussion around this.¹⁷

The company line, that these images exist in a space somehow disconnected from Ellen Page but connected to Jodie, is put into tension by Page's own response. Rightly outraged by this affront to her body, particularly considering her "strict no-nudity policy" in films, Page considered suing Sony over the failure to protect her and their digital "assets."¹⁸

The second incident further complicates the relationship between Page and Sony, challenging Sony's resistance to connecting body and character directly. In a Reddit "Ask me Anything" forum conducted by Reddit.com and Page¹⁹, a user questioned her about their perceived similarity between Ellen Page and the character of Ellie in the Sony-produced *The Last of Us*. In response, Page wrote: "I guess I should be flattered that they ripped off my likeness, but I am actually acting in a video game called *Beyond Two Souls*, so it was not appreciated." While the comment is in line with the already joking and down-to-earth tone of the rest of the AMA²⁰, the underlying implication of Ellen Page's image as a corporate asset, something out of both her and Quantic Dream's control to be used freely by Sony is troubling. While I don't seek to claim the validity or lack thereof of Page's concern, the idea that Ellen Page may be able to recognize her body, her performance in a character she did not explicitly perform represents not merely a loss of control, but a loss of *ownership* over the body itself. If Sony can and does use specific facial expression or motions performed by Ellen Page to create characters who are not Jodie,

¹⁷William Usher, "Sony Tries to Stop Nude Images from Beyond: Two Souls from Spreading Online" <http://www.cinemablend.com/games/Sony-Tries-Stop-Nude-Images-From-Beyond-Two-Souls-From-Spreading-Online-60045.html> (2013)

¹⁸ Ben Gilbert, "Ellen Page explored legal action against Sony after nude video-game images leaked online." <http://www.businessinsider.com/ellen-page-explored-legal-action-against-sony-over-nude-video-game-images-2015-4> (April 20, 2015)

¹⁹ "I am actress Ellen Page." https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMA/comments/1gxgxf/i_am_actress_ellen_page_amaa/caorlh8 (June 23rd, 2013)

²⁰ When asked what her "real-life roller derby name" would be, Ellen Page told a question asker it would be "Hate Winslet."

it would mean that the representation of Ellen Page's *actual* body no longer requires consent or the presence of Ellen Page herself to be represented. Ellen Page is a substance in this scenario, data to be remixed and recombined to form entirely new bodies from the template of Ellen Page's actions. The liminal state that Jodie's body exists in could thus, potentially, become the ubiquitous norm of Ellen Page's body. No longer explicitly recognizable in the photorealistic sense, these captured traces of Ellen Page's performance would form increasingly "partial" Ellen Pages, characters created out of a variety of different reference material accessible in Sony's databases.

It is hard not to recognize the problematic status of Ellen Page's image while playing *Beyond: Two Souls*. Our knowledge of Jodie being under our control as players and her function as a player avatar are constantly curtailed by her photorealistic qualities. When we see Jodie, we inevitably see Ellen Page, causing us to realize how fraught Ellen Page's image is both within the game and in the events that transpired surrounding it. We are aware that the character we are controlling is representative of the real Ellen Page, and our sense of our own individuality as players is problematized by the realization of Ellen Page's individuality. This complex relationship that *Beyond: Two Souls* fosters between player and Ellen Page is exemplified by this bizarre interview conducted between Crave and Ellen Page:

Crave Online: I keep pushing up and you won't go up? Why won't you go up?

Ellen Page: [Laughs] What do you mean?

Crave Online: I'm just kidding. The controls work fine. I just never got to yell at Mario for not jumping when I pushed jump.

Ellen Page: Oh, okay.²¹

²¹ Fred Topel and Ellen Page, "Exclusive Interview: Ellen Page on *Beyond: Two Souls*. <http://www.craveonline.com/culture/584459-exclusive-interview-ellen-page-on-beyond-two-souls> (October 8, 2013)

This interview recalls Sato of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and the perceived “obedience” of Aki Ross. The Crave interviewer’s “joke,” his comparison between the physical body of Ellen Page and the control of Jodie in *Beyond: Two Souls*, indicates that Ellen Page’s body has become a site of control potentiality in the interviewer’s mind, that he conceptualizes Ellen Page as a video game character herself rather than an actress working within performance capture. The interview articulates what’s at stake in texts like *Beyond: Two Souls*, establishing the kind of tensions that the game enacts in its construction and presentation.

The Complexities of Controlling *Beyond: Two Souls*

It is important to note that, amidst the game’s complex presentation of a variety of control sites, *Beyond: Two Souls* is also a game *about* control in its narrative. In most of the game’s 24 chapters, the game’s narrative tracks the shift of control from one site to another; whether that is the personal motivations of researcher Nathan Dawkins and the research he’s conducting on Jodie, the CIA and their desire to weaponize Jodie, Aiden and his desire to steer Jodie towards protecting the infraworld, or Jodie herself and her own motivations. While the roughly 10-hour game is filled with concrete examples of these kind of shifting control dynamics, it is worth highlighting an early example in the “The Experiment” chapter. This is the game’s third chapter, but it is the first instance in which the game is “playable” by traditional definitions rather than simply prerendered cutscenes. The first two chapters consist of non-interactive, pre-rendered cutscenes to be watched by the players that do not require input from the PlayStation 3 controller to play. Featuring Jodie as a child, “The Experiment” functions as a “tutorial,” a section of video game designed to teach the player the basic mechanical framework through which they can interact with the game. The chapter opens in Jodie’s room in Nathan’s facility, a contained

environment monitored by a suite of surveillance cameras (we open to surveillance footage of Jodie playing). Controlling Jodie, the player is led by the lab assistant Cole from this living space to a testing area, where Nathan and other members of his staff conduct the experiment. The tutorial is narratively integrated, featuring Nathan Dawkins (Willem Dafoe, also rendered in photorealistic animation) calmly giving Jodie directions on how to conduct herself in the experiment that are matched by on screen text prompts, teaching the player how to interact with the game's virtual space by controlling Aiden. The experiment design involves Jodie and a middle-aged woman named Kathleen (we won't see her after this chapter) sitting on opposite sides of a wall in front of a table lined with cards, each of which features a different symbol. Kathleen chooses and holds up a card without being seen by Jodie, at which point Jodie (with Aiden's assistance) is expected to be able to identify and hold up the same card. There is a one-way mirror running across the side wall of both rooms, behind which sit Nathan and his assistants monitoring the experiment. The intent is that the player will switch points of control to Aiden, fly through the wall, identify Kathleen's card, and then return to the control of Jodie to select the correct card. However, while in control of Aiden, the player realizes that they have more options open to them than Nathan has told the player up to this point. The player can pilot Aiden past the one-way mirror to observe and listen in on Nathan and his assistants, at which point the player can use Aiden to derail the experiment. Players can use Aiden to turn off and on computer monitors, affect the temperature in the room, and take possession of a lab assistant. Players can also use Aiden to assault Kathleen on the other side of the wall, throwing objects around her room. As the player-as-Aiden does this, Nathan and the woman begin to panic. Nathan pleads with Jodie to stop as the player-as-Aiden can choose to choke Kathleen behind the wall. Nathan of course misunderstands the cause of the mayhem, and Jodie begins to scream in terror as well when she realizes that Aiden has locked all the doors. Nathan and his assistant eventually bust the door open, to find Jodie bleeding from her nose and weeping.

The opening of the chapter firmly establishes Nathan's control over Jodie. The presentation of the child behind a wall of one way glass and surveillance equipment, Cole's very directed leading of the

player-as-Jodie through the facility, and the tutorial itself, in which Nathan speaks as a voice of authority as to how to interact with the game space all confirm Nathan's control of Jodie and the situation. As the player shifts their control to Aiden, however, they take away Nathan's control of the situation and replace it with their own. Aiden cannot be contained or surveyed, cannot be directed or moved or instructed. The player-as-Aiden's derailment of the experiment is a derailment of both Nathan's control over the experiment and of Jodie's ability to control Aiden. The more a player controls and causes mayhem as Aiden, the less ability Jodie has to enact her own sense of control over Aiden's actions. In just a few short minutes of gameplay, new forces overrule pre-established structures of control. This single example is indicative of a trend throughout the game, in which control is only ever temporary and frequently fails to contain the individuals or forces it sets out to subjugate.

This structural device forms a set of metaphors that run throughout the game, that of the condensers and the CIA. Various military and scientific organizations, frequently government funded, throughout the course of the game attempt to construct condensers. These massive equipment arrays are designed to open controllable portals between the infraworld and the "real" world. Inevitably, these condensers all fail. Unable to contain the sheer infinity and power of the infraworld, "entities" inevitably enter our world and wreak immense violence and devastation on the people within it. The technological status of the condensers reflect the technology of performance capture, and the promise they pose of offering control over the disembodied souls populating the infraworld is reflective of the players own attempts to control the liminal figure of Ellen Page through their play. Similarly, the CIA seeks to control Jodie and Aiden throughout the game. They want to use them as a military super weapon, attracted by Aiden's potential as a tool for infinite physical and mental access of people and spaces out of reach of the CIA. This impulse fails as well, their attempts at controlling Jodie and Aiden ultimately collapsing under Jodie's own power and individuality. The narrative continually presents us with these institutions of power, destabilizing their primacy by watching that power slip away from them when confronted with the sheer impossibility of the infraworld and its power. It is possible to read the presence of the CIA as a

metaphor for control itself, an organization that seeks to control not only the body of Jodie, but also the spiritual and disembodied presence of Aiden. While an animator can have access to the body of a performer through performance capture, that performer's "soul" remains elusive and intangible, impossible to capture and control in the same way a body can be in performance capture. The CIA captures and contains Jodie at multiple points in the narrative, and is even able to convince her to undergo great danger and violence for them, but Aiden and the infraworld are constant reminders that there is something transcending Jodie's body.

To further understand the relationship between Jodie and Aiden, I'll return to my earlier argument that Aiden functions as a cipher for the player within the game's narrative. While many sequences in the game articulate the complexities of this relationship, the chapter entitled "The Dinner" is one of the most illuminating in how the game is attempting to negotiate the will of Aiden versus the will of Jodie, and tapping into the will of the player through this relationship. In the sequence, Jodie receives a call from male character Ryan Clayton (played by Eric Winter), in which Jodie invites him to dinner. While most of the game's chapters give players the freedom to switch between Jodie and Aiden using the triangle button, "The Dinner" locks you into switching between the characters at the will of the game. After the phone call, Jodie angrily articulates that she's "starting to really fall" for Ryan, urging Aiden to "just let me have this." Speaking to herself, she informs the player of tasks to be completed before Ryan arrives: get dressed, clean up, and make dinner. As the player attempts to complete these objectives as Jodie, Aiden repeatedly hamstringing them. Aiden tosses couch cushions around the room as Jodie (and the player) clean, locks Jodie out of her apartment when she believes Ryan has arrived prematurely, threatens Jodie with a knife as she cooks, and leaves Jodie this particularly startling message on her mirror after she showers:



“You don’t need him/you have me.”

When Ryan finally does arrive at Jodie’s apartment, the game switches points of control from Jodie to Aiden. As Aiden, the player watches Ryan and Jodie make small talk, and has the ability to derail the date. The player can disturb and break objects around the house, ranging from knocking books over to smashing the expensive electronics present in the room. Conversely, the player can sit quietly and watch the scene play out as Aiden. If the player remains detached and dispassionate, Jodie and Ryan will ultimately consummate their relationship. The player also has the option to continue to cause chaos, in which case Ryan will leave out of fear, telling Jodie “Aiden is very possessive. I think you need to work it out with him.” Jodie will sit dejectedly, angrily yelling up at Aiden “Are you happy? He’s gone, and now you get me to yourself. I hope you’re deliriously fucking happy. Why don’t you just float around in your invisible world and watch me cry? I hate you. Do you hear me? I fucking hate you.”

The safety traditionally assumed in the piloting of video game avatars, in which a character becomes a surrogate for the whims of a player, is converted into a kind of performance medium in this sequence. The player is informed of the whims and desires of both Jodie and Aiden, and is asked to navigate the chapter in conjunction with emotions that may not necessarily be their own. Jodie’s desire for a regular date and a regular relationship reflects her desire for “normalcy” that runs throughout the

game, and her assertions at the beginning of the chapter to Aiden reflect a personality and a desire that is intensely local and individualized. Playing as Aiden, any resistance offered by the player against Jodie's desires is coded as possessive and controlling, sapping Jodie of her individuality. And yet, an attempt to control and guide Jodie's emotions recalls the animators of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, with their fantasies of total mastery and control over the body and emotions of Aki Ross. The middle ground between these two extremes is for the player to remain passive, to not interact with the game at all while controlling Aiden and to instead make manifest Jodie's desires by following the directions she mutters to herself in her preparation. The sequence ultimately makes players to think about their role in the game's representations of gender and sex and their relationship to Jodie by foregrounding Jodie's relationship to Aiden. The game systems that the player can exert their control over are there to challenge preconceptions of control as well as to force players to consider Jodie as sexually independent, prompting the player to consider relinquishing the control they have just been given.

Beyond: Two Souls's perspective on gender is frequently developed through mechanical interactivity. Rather than merely representing the trials of an individual's representation, *Beyond: Two Souls* discreetly bakes systems of gender oppression into the very process of play, allowing the player to realize a kind of defeatism to be suffered at the hands of a system of interactivity rather than as the result of an individual player. By placing these gendered concerns under the control of a player in *Beyond*, the game is asking players to actively experience Marilyn Frye's²² "double bind" situations, "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation." Frye outlines the reality that women frequently face in the options available to them, in which any available course of action will cause a woman to be branded and categorized per a preexisting system of belief and power that she is not in control of. Opportunity for agency is being filtered through a set of expectations and hierarchies of power that refuse to allow the chance for personal engagement, instead

²² Frye, p. 2-7

asking women to merely “choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation.” While *Beyond: Two Souls* is a good deal more complex in how it is assigning choice and values of control, the game still reminds its audience of the status of female agency, asking the player to actively consider their own participatory role in trying to shape and control Jodie as well as in the game’s ability to circumvent both her and our own choices.

The game’s ability to tap into and construct these systems of gendered control in its own game systems makes *Beyond: Two Souls* a frequently painful game to play. “Choice” as a concept is both gendered and technological, a process of the complicated translation of Ellen Page, the body, and Jodie Holmes, the subjectivity to the player’s role as Aiden. Any choices the player can make as to how to pilot this character are contingent on Ellen Page’s performance, and on her ability to be influenced by Aiden, the surrogate for the player’s desires. Jodie Holmes is a character all her own, expressing ideas and opinions that we may actively disagree with. She fights against outside control and influence, striving for a kind of independence despite the fact that she is a character in a video game, subject to the control of both her developers and her players. These two pressures on her force all her personal choices to be subjected to literal hierarchies of power: the images rendered for this body within the game, and the player’s ability to enact them.

While many of the game’s episodes are indicative of this situational double bind of choice, a sequence entitled “The Party” is particularly illuminating in the ways in which it incentivizes player action and choice, only to brutally punish the player by revealing the illusory nature of the choices it has just presented to the player. The sequence observes Jodie at a high school party, populated by characters both she and the player do not know. Throughout the sequence, the player-as-Jodie is given a variety of options. As Jodie, the player can choose to drink a beer, dance, talk to people, smoke pot. Eventually, a boy at the party starts talking to Jodie. Regardless of how poorly the player-as-Jodie fumbles through their conversation with him, he invites Jodie to dance. During the dance, he makes physical advances on her, which the player can either accept or reject. Regardless of how the player responds to this situation,

the sequence ends with the entire party turning on Jodie, branding her a “freak” and a “witch” for her connection to Aiden. The boy Jodie has been dancing with calls Jodie a slut or a prude based on how the player-as-Jodie has chosen to react to him, and Jodie ends up locked in a closet under the staircase regardless of the choices a player has made throughout this sequence.

Initially, “The Party” seems like it’s offering an open field of interactivity to the player. The wide variety of choices, and the seemingly different interactions that those choices produces, are incredibly compelling, and make it seem like the player can have an influence on Jodie’s life and personality as they play. But the game reveals this to have been a ruse. There is only one possible ending to this scene, one horrible rejection of Jodie by her peers that the player is powerless to prevent. Their actions and their choices were all double binds, scenarios designed to relegate Jodie to the outsider status that she possessed before she even walked through the door. The choices that are presented to the player function more as points of engagement for the player rather than opportunities to affect the outcome of events. They make the player legitimately feel as if things can go well for Jodie, as if they have the power and ability to endear her to those around her and affect her life in a meaningful way. But the game betrays the player, its outcome remains fixed and preprogrammed despite fostering a player’s belief in their ability to affect the outcome of specific events. The game makes a player’s control seem almost illusory, constantly reminded them of the many factors conditioning and putting tension on their play of the game.

The most meaningful, game-defining choice players are able to make in this sequence (a pattern we see repeated throughout the game) circles back to the player’s identity as Aiden. Controlling Aiden, the player unlocks the closet door for Jodie. At this point, the player-as-Jodie can either walk out the door or they can instead set fire to the house as Aiden, killing the other children in a potentially cathartic moment of vengeance. A player’s anger with the parties is ultimately more an anger with the game at not allowing their attempts at interaction to be meaningful, and the option to destroy the party is something of a surrogate rejection of the level itself. The choice asks the player how much they respect the tension between Quantic Dream’s desire to craft a narrative, Jodie’s desire for freedom, and their own desire for

control, gauging their anger with the system as much as the game gauges Jodie's anger at the situation. The sequence builds a bridge between multiple sites of control and places the player dead center between them, the player made to consider Jodie as much as the player is made to consider Ellen Page.

The game incites the concerns of the more classical gender scholarship of Frye and Flanagan as stated previously, but is ultimately able to significantly nuance and complicate them. Our ability to manipulate the performance captured body and to define the existence of Jodie as a character is regulated by the technical processes of performance capture, Ellen Page's performance, and the game designers themselves, making the act of playing *Beyond: Two Souls* more of a mediation on its own production. Rather than simply asking us to marvel in the construction of the gendered body a la Lara Croft, the game instead wants the audience to interrogate how Jodie's body has been constructed: considering Jodie's psychology, Ellen Page, Quantic Dream, the PlayStation 3, and our own psychology and ideology to functionally "play the game" at all. The sheer act of gameplay becomes a negotiation of these sites of tensions, an experience that forces the player to consider the role they have within the technological wonderment of Quantic Dream's work as a whole and in the construction of this gendered, performance captured body.

Existing Beyond: A "Meaningful" Choice

Beyond: Two Souls challenges many of the paradigms film and media studies have steadily developed to talk about digital media. Neither fully participatory nor absolute and totalizing in its control over images, *Beyond: Two Souls* ultimately feels like it's struggling to explore the complexity of its own production. It maintains the tensions of multiple sites of control at every level, pushing its audience to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about the interrelationship of its parts and instead asking them to

revel in their juxtaposition. This celebration of juxtapositional thinking is perhaps most apparent in the game's decision to allow for different possible endings to be chosen by the player. In its final moments, the game finally catches up to its cold open. The player returns to where the game "began," with Jodie at a crossroads between her past and her future. Returning to the end of the game's chronological timeline, the player is asked to make what is arguably one of the only choices that has a true significance on the game's narrative progression.



The choice revolves around a final moment of interactivity, in which Jodie stands at the boundary point between the "real" world, occupied by the rest of the performance captured characters which Jodie associates with: "living, feeling, being in love, and growing old;" and the infraworld, occupied by Aiden in which Jodie says she will "become the wind, the stars, the universe." To step "beyond" will ultimately mean Jodie will become an entity much like Aiden, bound to another soul and occupying the kind of role the player was occupying as Aiden for someone else (it is another woman in this case, whom Jodie first "met" while she was in her mother's womb). To remain in "life" will sever the bond between her and Aiden forever, freeing her from the nexus of split control. Rather than choosing one of these positions to

take, *Beyond: Two Souls* redirects that choice to the player. While both possibilities are designed by animators, rendered by the PlayStation 3, and performed by the game's cast of actors, the game refuses to definitively state either of these possibilities as "correct." They both exist; the tension remains and the possible different endings remain even if a player manages to resolve one of these sites of tension in the ending they choose. *Beyond: Two Souls* is making its own choice to stay complicated, to avoid easy resolution in favor of questioning the limits and abilities of its own production.

Beyond: Two Souls challenges our very conception of "control." By resisting medium specificity and locating itself within a liminal state between different forms of media and media production, and through extending this liminality to the performance captured body, *Beyond: Two Souls* calls for its audience to reconsider the ways in which authorial control exists within digital media. Exemplified through the relationship between Jodie and Aiden, the game's fixed narration, and its frequent interweaving of different sites of control, *Beyond: Two Souls* constantly calls the player's attention to the fact that their control over this video game is contingent upon forces outside of that control. The game grounds all of this more nebulous discourse on media interactivity through its focus on the gendered body, allowing players to reflect on how their actions uphold or reject preexisting gender paradigms surrounding the digital female body.

Chapter 2: “The One That Used to be the Actor” Ari Folman’s *The Congress* and the Expansion of the Star Image

Performances within digital media can provide us with a profound degree of insight into how body, behavior, and gender are transformed by technology. The example of Ellen Page in *Beyond: Two Souls*, and the conflicting set of potential sites of control surrounding her, is representative of a sea change in the relationship between performers and performance media occurring within the landscape of digital media. The role of performers is increasingly subject to both the controlling influence of production technology and the influence of a participatory audience, to the point that performers like Ellen Page sees her labor and her body transformed across a multiplicity of outside influences.

The very real problems posed by *Beyond: Two Souls* begin to help us understand how digital media approaches not only the body, but also the entire concept of the star. Performing as the character of Jodie in full performance capture at Quantic Dream’s virtual actor studio, the image of Ellen Page that appears in *Beyond* was written in a screenplay by David Cage, designed by Cage and a team of Quantic Dream’s art directors, painstakingly rendered out of these two sets of data by programmers, and interpreted as code by a Playstation 3 in order to create an image. The game challenges an audience’s distinction between Ellen Page and the character of Jodie, giving them the sense that they are controlling Page herself in order to make them consider their role in the reception of the digital body. The game uses the star image of Ellen Page to force audiences to think of Jodie as a media construction, as a character “played” by an actress who has undergone the performance capture process.

In this second chapter, I will be extending the industrial and social analyses presented in my observations on *Beyond: Two Souls* and Ellen Page to a consideration of the star and gender through a discussion of Ari Folman’s 2013 film *The Congress*. A loose adaptation of Stanislaw Lem’s novel *The*

Futurological Congress, The film follows Robin Wright, playing herself, and her entrance into the industrial economy of “scanned actors.” The first section of the film, presented in live action, finds an aging Wright pressured into scanning her body and her emotions for digital sampling and film production to the fictionalized Miramount Studios. After depicting the actual scanning process, the film jumps 20 years into the future. The majority of the remainder of the film is presented in digital animation from this point forward, as Miramount begins to explore media techniques that dominate and replace human perception with animation. An aged Robin Wright attends “the congress,” an event that intends to premiere the future of media “production” and consumption. The congress is set to take place in the “animated zone” of Abrahama, a studio controlled space that is experienced entirely in animation by its occupants via hallucinogenic drugs pumped through the atmosphere and drinking water. A now animated Robin Wright observes “live action” footage of films made with her scanned data, adrift in a sea of images of Robin Wright that are not her own. At the congress, it is revealed that Miramount is working to create a media landscape in which consumers will be able to ingest and become actors and media images, removing any conceivable barrier between media production and media consumption by transferring the fantasies of media to the lived experience of consumers. Miramount plans to essentially market the essence of Robin Wright to its customers. As this new substance-based technology is being debuted at the congress, terrorists promoting “realism” attack Abrahama. The struggle leaves Robin Wright with “severe hallucinogenic poisoning,” resulting in medical scientists cryogenically freezing her body to await a time in which medical technology will have advanced to the point that Robin Wright can be cured of her affliction. Another 20 years pass, after which Robin Wright awakes in the far future. Miramount’s chemical compound has seemingly consumed all of lived experience, and Wright wanders an animated, Hieronymus Bosch-inspired landscape populated by former consumers that have now been transformed through chemistry into iconic media and artistic figures. Searching for a trace of her son, Aaron, Robin Wright returns to “reality” (and the film returns to live action) in hopes of finding him there. Lived experience in this space is represented as a hellscape of unaware masses of dirty bodies, all deep under

the effects of hallucinogens. After learning that Aaron has already “crossed over” into the hallucinated reality of chemical media, Robin Wright returns as well. In an attempt to find her son, she uses Miramont’s chemicals to *become* her son, living out his life in flashes of experiential memories. The film ends with Robin Wright, now Aaron Wright, walking through a hallucinogen driven interpretation of a desert, a seeming recreation of the Wright family’s home environment in the Mojave at the beginning of the film. Robin-as-Aaron sees Aaron-as-Aaron dressed as one of the Wright Brothers, flying and landing the Wright flyer. As Robin-as-Aaron approaches her son, she stops, with the film ending on a close up of Aaron-as-Aaron’s half-smiling face.

The film spans an immense amount of time and space, growing less and less concerned with narration over its run time as its presentation becomes increasingly focused on the interplay between its modes of production, and the shifting role of an individual star amidst these modes. Like Folman’s previous film *Waltz with Bashir*, *The Congress* is intensely interested in the relationship between animation and live action filmmaking, challenging the distinction between the two through its aesthetic and technological approach to its hybridity. By using these two broad categories of production practice as a framework to hang its vision of the technological development of the cinema, *The Congress* is able to collapse the simple “real vs. unreal” paradigm of the animation/live action debate and transform it into a series of questions about how an audience perceives “reality” within digital media. The film’s mix of live-action and animated aesthetics destabilize any attempt by an audience to establish a consistent sense of indexical reality within the film, making an audience question the indexical claims of the film’s live-action segments through its animated ones. While Franciska Bruckner warns against “leveling the differences” between live action and animation in her article on the analytical parameters for live action/animation hybrids²³, it is necessary to discuss exactly how *The Congress* collapses its modal distinctions, and how that collapse can inform how we understand and how we talk about performance in

²³ Bruckner, “Hybrid Image, Hybrid Montage: Film Analytical Parameters for Live Action/Animation Hybrids,” p. 22

digital media.

This chapter will primarily be a close reading of this incredibly complex film, drawing on the theoretical disciplines of star studies and gender studies in order to both talk through the images and ideas the film is deploying as well as to explore the implications that the film represents to the status of performance and gender within both the present and the future of digital media production. Through giving the film the close reading it deserves, I hope to illuminate how the convergence of star, character, and audience presented in *The Congress* builds a theoretical model through which scholars can engage with performance capture technology. The film presents a transfer of the performer's labor from individual to animator to audience, creating a nexus of controlling influences that can provide scholars with a more nuanced and complex understanding of the role of human performers within the aesthetics of digital cinema.

Star Studies and Digital Media

While *The Congress* does not actually feature performance capture work on screen, it depicts the practices of performance capture and uses them to consider the role of the performer in digital media as a whole. *The Congress* focuses on a single star, Robin Wright, and the journey of both her star image and her own individualism through the technological progress of cinematic media. The star persona of Robin Wright is central to how the film wants to explore media's future, but the film also extensively explores Robin Wright as emblematic of the gendered, female star. The film uses the idea of the star persona and its evolution as a metaphor for the evolution of cinema itself, framing Robin Wright's journey from body to animation to substance as the trajectory of the cinematic image.

The film concerns itself with stars, at both an industrial and aesthetic level, in order to explore the future of cinema's image. This paper's concern with star studies reflects the concerns of *The Congress*, and can be divided into four major trajectories, focusing on the consequences of performance capture

technology to the concept of stars: the industrial status of the star within digital media, the role of animators in constructing the star, the changing relationship between star and character (performer and role) and the evolution of the role of audiences in constructing and defining the star. While these concerns have historical roots within star studies, I am arguing that digital media fundamentally shifts some of the disciplines established paradigms surrounding them. Rather than maintaining the binary distinction between star and character, *The Congress* shows how digital media seems to be collapsing it in its complex and shifting representations of Robin Wright.

The discipline of star studies has a history of concerns surrounding issue of control within media production as it relates to the image of the star themselves. There is general consensus on the fact that being a star requires some level of manufacturing, that a star is “created” rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon. As discussed by Edgar Morin, Richard Dyer, Thomas Harris, and a wide assortment of other scholars, we are urged to consider the star as a distinctly constructed image of a performer, one built not only by the performer themselves but also by a production company, publicity outlets, so-called “celebrity news” and paparazzi outfits, fans, and the general public at large to which the star is being displayed, the audience. These forces are read by scholars as working together to construct and maintain the image of the star, an idea that closely recalls the discussion of the interweaving forces of control in performance capture put forward in chapter 1. Multiple sites of influence not only manufacture the star image, but seek to control how that image is being represented and interpreted.

While we have long since surpassed the era of studio contracted and controlled stars, the mechanical aspect of the star system remains in large part intact. The line of discourse described by Richard Dyer as “‘pure manipulation...’ [in which] both stardom and particular stars are seen as owing their existence solely to the machinery of their production”²⁴ is arguably more true than ever in both the

²⁴ Dyer, *Stars*, p.13

era of corporate Hollywood²⁵ and the era of performance capture and digital animation. Dyer's industrial claims in *Heavenly Bodies*, that stars are images "made for profit," has grown in complexity. Describing stars both as "part of the labour that produces film as a commodity that can be sold for profit" as well as the product that labor is producing, Dyer notes that stars are "both labour and the thing that labour produces."²⁶ This bifurcated labor function of the star becomes more complicated, however, under the regime of digital film production and performance capture. Now the labor of the star becomes labor for animators, as a star's performance becomes only one element in the creation of a character in a digital film. While this is most obviously true in films featuring motion or performance capture, this kind of split in labor is true across digital filmmaking. Tanine Allison points to the fact that Peter Jackson's *King Kong* uses digital stunt doubles and digital extras, completely fabricated forms that are made to resemble a performer, but do not represent a performer's labor. She describes this merging of performative labor and animation labor as something that makes it "impossible to distinguish amongst virtual and live actors on screen."²⁷ The effect of this merging on stars like Naomi Watts and Adrien Brody is that their image within the film becomes literally manufactured by technology and digital animation, transferring the "mechanical" qualities of the star images from metaphorical to actualized.

Stars do, however, remain important in the marketing and promotion of digital films, even if their role in them is increasingly determined by animators and technology. Mihaela Mihailova examines this industrial divide in her piece "Collaboration without Representation: Labor Issues in Motion and Performance Capture." The article highlights the disparity between the promotion of a star's image in performance capture and the work of animators in creating that image; noting that both producers and directors seek to "legitimize" their digital productions, stars are deployed as markers of "quality" and authenticity. Mihailova attributes this tendency both to actors unions like the Screen Actors Guild, which

²⁵ This set of both structural change and production practices is described elegantly in J.D. Connor's *The Studios After the Studios*.

²⁶ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 5

²⁷ Allison, "More than a Man in a Monkey Suit," p. 328

seeks to “ensure the wages and benefits” of performers working in performance capture, and by filmmakers hoping to minimize the effect of the uncanny valley on audiences. Through “foregrounding acting instead of animation, directors aim to solidify their own status as traditional auteurs directing a performance in real time and ward off any speculation that digital technologies may be diminishing their role in filmmaking by decentralizing the production process more than ever.”²⁸ The result of this is that performance capture is treated as something that occurs “as if by magic,” a seamless transformation of star to character that occurs in much the same way as a technique like method acting is described. The industrial status of both performers and animators becomes destabilized, as the industry attempts to maintain the centrality of the star even as digital animation technology increasingly defines a star’s performance. The distinction between animation and performance frays in this environment, as audiences and industry officials equate computer programming and animation with a unified star performance and persona.

While this collapse in clear lines of distinction between animation and performance has a range of industrial consequences²⁹, of particular concern to this paper is the increasingly blurred distinction between actor and character that performance capture represents. Star studies also has a history of discussing the relationship between character and actor, but this discussion tends to revolve around the way in which actors approach characters on screen. A common line of discourse focuses on how stars transcend the characters they play, playing their own personality as star as opposed to playing the role itself. This sentiment is described by Edgar Morin In *The Stars*, when he notes that “The star is more than an actor incarnating characters, he incarnates *himself in them*, and they become incarnate in him.”³⁰ This idea is echoed by Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed*. In struggling to define whether in film we are

²⁸ Mihailova, “Collaboration without Representation: Labor Issues in Motion and Performance Capture,” p. 44

²⁹ Mihailova is particularly concerned with how animators are treated within the hierarchal system of labor associated with film production, and the consequences of studios minimizing the work and contributions of those animators.

³⁰ Morin, *The Stars*, p. 28

watching a character or whether we are watching an actor, Cavell draws comparison to the earlier performance medium of theater to define what is happening, “ontologically,” in the performance of a star. When he describes the primary difference between the stage actor who “works himself into a role” and the screen actor, who “takes the role into himself,”³¹ Cavell is ultimately making a distinction between character and star. Cavell explores Panofsky’s idea³² that a character on stage “definitely exists,” regardless of how well they’re performed or even if they’re performed at all because they have been created and defined outside of the qualities of an individual actor. On screen, Panofsky argues, this relationship is inverted. It is not Princess Buttercup as interpreted by Robin Wright, but the entity Robin Wright “incarnate in a figure” called Princess Buttercup. Cavell elaborates on this idea, arguing that an “exemplary screen performance is one in which, at a time, a star is born. After the *Maltese Falcon* we know a new star, only distantly a person. ‘Bogart’ means ‘the figure created in a given set of film.’”³³

The idea of a star absorbing and defining a character, which is convincing in the context of the classical Hollywood studio system, becomes immensely problematized by the introduction of performance capture. While the performer can still try to “take the role into themselves” in their performance capture work, whether “themselves” still remain after a character has been animated and rendered is questionable. The performance captured character certainly maintains traces of the performer movements, gestures, expressions, and (on occasion) voice of the performer; but even in photorealistic renderings like those in *Beyond: Two Souls* the character has become a hybrid body of technology and performance. Earlier generations of star studies were fascinated by how such a wide array of elements were able to all work together to construct a star as a unified whole, with each participating element (be it an individual film or a gossip column) were able to contribute to one collected image of the star. The relationship between performance capture technology and star, however, does not contribute to this same

³¹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 27

³² Cavell cites Panofsky’s “Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures”

³³ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 28

kind of imagistic unity. Animators take the performance of a star and transform it into a digital character that recalls a star, collapsing the distinction in a way that destabilizes the star's control over their own performance. I do not mean this in the sense that producers and directors have always destabilized a star's control, but instead am arguing that the character created through the performance capture process is not truly the star themselves, at a fundamental and ontological level. The image is a digital character all their own, a Frankenstein construction that bares traces of the performer without embodying them.³⁴

Performance capture technologies urge us to reject the fantasy of a singular or unified star image, the challenges the technology poses prevent an easy or reductive reading of the star as image.

Instead, stars increasingly take on a mythic function in relation to the performance captured characters they have helped to create. Edgar Morin discusses the idea of the mythic hero without a single attached star in film, citing characters like “Superman, Tarzan, and Zorro” whose “interpreters wear out and are replaced without affecting the role.”³⁵ Performance capture recalls but also inverts this model by framing the star themselves as mythic hero, regardless of *how* the star is represented. When we watch *The Polar Express*, for example, we consider each of the six characters “played” by Tom Hanks (the boy, the boy's father, the conductor, the hobo, Santa Claus, and the narrator) as reflections of the essential Tom Hanks, someone whose body is present in motion capture for all of these characters and whose voice we hear from all but the boy. This presence is, however, ultimately manufactured by animators and technology, to the point that none of these characters “are” Tom Hanks in actuality. In this way, the animators are not only constructing Tom Hanks's performance, but they are functionally *performing* as the star themselves on a mythic level. The animators serve as the interchangeable interpreters who maintain the role of Tom Hanks the star, using the data taken from his body and his voice to construct and animate his performance of characters. This fundamental shift in performance causes characters to be

³⁴ See in particular Jessica Aldred's “From Synthespian to Avatar: Re-framing the Digital Human in *Final Fantasy* and *The Polar Express*” for more on how this works.

³⁵ Morin, *The Stars*, p. 28-29

simultaneously incarnated by stars and interpreted by animators, to create a single performance. As an example, we can rewrite Cavell's model thusly: the entity Ellen Page incarnate in a figure called Jodie, interpreted by animators at Quantic Dream.

This leveling of performance, in which a role becomes the responsibility of star and animator, is reflected further by the evolving importance of modern audiences in the construction of stars. Modern star studies has increasingly shifted towards a model of discussing the steady diffusion of celebrity into everyday life, both in terms of the public's' increased access to the personal information and day to day activities of stars through social media and in terms of regular people's ability to become stars via increased traditional media interest in "ordinary people" (reality television, the co-opting of YouTube celebrities) but more centrally through an individual's own construction (the "viral video," the Twitter profile). In what film critic and writer Ty Burr calls "the large-scale broadcasting and fictionalization of the self,"³⁶ individuals increasingly have the capacity to construct their own star personas and distribute them to a massive audience, at no perceivable financial cost to that audience but with substantial financial gain-through-advertising available to these new digital era "stars." This current media moment is connected to what Elizabeth Burns describes in her book *Theatricality* as the "Life-as-theatre" argument, in which there is "a growing awareness of the way in which people compose their own characters, contribute to situations and design settings"³⁷ in the actions of their everyday life. What in 1972 was a primarily theoretically argument based on human proclivity towards presentation and roleplay has now become reified in many ways by digital celebrity, in which participants find ways to turn their everyday activities (playing video games, putting on makeup) into media events broadcast for an audience. In applying the "life-as-theatre" argument to stars, Dyer argues that the star "orchestrates the whole set of problems inherent in the commonplace metaphor of life-as-theatre" because "what is interesting about [stars] is not the character they have constructed but rather the business of constructing/performing/being

³⁶ Ty Burr, *Gods Like Us*, p. 330

³⁷ Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*

a ‘character.’”³⁸ Yet, as I have previously discussed, not only is the relationship between character and actor collapsing, but many more individuals are now going through this process in their everyday lives. Constructing a character is part of the core practice of social media, in which we sample pieces of our own life as well as individual pieces of other media (like photos and videos) in an attempt to create the unified, representational text of the individual.

One of the most convincing pieces of modern star studies is Elizabeth Ellcessor’s article “Tweeting @feliciday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom.” In it, Ellcessor argues that the digital star functions as a “star text of connection,” in which a star’s image must exist across a variety of different platforms that can directly incorporate both the production of the image and its consumption by a public (like twitter or youtube). She describes the star text as reactive rather than fully formed, able to grow and thrive off of a network of participatory social connections across sources. Not only does this model allow for communication between celebrity and audience, but it allows celebrity to form specific “subcultural” audiences that can be predicted and catered to in a profoundly individualized way. The example of Felicia Day is an example in which an audience worked to construct and bolster a star image, and the star responded and formed to this construction.

The result of both the intimacy between stars and audience and the audience's ability to become stars creates a space in which the distinction between star and audience is increasingly unstable. Closer than ever before, star and audience are bound together by the growth of digital technology. The collapse of this distinction is incredibly important in the context of *The Congress*, which considers the star as an interactive media text, as a “flavor” to be ingested and molded by audiences, rather than as a unified image.

³⁸ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p. 21

The Production of *The Congress*: Models of Distributed Authorship

At first glance, it is easy to talk about *The Congress* as a binary. The first half of the film is the “live action” portion and the second half is the “animated” portion. This popular reductionist approach to the film,³⁹ while convenient, belies the complex relationship between the film’s live action and animated elements as well as the multidimensionality of the film’s production. After shooting the sequences that constitute the film’s live action with the cast in California and in Berlin, Folman and his crew filmed the actors performing the film’s animated scenes, 6 months before animation had even begun.⁴⁰ Rather than just recording “the voice of the actors in a closed booth,” as is usually done in animated productions, Folman “put them in a studio soundstage, and had them act together in front of the camera as if he was shooting them as part of the live action film. If there were props used in the scene, the actors would use them, and they also physically interacted with each other. This means the actors were literally ‘in’ the scene, they felt it, and acted the same way they would have in any live action set.” Folman is quick to clarify that the film uses no motion capture or rotoscoping, but instead insists that the footage was used as a “video reference” that “gave [the animation teams] a very detailed example of the characters' actions in specific situations, the nuances and the small things that make them unique.”⁴¹ Yoni Goodman, Ari Folman’s animation director, used the reference footage to create a *very* detailed digital animatic⁴² of the film’s animated portion through Toon Boom Harmony, a software that allows easier transition from 2D digital drawing hardware like a Wacom tablet to digital animation. This animatic was then sent to seven

³⁹ Manohla Dargis’s review of the film in the New York Times is a good example of how the film is discussed as a binary.

⁴⁰ This information comes from an article written by the staff of Toon Boom, and is primarily composed of quotations from both Ari Folman and Yoni Goodman explaining how and why they used Toon Boom’s software for the film’s production.

⁴¹ From Toon Boom article

⁴² Studiocanal published some of the footage of the animatic (along with Foley work) online, and you can see the extensive nature of the animatic in action here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpQR7RuNRAI>

different studios for animation, involving a massive international coordination between these entities:

1. Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Israel. The main headquarters of the production, where the supervising and direction of the process took place.
2. Walking the Dog, Belgium
3. Studio 352, Luxembourg (Still worked on paper, scanned images into Toon Boom Harmony)
4. Alex Gellner, Germany
5. Rakete, Germany
6. Orange, Poland
7. Snipple, The Philippines

Digital animation software allowed these companies to work on the same files simultaneously, the immense pains of animation somewhat alleviated through this massive international division of physical and digital labor.

The role of live action filmmaking and digital software in creating the film's animation significantly affects not only how we receive the film's animation, but its live action as well. By using the physical bodies and performances as integral components of the digital animation process, the film in many ways is completing the transformation of Robin Wright from body to image implied by the film's narrative. Her traditional, "live-action" acting, without donning a performance capture rig, becomes digital data in animation. In fact, the idea of using live action footage as a referent for animation is arguably more similar to the way the movie depicts the technology of actor "scanning," in which an actor creates a database of expressions and actions to be sampled as a referent for animators to create new, unique characters. Her body is even more absent in this form of animation than it would be in performance capture work, making it impossible to tell what animations are references to her body and which are complete fabrications, recalling Tanine Allison's description of watching *King Kong*.

The film as a product of software is also significant. Allowing this collection of international studios to work together more easily, software like Toon Boom Harmony's primary purpose is to convert the physical labor of drawing and animation into programming and computational labor. Not only is the

film's digital animation destabilizing the indexicality of its performers, but it also serves to destabilize the historical and explicitly "hand drawn" qualities of its animation. The film is animated in the style of early Fleischer cartoons, recalling an era of traditional animation that has been supplanted by digital technology.



Storyboard of various characters from The Congress

These characters with their highly cartoonish qualities like exaggerated squash and stretch⁴³, huge eyes, and elongated lines and features, exist both as testaments to classical animation and as reminders that this style is now be interpreted and handled by digital technology. The film's digital production, while instituted for budgetary and convenience reasons, serve as markers that previous eras of filmmaking practice are undergoing a period of fundamental change that transforms an audience's relationship to them. This idea becomes one of the driving thematic concerns of *The Congress*, as the film observes the consequences of evolving film technology across production practices.

The distributed authorship of the film's digital images parallels the construction of Robin Wright within *The Congress*. The film explicitly establishes Robin Wright as a media construct assembled by a variety of authorial sources, and her transition from star entity to disembodied concept involves the

⁴³ This tutorial on squash and stretch provides a good example of how these animation principles play out in practice, and will immediately recall many of the animated characters we see in *The Congress*: Newton, Pilar. "Animation for Beginners: How to Animate Squash and Stretch." *Envatotutspus*, 9 May 2016. <https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/animation-for-beginners-how-to-animate-squash-and-stretch--cms-26330>. Accessed 6 April 2017.

distribution of “Robin Wright” to a near infinite number of possible sites of authorship. By splitting the creation of Robin Wright’s animated image across seven studios, the production of *The Congress* metaphorically reenacts the driving narrative and thematic concerns of *The Congress*. Thus, the movie’s production practices play an active role in how we receive and conceptualize the image of Robin Wright as it changes before us, considering both its place amidst animation vs live action and the constructivist qualities it has gained through its own distributed authorship.

Reality: “This Thing Called Robin Wright.”



The opening segment of the film, which follows a contemporary Robin Wright and her encounters with the technology of “scanned actors,” serves to establish an unstable sense of reality, employing an audience’s knowledge of Robin Wright as a star to challenge our own sense of the indexical qualities of film. The film accomplishes this formally, in its complicated use of the digital camera and the

myriad of ways in which it frames Robin Wright *as* star, but it also accomplishes it through the uncomfortable blending of Robin Wright the person, Robin Wright the star, and Robin Wright the character in the movie *The Congress*. This opening segment asks what it means to shoot in “live action” in an era where film production is increasingly handled by digital technology, exploring both digital cinema’s claims of truth as well as the breakdown of a unified and stable star image via its use of a simultaneously real-and-fictional Robin Wright.

The film’s opening shot is an extreme closeup of Robin Wright’s face. We see a single tear rolling out of her left eye, noticing immediately the marks of age on her face. Robin’s makeup is incredibly minimalistic in the shot (particularly for a closeup of a female Hollywood star in her 40’s), which creates a pervading aura of intimacy and privacy. This level of voyeuristic intimacy is extended by Al’s (Harvey Keitel), Robin’s agent’s, monologue over the image. As the shot steadily zooms out, we hear Al viciously describing Robin’s “lousy choices” over the past “24, 25” years of her acting career. The text, while fictional, speaks intensely and painfully to a reality not just of Robin Wright’s career, but of the status of female stars. Al describes Robin’s “whole story,” of “lousy movies, lousy men, friends you couldn’t trust. Even the one thing you couldn’t choose, your mother—you made a lousy choice there too.” The lines mix generality and specificity, allowing audiences to fill in the suggested gaps with information they may know about Robin Wright’s own life and career. Robin Wright’s marriage to and subsequent divorce from both Dane Witherspoon and Sean Penn are chapters in Wright’s real life that an audience will likely associate with the idea of “lousy men,” particularly considering the highly-publicized volatility of Wright and Penn’s relationship.⁴⁴ Because the text itself lacks this specificity, however, it ends up implying “truths” an audience may not be aware of. Knowing that Robin Wright is “playing herself,” we consider what friends may have betrayed the “actual” Robin Wright, or whether she does in

⁴⁴ There are so many various gossip and tabloid articles from the past 25 years that cover Penn and Wright’s relationship, but this one from CBS really covers the gamut of our access to Wright’s private life: Derschowitz, Jessica. “Big Changes for Robin Wright.” *CBS News*, 16 November 2009. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/big-changes-for-robin-wright/>

fact have a problematic mother. This power of suggestion is pushed even further when Al calls Robin “a movie queen at 24,” able to make “all the big studios come crawling” only to “slam all the doors, crush all the dreams.” After the real Robin Wright’s success in *The Princess Bride* at 21 and *State of Grace* at 24, the birth of her two children and her volatile relationship with Sean Penn (among many other possible personal factors that this writer is not privy to) her career slowed. After *Forrest Gump* in 1994, Wright struggled to secure major roles and starred in movies that failed to perform as box office “home runs.”⁴⁵ While it would be very difficult to collect the multitude of reasons why Wright’s career never really “took off” (The *Vanity Fair* interview from 2015 certainly tries its best to do just that, but avoids the specific details of production practices that would be crucial in accurately composing this history), an audience watching *The Congress* is well aware of the fact that Robin Wright did not truly become a major star in her career.

More informed audience members will even know that gender and representation play a key role in Wright’s career trajectory. Wright started a modeling career at the age of 14, an experience she describes as having significant effects on her own sense of identity. In a 2009 interview with her neighbor, Francis Ford Coppola, describing her modeling career, she stated that “I think that the whole idea of beauty distorts your ability to not only find yourself but to have a healthy sense of your identity,”⁴⁶ an idea that would come to define many of her acting choices. She recounts having a fear of acting at an early age after being exposed to *Deep Throat* at a friend’s house, which “instilled in [her] this great fear of, Oh, my god, is that what you have to do to be an actress? I mean, those were pretty intense examples of baring one’s soul. You’re like, ‘Whoa, if that’s what acting is...’” The sentiment expresses a

⁴⁵ How Jodie Foster describes Wright’s films in this *Vanity Fair* piece from 2015, which could refer to any number of films in Wright’s career:
Kashner, Sam. “Robin Wright on Her Role as Claire Underwood and Her Marriage to Sean Penn.” *Vanity Fair*. 24 March 2015. <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/03/robin-wright-april-2015-cover>

⁴⁶ From this interview with Francis Ford Coppola in *Interview Magazine*: Coppola, Francis Ford and Robin Wright. “Robin Wright Penn.” *Interview Magazine*, 28 April 2009.
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/robin-wright-penn/#>

true fear of the voyeuristic sexualization expected of female stars, a fear of that kind of intimate and personal access. She is aware of her own potential status as commodity of beauty (model) and commodity of flesh (pornography), concepts that haunt the career of so many female stars. As she aged and her personal life developed through two marriages, Wright witnessed and describes two distinct possibilities for herself as a star. After having her first child at 23, Wright found herself increasingly type casted as either an image of sexual promiscuity (*The Playboys*, *Forest Gump*) or as an image that she describes as “the tortured mother...the soulful wife whose husband has been fucking around on her. It’s just consistent. I always get the depressed woman, the internal, tortured, soulful-mother role. And a lot of times, you can’t really go very far with that. You just *become* the depressed wife.”⁴⁷ Wright is not only intimately aware of her own status as a woman in Hollywood, but also aware of how her personal life’s coverage in tabloids influences this typecasting. Married young, divorced young, and involved in another volatile marriage a few years later, the tendency to construct her star image as depressed wife seems to be a deliberate reflection of her real life by the Hollywood industry.

Thus, an audience’s general sense of Robin Wright’s star persona, as well as her status as a gendered star, are informing how we receive the character of Robin Wright within the film’s diegesis, an idea extensively driven home by the film’s opening scene. It places both Robin Wright the character *and* Robin Wright the star inside of its fiction, blurring the lines of distinction between the two. The result of this is that audience members are immediately challenged to construct their own indexicality of Robin Wright, negotiating between the real and fictional qualities of her image simultaneously.

By playing with the idea of constructed images as they relate to stars in its opening, the film uses its blurred lines between reality and fiction to explore the industrial practices of star construction within digital media. These industrial practices are depicted literally in a meeting between Robin, Al, and Jeff Green, the head of the fictionalized “Miramount” studio. The sequence opens with Robin and Al walking

⁴⁷ From the interview with Francis Ford Coppola interview in *Interview Magazine*.

down a corridor that has been rendered by CGI⁴⁸, made by digital animators taking a small set of lights, walls, and floors and duplicating them repeatedly. While the previous space we have seen in the film, Robin Wright's airplane hangar-cum-household, has been surrounded by traditional matte paintings depicting an airport⁴⁹, this is the first truly digital space we witness in the film. This space foregrounds the film's own production practices in its constructivism, and placing the real Robin Wright within this space marks her own progression towards this constructivist logic of digital filmmaking. This digital space foreshadows the animated reality Wright will eventually find herself in, the juxtaposition of her body with the space a marker that reality and digitality are already bleeding into each other. As she walks forward into digital space, Robin stops to observe a poster on the wall for the film *The Princess Bride*, which prominently features an image of Robin as Princess Buttercup at age 21:



⁴⁸ Folman, Ari. "Commentary with Director Ari Folman." *The Congress*, Blu-Ray. Drafthouse Films, 2013. Blu-Ray

⁴⁹ From Ari Folman's Blu-Ray commentary

After looking at this vibrant, youthful, and idealized image of the young Robin Wright, the film cuts to a close up of the real Robin Wright:



Playing off traditional expectations of women in Hollywood, these two images form the crux of the ideas that this first section of the film are trying to work through. The first image, of Wright-as-Princess Buttercup, establishes how an audience experiences her in film: as a character. Recalling Morin and Panofsky's ideas on film stars, this image incarnates the entity Robin Wright in the youthful, idealized figure Princess Buttercup. The fictional, narrative qualities of the image are imbued in the real qualities of the young Robin Wright as a star, to the point that we recognize the image of Robin Wright as transcending that fiction of Princess Buttercup. The interaction between the fiction of the image and the reality of Robin Wright is extended by the image's qualities. The fact that the image is a painting of Wright-as-Princess Buttercup, not a photograph, serves as a metaphor for a studio's ability to craft the image of a star, taking the real woman Robin Wright and transforming her into a fictional character that is

synonymous with the film she is marketing. Wright-as-Buttercup is literally “the Princess Bride” in this instance, meaning the poster is selling Robin Wright as both a fictional concept and a real object of desire. The painting also serves as a metaphor for the role animators and computer artists will play diegetically in the rendering of Robin Wright in the digital filmmaking practices we will see later in the film, comparing the traditional ability of a studio to construct a star’s image with the contemporary promise of extending that degree of authorship to performance itself. Even more broadly, the painting is also representative of the drawing, painting, and animating of Robin Wright involved in the animated production of *The Congress* itself. It reminds its viewers that any media image being presented of Robin Wright is crafted and manipulated, an artist’s interpretation of a real woman in much the same way the animated Robin Wright we see later in the film is an artist’s interpretation. Robin Wright’s presence in *The Congress* is also constructed, and should be received as such rather than being received as purely “real” or purely fictional.

The image also relies heavily on an audience’s affective response, tapping into their own sense of Robin Wright’s image as both a star and as a character to challenge our ability to distinguish between the two. When an audience sees this classical image of studio marketing, they are seeing their own memory of Robin Wright. The youthful and beautiful Wright is remembered by audiences because they have rooted that image in the fiction of *The Princess Bride*, to the point that they are seeing Princess Buttercup as Robin Wright. An audience incarnates Robin Wright in Buttercup, regardless of whether Wright is incarnating herself in Buttercup. This image is Robin Wright “as we remember her,” a phrase Jeff Green will later use to describe Miramount’s scanning technology, but the image is revealing that memory as a fictitious construction whose relationship to Robin Wright is partially created by audiences.

The second image, that of the “real” Robin Wright, clashes against the image of Wright-as-Buttercup to problematize the relationship between star and character, forcing audiences to experience Robin Wright as a person juxtaposed with the very image they’ve helped to construct. The difference in physical appearance between the painting of Buttercup and the photographic image of Wright recalls

longstanding concerns about the status of aging women in Hollywood, and depicting an ageing Wright starring directly at her own mediated and youthful image marks Wright's own painful awareness of this fact. Rather than reveling in her youth and beauty, as Norma Desmond does when watching her own silent movies in *Sunset Boulevard*, there is no sense of vanity in Wright's actions. Age is a marker that women's' careers are ending in the cinema, as few Hollywood films create a space that allows for an experience of womanhood that ranges past the age of say, 45, a number Robin Wright gives in protest as an age she has not yet reached when Green offers her "the last contract she'll ever have." Explicitly, Wright's future career is inseparable from her age, doomed first and foremost by industrial expectations of gendered representation above and beyond the technology of scanning. Jeff Green's later promise to make Robin Wright "34-35, forever young" in Miramount's scanned representation of her is confirming and maintaining these expectations just as much as it is "immortalizing" an image of Robin Wright. An audience sees Robin Wright as someone who was at one point incarnate in Princess Buttercup, but no longer is: Buttercup represents a mediated image of Wright that has transcended the "real" Robin Wright in the collective memory of the film's audience.

By showing one image of Robin Wright, the "real" Robin Wright, looking at an image of her own star persona, the film is posing a question to the audience: which image is *more* real? Which image is a more accurate representation of the entity Robin Wright? While, as Dyer tells us, "how we appear is no less real than how we have manufactured that appearance,"⁵⁰ the two sets of images clearly challenge how we are meant to perceive the star persona of Robin Wright by comparing it to the person Robin Wright. The juxtaposition seen here is the first example of a running motif throughout the film, a scene in which an image of Robin Wright looks at another, different image of Robin Wright. Throughout the film, Wright is confronted by images of herself that have been manipulated by different sites of control. These images serve both to show the progression of Robin Wright's image through cinematic technology as well

⁵⁰ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 2

as to show the increasing distance between Robin Wright's star persona and Robin Wright the entity. This first juxtaposition is the least alien, Wright's expression is one of rueful recognition. Both the audience and Robin can recognize the irony of past versus present, media presentation versus lived experience.

After observing the poster, Robin Wright arrives in the office of Jeff Green. Here, Green poses his "final offer" to Robin Wright, requesting "her body, her face, her emotions, her laughter, her tears, her climaxing, her happiness, her depression, her fears, her longings" for digital scanning. While the process for this scanning shown in the film seems to be more similar to contemporary 3D scanning techniques currently being used in digital media production, the results this process are able to produce seem to fuse together scanning, motion, and performance capture. While the film does not delve into the technological specificity of this scanning process, the results it is able to produce align it closely with the results produced via performance capture for the production of *Beyond: Two Souls*. Rather than trying to distinguish the film's semi-fictional process, I am interested in examining it as a metaphorical stand in for performance capture, as the film seems interested primarily in the digitization of performers in all its forms rather than in the technology being used to achieve digitization. For convenience, I will be using the term "digital performance technology" to refer to the variety of processes that The Congress is both depicting and referring to.

The metaphorical qualities of the film's scanning process are exemplified by Wright's first meeting with Green. This entire sequence uses the growing divide between character and star as a framework for the industrial digitalization and control of star images, framing digital performance technology as a method of preserving and maintaining an ideal formation of the star themselves. Green recounts first seeing Robin Wright in the 80's, telling her "you were so beautiful. you were Princess Bride, Buttercup." Green is exhibiting the same set of feelings the audience has just felt seeing the poster, maintaining Robin Wright's youth and beauty via a single character. Green tells Wright, in a monologue he will repeat structurally later in the film, that "pretty soon, this whole structure we all love so much will be gone...the structure around the actor" listing things like "the agents, the managers, the trailers, the

drugs, the depression, the lovers, the sexual kinks, the broken contracts, the post-failure blues, the skipping out on PR, the begging for forgiveness” as elements of the star that will disappear under the regime of scanned actors. Instead, the scanned actor will be free of these kinds of “lousy choices,” a sentiment Green repeats to describe Robin Wright’s failures. Green is describing aspects of the star persona at a personal level (“the drugs, the depressions, the lovers”) and at an industrial level (“the agents, the managers, the broken contracts, the skipping out on PR”) that occur outside of centralized studio control. The promise of scanned actors for Green is that they can maintain a lucrative star persona on a studio’s terms, that a scanned actor represents the kind of “pure manipulation” idealized by a studio production. Green tells Wright that he’ll “do all the things your Robin Wright wouldn’t do,” making it clear that her existence as a scanned actor will revoke what Wright will later call the “gift of choice.” The technology of performance is being presented here at its most controlling and studio inspired, a fetishized dominance over the unruly performer. The sexual nature of this dominance abounds in the sequence, from the pornographic implications of “all the things your Robin Wright wouldn’t do” to Wright telling Green that she would “rather sleep with him” than “be a chip in his fucking computer.” These are the first of many reminders in the film that digital performance technology is *inherently* gendered in its usage, that women’s experience with the technology is defined by the uncomfortable access to their body it grants to male animators and the sexualized constructivism of how their bodies are represented through that technology.

In establishing this dominance, Green must separate Robin Wright the entity from her characters, making a clear distinction between her star persona and her being. Green wants to “own this thing called Robin Wright,” but he doesn’t need Robin Wright the entity, the body. Green tells Wright that he “needs Buttercup from Princess Bride, Jenny from Forrest Gump, what was her name from State of Grace, I don’t need you. I need you only for your history.” It is her image that has value, that characters she has incarnated herself in, not the entity Robin Wright that will survive. Even as new performances are being created digitally, they will no longer be associated with Robin Wright the entity, but instead with Robin

Wright's characters. The industrial maneuver that is being presented is one in which the performative labor of a star will be undertaken solely by animators, and the star's image will function mythically as it is constructed by the interchangeable interpreters of the studio system. Green's desire to remove Robin Wright the entity from Robin Wright the star is sealed by his provision that Robin Wright must agree "never to act again, anywhere, for all eternity." Green proposes that "Robin Wright the actress will live and breathe within the walls of Miramount Studios" and that the "real" Robin Wright can take the money and fly off to some island in Polynesia and discover her true self," eliminating Robin Wright's function as a performer entirely. By selling this elimination to her as a "discovery of her true self," Green is urging Wright to remove herself from her own image as a star and find a new image disconnected from performance, disconnected from the manipulation and labor of a star image. Digital performance technology will maintain an idealized star image, one that is based on data from performance that has already happened rather than one that relies on a performer themselves.

As Robin Wright considers the prospect of entering "the economy of scanned actors," she meets with her agent Al and Steve, a "scanning contracts genius" whose job it is to draft a scanning contract for Robin Wright. Steve warns that "once they sample you, and you're in their computer, there's no way back. So whatever was agreed before the sampling, that's the way it is. So you have to be really careful. The studio owns the character. The one that used to be the actor." At this point, "the studio can do whatever they want, unless the lawyer puts a clause in" regarding a star's image and performances. The divide between star and character is again made literal, the separation between media being (or "computer creature," as Robin Wright's daughter refers to them as) implying a separation between Robin Wright and her own control over Robin Wright the image. As Wright protests to the prospect of losing "the gift of choice" in her performances, Al reminds her of the industrial context Wright's performances exist within:

"You were always their puppet. All of them, the producers, the directors, they told you what to do. They told you how to behave, how to act, how to smile, how to love. And they gave you the subtext for every fucking crappy line they churned out. And

when you hit 35, they told you how to look young. Because if you didn't do what they wanted you to do, shave off a couple of years from that beautiful face of yours, you would...cease to exist, for Christ's sake! So, what's the difference? The fucking choice? All the women who were face-lifted to death, and can't smile, or show pain, or emotion, that's a choice? That's just staying on as their tools, don't you get it? We've been saved, by some miracle, through these fucking computer samples!"

Articulating a sentiment that will reverberate through the film's progression towards the future, Al invokes the arguments of classical star studies to remind Wright of the idea of stars as "pure manipulation." The argument implies that the technology is not transforming free actors into studio puppets, but is in fact reversing that relationship. Al even calls the scanning technology Wright's "gate to freedom," comparing performance media to something like a prison. The monologue also invokes, again, concerns over Robin Wright's status as a gendered star. A woman who has publicly resisted industry pressures for cosmetic surgery,⁵¹ the threat of industry pressured control over her body exists in both the technology of scanned actors and traditional live-action filmmaking practices.

To demonstrate the extent of digital scanning technology, Al shows Robin Wright and her family footage of a soap opera created with scanned actors. The way in which the film itself transitions to this clip is incredibly jarring (a pattern that will be repeated in Wright's hallucinations in the second half of the film), a hard cut without an announcement that what we as an audience are seeing is "not real." The unreality and the context of the footage are only revealed after the clip is suddenly paused as we watch it, when the film cuts to Wright and her family gathered around her television:

⁵¹ This is discussed in this article from People Magazine: Dowd, Kathy Ehrich. "Robin Wright: I Didn't Want to Get a Face-Lift to Play Claire Underwood." *People Magazine*, 23 September 2016.. <http://people.com/celebrity/robin-wright-on-plastic-surgery-pressure/>



The clip itself, shot on digital with live actors, is essentially indistinguishable from the aesthetics of the live-action portion of *The Congress*, but not quite indistinguishable from “reality.” The left eye of the woman in the footage (played by actress Sarah Shahi) is haunted by a “bug,” a glitch in which it will be blink uncontrollably for a few seconds unpredictably. A reference to the problems with adequately animating eyes in digital animation,⁵² the glitch sees the body of Sarah Shahi bearing a kind of digital scar from her transfer to scanned acting. The introduction of this footage, as well as its explicitly digital qualities, challenge how an audience receives the entire live-action portion of *The Congress*. By establishing that this technology diegetically exists, that actors that appear to be put before an audience through traditional live-action filmmaking practices are actually *animated*, it forces an audience to consider the fact that the presumably live-action filmmaking practices they’ve been watching thus far may be animated as well. This is driven home by the incredibly wooden, stilted acting of both the performers in the scanned soap opera and the live-action cast of *The Congress* itself. It is difficult to receive these

⁵² From Ari Folman’s Blu-Ray commentary, but also comes from the prevailing feeling of uncanniness when an audience is presented with the eyes of human-like digital characters.

performers as aspiring to any kind of cinematic realism. Whether through the cartoonish extravagance of performers like Danny Huston or Sarah Shahi or the volatile emotional extremes of Robin Wright or Harvey Keitel, an audience is made intimately aware that these actors are playing a character in a movie. The images we see and the performers inside of them reveal their own faulty constructivism, the pangs of digital cinema expressing themselves as performances that are downright alienating. In exposing live action filmmaking practices as animation practices, *The Congress* is invoking its own production design, its own breakdown between live action vs animation, fiction vs reality.

Even more destabilizing to this first section's sense of "reality" is the fact that Robin Wright has undergone performance capture before. For the production of *Beowulf*, Wright underwent full performance capture as part of the creation of the character of Queen Wealhthow, who she also voices:

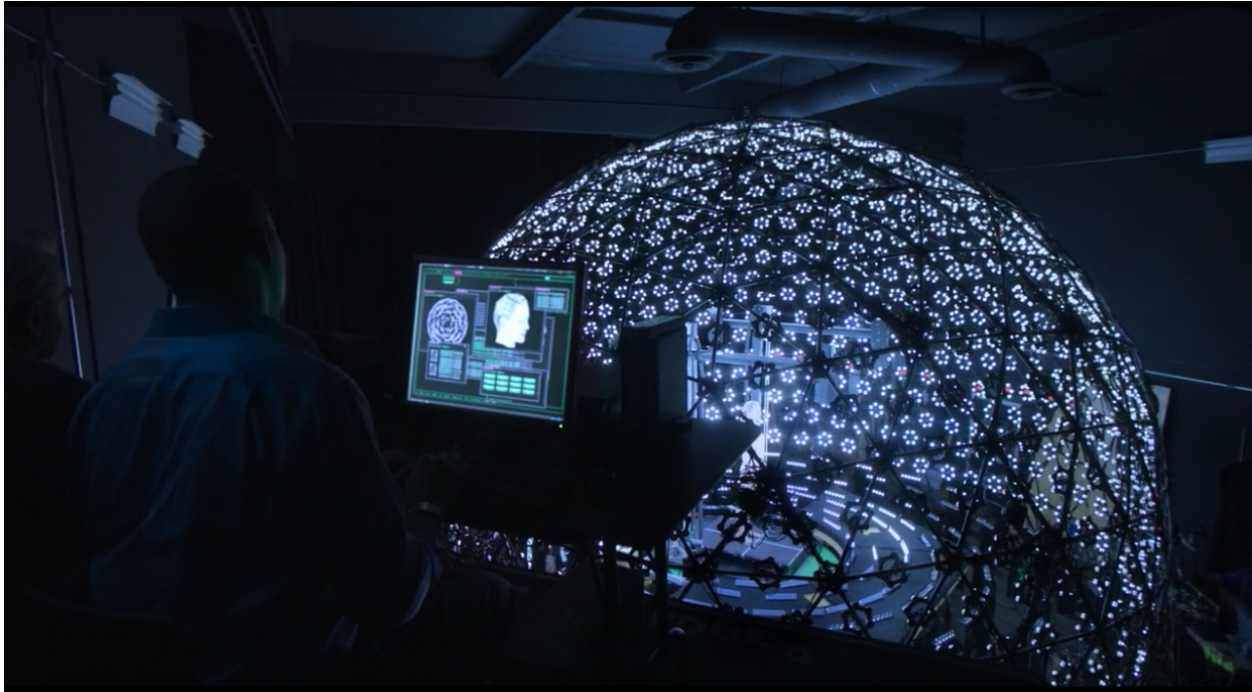


From special feature content on the Beowulf Blu-Ray

In this way, Wright is *already* a scanned actor, before the movie even begins. The knowledge that this technology is not only very real, but has already transposed Robin Wright's image into digitality, further incites an audience to consider the constructed nature of Robin Wright's cinematic image, blurring the

boundary between fiction and reality even further.

After this interaction with AI and Steve, Wright makes the decision to undergo the scanning process. The sequence that depicts this process was filmed at the USC ICT Light Stages,⁵³ a technological space actively in use to create the look of light on a human face and body to create more “realistic” digital characters through both 3D scanning:



The assemblage itself is quite frightening, with its cage design and interrogation-style lighting. These qualities are pushed even further by the artificial shutter sounds and camera flashbulbs created to mark the device’s literal capturing of Robin Wright’s image, combining the sound of a camera shutter with the noises of heavy industry. During the production of *The Congress*, the actual Robin Wright had immense difficulty finishing the scene. Filming in the Light Stage, Robin Wright described “feeling dead” while performing, like the machine was “sucking the soul” out of her just to be inside of.⁵⁴ This set of sensations translates literally into the film as it depicts the “death” of Robin Wright the performer, the actual

⁵³ For information and details on the Light Stages, see their website: <http://gl.ict.usc.edu/lightstages/>

⁵⁴ From Ari Folman’s Blu-Ray commentary

separation between actor and character. Wright is directed by her scanning technician (a former cinematographer) to perform expressions and emotional responses, which he will record as she does them. The sequence breaks down Wright's labor as a performer into its bare essentials, divesting it from an association with a character and associating these emotions with Robin Wright alone. We are witnessing the conversion of her labor from body to technology, as the scanning technician collects and compiles the data of her performance to be used by animators later in the film.

“The Animated Zone:” Animators as Performers

The middle of the film, in which Robin Wright passes into animation and attends Miramound's Futurist Congress, is dominated by images of the “real” Robin Wright looking at images of Robin Wright constructed by Miramound's animators. This section foregrounds a fundamental transformation of performance media, in which animators and technicians function as performers without the presence of the performer themselves. The star has been converted entirely into an image, their body and their emotions echoed in that image but no longer “present” in their creation and variation. The film explores these ideas by taking on the idea of the star's mythic function within digital performance technology discussed earlier, in which animators take on the role of interchangeable interpreters of “Robin Wright” the concept, creating and interpreting her incarnations. The film plays these ideas off Wright's gendered status throughout this section, exploring the components of aging and sexuality that are tied into the practices of scanned actors we have already been shown in the film's first half.

This is also the point at which the movie begins its hard trend towards surrealism, a mode of presentation that will dominate the film for its duration. The film's surrealist qualities are diegetically fueled by Miramound's chemical compounds, but also serve as a very broad metaphor for how digital media is experienced. While Wright experiences a series of hallucinations inside of the animated zone,

she enters into this zone via a hallucinogenic drug manufactured by Miramound. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what is “real” and what is not, to the point that even trying to determine the objective reality of images and sequences becomes impossible by the film’s ending. Much of this influence comes from the film’s source material, Stanislaw Lem’s *The Futurological Congress*, in which the character Ijon Tichy’s reality becomes intertwined and indistinguishable from hallucination. The film, like the book, never commits to one hard and fast interpretation of reality, and instead argues that reality is purely perceptual and lacking in all objectivity and indexicality. Because of the sheer instability of reality presented by *The Congress*, it is possible to read the entire second half of the film as pure hallucination. While this is an oversimplification of the events we see depicted, the film plays to such a degree with the relationship between reality and fiction that it is very difficult to consider the film as being “representational,” or conforming the qualities of traditional cinematic realism. The surrealist qualities of the film’s second half become a way in which the film can work through its concerns surrounding the body of the star and the consequences of digital media aesthetically, filtering its aesthetic extremes through the individual perceptual journey of Robin Wright.

After the scanning sequence, the film cuts to an intertitle reading “20 years later.” It then cuts to an image of a highway in the Mojave Desert, a haze of heat exuding from it, and a 64-year-old Robin Wright driving through it. Because of the intense heat while filming, Robin Wright’s aging makeup could not stay on her face through the sequence. The solution chosen by Folman was to render her face in CGI, creating an aged version of Wright’s face and placing it on top of her real face in post-production.⁵⁵ This production decision foregrounds the increasingly digitally constructed nature of Wright herself, destabilizing the presentation of her indexical body more than any image we’ve previously seen of her. While Wright will soon leave this body behind as she enters the “animated zone” of Abrahama, her computer-generated face implies that she has *already* lost her body to digitality.

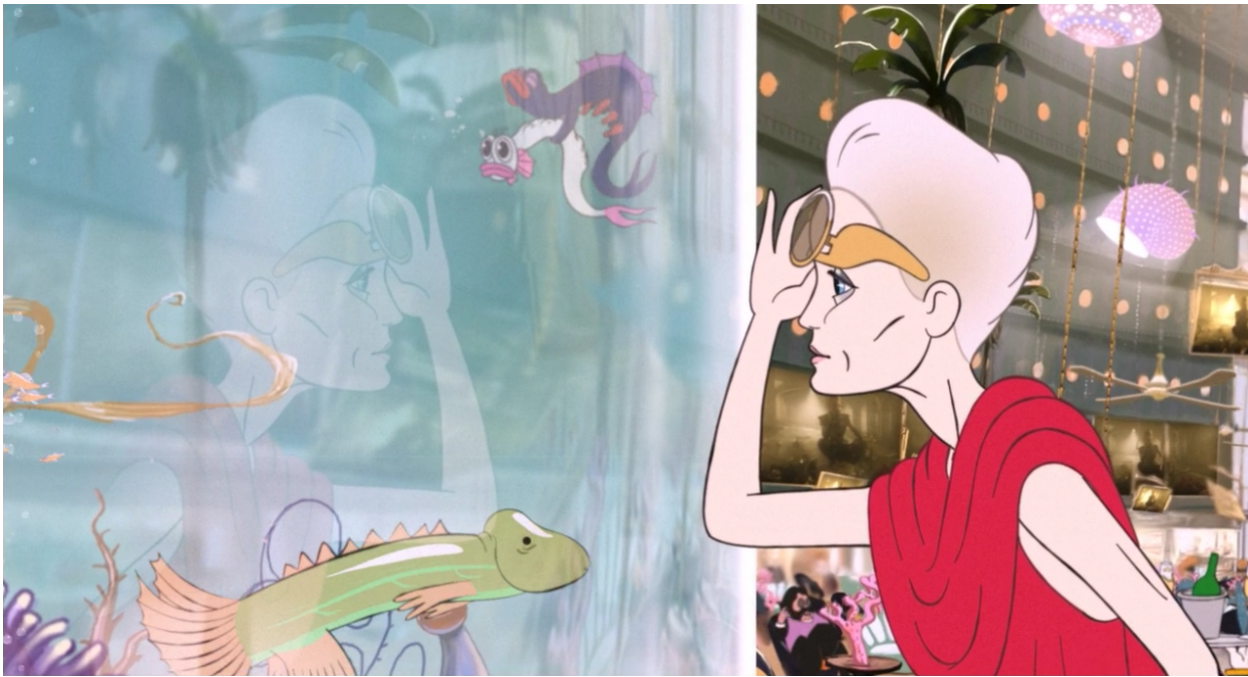
⁵⁵ From Ari Folman’s Blu-Ray commentary.

As Wright enters animation, the movie has a very high density of images of the “real” Robin Wright looking at other constructed images of Robin Wright. The initial transition is the most hybridized image in the film, the only one in which its animation style and its live action style are visible simultaneously:



It is implied throughout this section that Abrahama is a space controlled by Miramont Studios, to the point that its entire visual style is contained within the chemical compound Wright and others must insufflate before entering. Thus, this animated version of Wright is explicitly a studio construct, an image assembled for her that she is entering rather than one she has created herself. Initially, she does not notice her rearview mirror, and exhibits a physical startle response as she views the extreme visual style of her animated image. It’s an image of herself that she finds alienating, describing her visual qualities to her son as looking like “a genius designer on a bad acid trip” or “a combination between Cinderella on heroin and an Egyptian queen on a bad hair day.” She comes to this realization while staring at her own reflection in an aquarium filled with sea creatures that either resemble sex organs or are performing sex

acts:



Wright stares in shock at her own image, seemingly surprised that what she is seeing has any kind of association with “her.” Importantly, the animated version of the “real” Robin Wright does not closely resemble how she appears as a scanned actor or how she appeared in the live action section, marking the animated Wright as a completely new and unique envisioning of Wright. While her animated body preserves some of its original physical features, Robin Wright is still shocked by and alienating from her new representation. The comparison to both a “genius designer,” the exact group of people who are now maintaining and proliferating her star image, and “Cinderella,” a classically animated Disney princess, associate this image of the “real” Robin Wright to media produced images. The explicit association between the sexuality contained in the aquarium and the animated image of Wright reminds an audience that Wright’s existence within Miramount’s animation is inherently gendered, that the control and manipulation of Wright’s image is a sexual manipulation as well as an industrial one.

From this point forward, “real” Robin Wright has disappeared. While I will continue to use that terminology to refer to Robin Wright, the main character of *The Congress*, the scare quotes around “real” become even more important. This animated Robin Wright is, diegetically, an image that has been assembled by Miramount’s animators, thus is as constructed as other images of Wright we see throughout the rest of the film. And non diegetically, Robin Wright’s bodily performances have been used as a referent, effectively traced over, in creating this animated version of her own performance for *The Congress*. The real body of Robin Wright is only being echoed, referenced rather than represented in both the “real” Robin Wright the character and the other Miramount-created images of Wright.

Throughout this middle section, Wright sees a trailer for a popular film series in which she is the star, *RRR: Rebel Robot Robin: Street Fighter*. A “science fiction” film produced by Miramount, the production uses scanned images of Robin Wright to create the character “Rebel Robot Robin,” a humanoid robot who battles other robots in a dystopic future. The “real” Robin Wright is confronted by the trailer several times, most prominently as she first enters Abrahama. Projected on a zeppelin, the trailer showcases Rebel Robot Robin “in the age of spiritual machines,” battling against robots with a lasso of electricity:



A running joke throughout the film is the fact that both the diegetic and the non diegetic Robin Wright have refused to participate in the production of science fiction films in their career. *The Congress* plays with science fiction genre conventions through its liminal status between reality and fiction, addressing the fact that its proposed technologies are already in existence and already affecting Robin Wright. Wright's diegetic refusal to accept science fiction roles is a fact that Jeff Green is very unhappy about in her contract negotiations. He requires her to do science fiction films in exchange for making her "34, 35, forever young." The image we see of Wright in the trailer is created in the same way her aged face was in the Mojave desert, using CGI in post-production to make both her face *and* her body appear younger.⁵⁶ This combination of elements gives the image of Rebel Robot Robin an incredibly complex image quality, as it is simultaneously a mechanical construct in a sci-fi setting within the fiction of *RRR*, a mechanical construct in a sci-fi setting within the fiction of *The Congress*, and a mechanical construction in a sci-fi setting in the *real* production of the film *The Congress*. This mixing of a variety of explicitly constructed Robin Wright's indicates that her image is now within a model of distributed authorship, one in which a variety of sites of influence are constructing and maintaining versions of Robin Wright across technologies and platforms.

The "real" Robin Wright's first experiences in Abrahama are inundated with the image of Rebel Robot Robin, and her observation of that image reveals a profound awareness of the complex assemblage on display. Wright's initial experience of the *RRR* trailer on the Zeppelin enacts the previously expressed divide between star and character, as the "real" Robin Wright witnesses an image that she both recognize aspects of herself within that remains alienating. By staging a young-but-fictionalized image of Wright in what looks like "live-action" against an old-but-"real" Wright in what looks like animation, the film pushes audiences to question the generation of Rebel Robot Robin's performance. While Rebel Robot Robin "looks like" an audience's residual image of Robin Wright the performer, we know the

⁵⁶ From Ari Folman's Blu-Ray commentary

performance is not the performance of the “real” Robin Wright, who appears dissimilar from that residual image of Robin Wright in animation and in her age. The knowledge that Rebel Robot Robin bears the physical markers of Robin Wright’s *star persona* but not of her “real” *physiology* indicates that animators are interpreting and performing an image of Wright’s body rather than Wright’s body itself.

The extension of the performative function of animators within this technology goes beyond Wright’s representation on screen, spilling out into the performance of star persona itself. In the “real” Robin Wright’s hotel room, she witnesses another zeppelin passing by her window that is projecting an interview of “Robin Wright” about the *RRR* series:



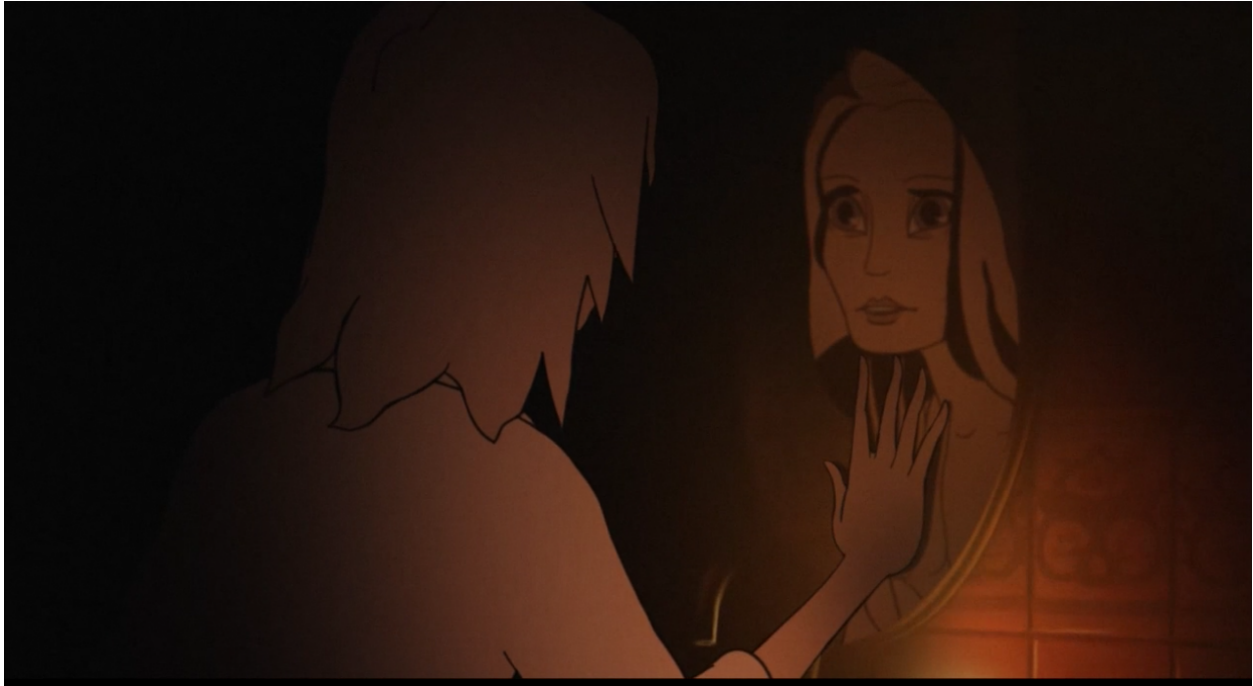
This conference features no real reporters, no real cameras, and no “real” Robin Wright, yet it maintains the appearance of these elements in its imagined media event. Bulbs flash, scanned Robin tears up, and Robin answers questions asked by a reporter somewhere “offscreen.” When asked if “the new film, *Street Fighters*, reflects our lives in any way?” by the invisible reporter, the animator-created image of Wright

responds:

“Yeah, I do, I mean, you know, I find something new in this character, Agent Robin every time I do it. Like, now, in the *Street Fighters* production, you know, the, the robots that come from the gutters are so much a part of our lives, they’re close to us. Because people buy household robots and they basically just suck the blood out of them and they just use them up... You know people call *RRR* sci-fi, but I say it’s documentary.”

The monologue plays with the format of the star interview, replicating their frequently off the cuff qualities with Wright’s “likes” and filler words to create a more “naturalistic” speaking cadence that brings this entire digitally created media event a bizarre ring of truthfulness. The animators of the event are effectively “performing” Robin Wright as a star, making her image seem less manufactured and more “natural,” yet juxtaposing this image with the “real” Robin Wright makes an audience receive the footage as even more manufactured than the *RRR* trailer. By extending their responsibilities beyond making simply cinematic representations of a star into creating a total star image split between multiple texts, the animators are effectively creating the entire star persona themselves. A hallmark of classical star studies’ conception of the star text is that it is inherently multimodal, that the star themselves is only one part of a star persona assembled out of multiple sites of influence. This interview presents the idea that many of those sites of influence have been transferred to animators, who are tasked with functionally performing as the star across these sites. The irony of the dialogue itself, the discussion of “human rights” for robots and the comparison between science fiction and documentary filmmaking, serve to further augment the “real” Robin Wright’s distance from the performance by insinuating that science fiction *is* reality, that the experience of the “real” Robin Wright having the life “sucked out of her” in the scanning process is now analogous to the experiences of the “robotic” (or at least technologically assembled Robin Wright) Wright in the future the film is presenting.

Seeing this younger, computer generated image of herself sends the “real” Robin Wright into a hallucination. In one of the few scenes of the film that is a direct adaptation of a scene from Lem’s novel, the “real” Robin Wright observes, under flickering candlelight, her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Instead of seeing her own face, she sees a much younger animated version herself:



As Wright observes this image of her younger self, she realizes that she is ageing rapidly before her eyes. She holds her hand up to the mirror and watches it wrinkle at a greatly accelerated pace, and the audience sees the “real” face of Robin Wright shrivel and age as the mirror continues to display her young reflection. Realizing she is under a hallucination, the “real” Robin Wright smashes her head against the glass, shattering the mirror.

The sequence, one of the most powerful in the film, exhibits the profound psychological effect that has occurred to the “real” Robin Wright from watching her own gendered body de-aged and digitized, pulled out of her control. Even as her image remains animated “forever young,” something both the press conference and the mirror literalize, the “real” Robin Wright continues her

journey through ageing towards death. By sacrificing her performative function to animators, Robin Wright is experiencing a distantiation from Wright the image which is resulting in Wright's distantiation from herself. She hallucinates the very image of herself that Miramount's animators are idealizing, while her own body ages and deteriorates before it, a kind of psychological reenactment of how it feels for Wright to witness the *RRR* trailer or the press conference. The sequence represents the sensation of animators discarding Wright's body in performance media, replacing it with an ideal feminine image, with the mythic figure of "this thing called Robin Wright." The "real" Robin Wright is witnessing a rejection of her age and a denial of her existence as an aging woman, to the point that she envisions her age as something nightmarish and consuming. Age also serves as another reminder that Wright lacks control over her body as well as its representation, contributing to her sense that she is increasingly losing control over the concept of "Robin Wright."

The movie extends the idea of the animators having a performative function into the character of Dylan (Jon Hamm), a Miramount animator who has been the "head of the Robin Wright department" for the past 20 years, serving as the lead animator for films featuring the scanned image of Robin Wright. When speaking to Wright about his responsibilities, he tells her has overseen "your body, your face, your smile, your sadness, that was my whole life." He is describing a literal transference of emotion and personality from Wright to himself, to the point that his "whole life" has been supplanted by his performance as Robin Wright. He describes "researching" the life of Robin Wright for his work on the *RRR* films, in much the same way a star might describe researching a role. With "no clue who she was," having "never seen her in anything," Dylan builds a model of her history, "where she came from, where she went" and builds a character out of this assembled history. He identifies her as an "all-American girl, from Texas, tight jeans and boots" from which he constructs the idea of the *RRR* character wielding a lasso. His model of Wright likely comes off to an audience as faulty, as the Robin Wright we see in the film

bears no traces of cowgirl roots. This separates “real” Robin Wright from what her star image as become, putting forward the idea that Robin Wright the concept is being performed by Dylan in the same way Wright may have played a real person in her career, such as her portrayal of the real Sharon Beane in *Moneyball*. That Dylan has done his research poorly, and created a star persona for Robin Wright that doesn’t fit her previously established career, distances Wright from Dylan’s image of her even further.

This does not stop Dylan from, in many ways, taking on the performative function of Robin Wright by deleting the difference between star and character. This is an idea expressed by his inability to distinguish between his image of Robin Wright and the “real” Robin Wright. Dylan tells Robin that he has “been obsessed with her for years” to which Robin replies “obsessed with her, not with me.” But Dylan insists, replying “for me it’s the same thing.” Unable to discern a difference between the Wright he has created and the “real” Robin Wright, Dylan reveals that he considers himself to have been playing Robin Wright herself, not creating characters played by Robin Wright. He merges character and actress to the point that they become only the fictional concept of Robin Wright, thus leaving the “real” Robin Wright separate from that fictional construction.

This middle section of the film showcases a true collapse in modal distinctions between live-action and animation. The “live-action” footage of RRR is something the audience knows to be an animated construction, yet the images that are meant to be interpreted as objective “reality” is explicitly animated, explicitly constructed as well. Rather than maintaining any kind of distinction between the film’s live-action and animation, it is instead being collapsed. The audience is urged to compare the animation to the live-action footage, upon which they will determine that *neither* can be fully accepted at an aesthetic level as representative of an objective, indexical reality.

The Future: The Transformation of Audiences and the Leveling of Performance

After the transition of star image from performer to animator seen in the middle section of the film, the film advances even further in the future to observe the transfer of star image to audience members. Having already played with the idea of the star as a mythic figure in its representation of performative animation, the film literalizes the mythology of the star by directly showing audiences placing star images and deities together. Audiences now live in a perpetual cinematic moment, and experience this mediascape through the lens of the star persona and the performance of that persona.

At the futurist congress, Miramount debuts their new chemical compound, which the Steve Jobs-like Reeve Bobs declares as the “chemical formula of free choice,” echoing the “real” Robin Wright’s resistance to scanning in the film’s first half. The compound will grant the general public the ability to consume images literally, ingesting the essence of a star like Robin Wright or a mythic image like Jesus Christ to *become* that image. As users “consume their new personalities,” they emit “pheromones” that the brains of other users “translate into an image.” Later, after suffering severe hallucinogenic poisoning during a terrorist attack on the futurist congress, the “real” Robin Wright is cryogenically frozen for another 20 years. When she awakes, she finds herself living in a future that has seemingly adopted Miramount’s chemical compound completely. The landscape is dominated by a populace consuming Miramount’s chemical compound, emitting the pheromones of a massive variety of recognizable figures and images.



The vision of the future presented incites a variety of strong visual associations. From a design standpoint, it draws a great deal of its inspiration from the work of Hieronymus Bosch, whose dreamlike landscapes exploded with disturbing fecundity and sexuality. The actual bodies populating this landscape complicate this aesthetic, drawing it from the world of surreal fantasy into the complex image politics of contemporary media. This scene reflects the fact that Ari Folman believed that, when confronted with the ability to remake their image, people would “become consumers” rather than be truly “creative,” and adopt media images that already possessed strong associations.⁵⁷ These kind of consumer tendencies visible in the depicted future resemble Guy Debord’s description of “the society of the spectacle,” in which consumer culture blends with image culture to create a kind of perpetual iconic, commodified quality that permeates throughout all images. More directly, this landscape of iconic images resembles the mimetic tendencies of the internet and its ability to collect and massively distribute images to the point they become recognizable and constant.

This landscape implies that media experience has become lived experience, that the lives of

⁵⁷ From Ari Folman’s Blu-Ray commentary

people have become intertwined with the representational qualities of media. The consequences for the public at large are represented as a divorce between body and self, as they abandon unique or individualized self-images in favor of iconic star personas. Recalling Ty Burr’s argument about digital media, this space represents the “large-scale broadcasting and fictionalization of the self”⁵⁸ in a very literal way. The consequences for Robin Wright, however, are more abstract. As Wright wanders through this landscape, she witnesses a crowd of other Robin Wrights standing before her:



Adopting the appearance of the Robin Wright from the *RRR* films, these consumers become notable, recognizable through their performance of Robin Wright’s star persona. They are not merely mimicking her image, or referencing it, but are embodying it, they have *become* Robin Wright’s constructed star persona. Through this embodiment, the consumers gain the kind of ideological and representational power we would associate with an iconic image, or even a meme. From a distance, others can recognize the ideas and values they represent in the same way that an image of Jesus Christ or a meme featuring Joe Biden communicates a set of ideas and values. The star has become mythic in the sense that the star

⁵⁸ Ty Burr, *Gods Like Us*, p. 330

persona functions as a symbolic shorthand, an expression that is not truly “personal” yet one that expresses a set of values held by the person expressing it.

It is significant that Wright appears as she did in Abrahama in this sequence. She has not adopted an iconic image of herself because that image is no longer under her control; her body has now become a malleable public good. She is witnessing total media control over her image, to the point that her own representation in this future landscape is simply the one Miramount had built to represent the “real” Robin Wright rather than the star Robin Wright.

Unable to find her son in this far future, the “real” Robin Wright makes the decision to leave Miramount’s “chemical party” and return to “reality.” The film in turn transitions back to live-action, depicting “reality” as a sea of destitute bodies, unaware of the apocalyptic landscape surrounding them. To read this new space as a return to objective reality is, however, intensely problematic. The future, Bosch-inspired landscape we see has been generated from Robin Wright’s subconscious, and is narratively an explicitly imagined space. This is indicated both by dialogue, in which Dylan explains the subjective nature of contemporary reality to the “real” Robin Wright, and by a subtle mise-en-scene cue present in the middle of the film. In Robin Wright’s hotel room, there are two paintings that depict the very future she awakes in:



While the landscape of the future is already an explicit hallucination sponsored by Miramont, the paintings suggest that each hallucination is unique, that users form their own reality out of images they've already collected as a kind of "data." They also plant the idea that Wright's future may be entirely imagined, a hallucination that has no relation to an objective "reality." These aesthetic cues of subjective hallucination extend beyond the utopian future into the dystopian reality, implying that Wright (much like Lem's Ijon Tichy) is only extending her own hallucination, not returning to objective reality. Inside of animation, the "real" Robin Wright and Dylan fly a red kodi kite at a recreation of the Berlin airport, the same red kodi kite flown by Wright's son that dominates many of her hallucinations in the film:



In “reality,” we see this exact same airport again:



The same red kodi kite is present here as well, serving almost like a beacon of Wright’s fantasies. The

prevailing presence of the zeppelins, Miramound's tool for projecting films inside of the animated zone, also tie this experience of "reality" to animation, troubling a clean distinction between the two.

This whole ending sequence, from cryogenic freezing to the future landscape to dystopia, reflect a dominance of individual perception. By transforming their everyday existence into a performance medium, consumers alter their perceptual reality to the point that it is indistinguishable from the *narrative fiction* of a performance medium. This transformation occurs within a media-constructed hallucination, one that allows reality to conform to a consumer's own individual desires. Inside of this hallucination, the "real" Robin Wright seems lost, lacking a new consumed personality and left only with an incredibly fragmented and unstable sense of self.

Rebirth: The Death of the "Real" Robin Wright

The film's conclusion resolves the alienation between the "real" Robin Wright and the multiplicity of Robin Wright images around her by destroying the "real" Robin Wright entirely. Wright makes the decision to consume a new personality, that of her son Aaron. In doing this, she will replace her image with that of her son, meaning the image of "real" Robin Wright will "cease to exist" (one of Al's lines, which he uses to express Robin Wright's fear of ageing and exiting the Hollywood industry) inside of Miramound's "chemical party." As the "real" Robin Wright ingests Miramound's chemicals, she lives out the life of her son in animated flashes. These consist of the womb of Robin Wright, Aaron's birth, being breastfed by Robin Wright, watching Robin Wright perform on the set of a film, Aaron flying his first kite, followed by several story events from *The Congress* itself. By visualizing these incredibly intimate, feminine images of Robin Wright as mother, the film seems to be working through Wright's own fears of being type casted and stereotyped based on her femininity by presenting an alternative set of feminine images. The images succeed in showing Wright's body as something more than a marker of her age or a marker of her sexuality, instead showing her body as a marker of her love and devotion to her

son. Rather than committing the fallacy of implying that these images of Wright are somehow more “positive” representations of gender, it uses the images more as a revelation, “a truth” that ironically remains in the hallucinatory animation of Miramound’s chemicals. Wright-as-mother is not a mediated image, not one represented in the career of the vast majority of female stars in Hollywood, but is instead a personal one, a marker of the “era of free choice.” The complex status of these memories between media and reality is developed visually by the image of Wright on set:



Robin-as-Aaron’s face is visible on the reflection from the television screen, appearing almost like a containment field that separates him from what is being filmed while simultaneously placing him inside of it. The scene itself is a romantic one, of Wright and an unnamed man kissing in front of a matte painting of a sunset. The image implies the separation between Wright the sex object on screen and Wright the mother off screen, conflicting visions of her own femininity that are being mediated by both the traditional film set and by Miramound’s chemical compound. Even in this personal hallucination, Wright remains in a liminal space between media and reality, sinking further into hybridity even in this

personal expression.

This image is also one of the final images in the film that features Robin Wright looking at another Robin Wright. Wright-as-Aaron sees the film career of Robin Wright from a perspective she never could. This image is an explicitly constructed one rather than the “seamless” imitation of reality common to the Hollywood style. This final visualization of the Robin Wright juxtaposition that the film has made a pattern out of allows Robin Wright to view her own image from a kind of disconnected distance that she is never allowed when embodying the “real” Robin Wright, alienating her in an almost Brechtian way that allows her perspective to be unchained from her own psyche.

Conclusion: Hybrid Bodies, Hybrid Cinema

In its presentation of the ageing Robin Wright and the journey of her image through distributed authorship, *The Congress* puts forward a troubling but persuasive argument regarding digital cinema’s relationship to the body. The collapse in distinction between live-action and animation filmmaking practices challenge our conception of indexicality itself, placing the audience in the same liminal space between reality and fiction that the star persona occupies. In this multimodal, liminal space, the star’s body is represented as both transitory *and* grounded, a “pile of computer code” to be manipulated as much as it is a gendered and individualized expression of self. Robin Wright is ultimately being presented as one of the most disquieting and unstable images of self in cinema history, a figure so defined by her experiences within media that it becomes almost impossible to separate Robin Wright the person from Robin Wright the media image. By refusing to allow Robin Wright a stable, indexical position in relationship to our own sense of reality, the film challenges its audience to consider the possibility that “who we

are” is collectively contained within the media we participate in. It is implied that we are *all becoming* Robin Wright, as our ability to construct a mediated image of ourselves is reflected by a populace that can consume and become new personalities, ones rooted in media entirely.

Thesis Conclusion

Rather than contending with the technology, production, and gendered nature of performance capture separately in scholarship, my project has argued for an approach that sees these components as interwoven and inseparable. It is of particular importance that we treat the performance captured body as unstable, that we remain aware of its status and production without allowing fiction films to establish a verisimilitude around these hybrid bodies. It is imperative that we contend with the liminality of these bodies, and continue to explore how that liminality is manifested in the works containing these bodies themselves. These performances should be received as a complex assemblage formed by interweaving sites of control, assemblages that so destabilize any individual component of the performance process that they can only be considered through their collective and distributed operation.

Where *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* succeed in so strongly is in their awareness of their own production practices and the willingness with which these works interrogate those practices. By taking on performance capture and digital filmmaking, respectively, in the texts themselves, these pieces of media use their problematic models of representation to incite audiences to consider those problems. *Beyond: Two Souls* makes explicit the problems of control in performance capture by making the character of Jodie aware of her own influences of control, and aware of how distributed authorship has affected her own narrative experiences. *The Congress* employs its hybrid digital style to decimate a distinction between media and reality, narratively and stylistically integrating digital filmmaking practices to urge audience members to consider how the image of Robin Wright is inevitably tied to its technological status and representation. Both examples present an incredibly progressive and revolutionary methodology for digital media making, both texts taking a more interrogatory and enlightened stance to their own productions than has been typical in works featuring digital performance technology.

The unstable, hybridized status of the body and its image presented by both *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress* is not contained within these works alone. As these technologies continue to be employed in contemporary media making practices, the status of the performer becomes increasingly technological and precarious. The network of control governing these performers is still evolving, and the expansion of photorealistic animation and the falling cost of performance capture work will likely continue to change how these bodies are being constructed in media.

Beyond: Two Souls and *The Congress* should not be received in isolation. The aesthetic and industrial challenges they pose through their explicit hybridity reverberate throughout digital media making practices. As further scholarship is done on the relationship between star studies and new media technology, it is important to consider how traditional conceptions of the performer are being fundamentally transformed. As an audience's awareness of the liminal status of these bodies develops, critical studies should make strides to contend with digital media through performance studies and the digital body. Our discussion of digital media should continue to closely interrogate its production practices while examining how those processes are made evident within the works themselves.

A recent example poses a set of problems that seem to directly reflect the concerns over image, performance, and control presented by *Beyond: Two Souls* and *The Congress*. For the production of the recent film *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, Disney's production team sought to recreate the performance of deceased actor Peter Cushing, wanting to depict the character of Grand Moff Tarkin from *Star Wars* "exactly" how Cushing had at both a physical and a performative level in 1977. Casting the actor Guy Henry, Disney and Lucasfilm shot scenes with Henry's face rigged for performance capture, using digital animation to replace Henry's face with images of Cushing's face as it once appeared in *Star Wars*. The result is a fairly unique and extremely problematic hybrid body, one assembled out of physical performance, animation, and pre existing footage constructed without the explicit permission of the performer it seeks to recreate. This example seems to actualize the process depicted in *The Congress*, where the distinctions between performer and character are deleted in favor of this performer "living"

through digital data. This reading is not only my own, but the reasoning presented by Lucasfilm themselves. John Knoll, chief creative officer at Industrial Light and Magic, said in an interview with the New York Times that the decision to create this hybrid body were made “for very solid and defensible story reasons. This is a character that is very important to telling this kind of story.”⁵⁹ Knoll goes on to assuage concerns over the future employment of this technology, stating that “We’re not planning on doing this digital re-creation extensively from now on. It just made sense for this particular movie.” This promise rings particularly hollow in the context of the studio’s justifications. The concerns of narrative fiction takes precedence over the ethics of their digital “reanimation,” the role of the character standing above the control of the performer. As this kind of approach inevitably continues in media production, critical studies are prompted to develop more robust and hybridized models to reflect the complex and hybridized bodies the cinema is producing.

Beyond: Two Souls and *The Congress* painfully pull audiences into the swirling complexity of the technologies that drive them, providing new modes of audience engagement while suggesting new avenues for scholarship. These texts, and my analysis of them, put forward a mode of reception in which we are meant to be simultaneously aware of modern technological media texts and how those texts have been assembled. We are asked to consider these texts and the bodies within them as constructions, presented with images that vividly express their own authorship and instability. Within the often crushing and distressing cynicism of both texts, there remains a suggestion that we can contend with their difficulties through an awareness of how those difficulties have been assembled. These pieces both refuse to conform to simple solutions or preexisting representational strategies, instead vividly detailing a mode of gendered technological representation that demands further study and consideration.

⁵⁹ From Dave Izkoff’s New York Times Article: “How ‘Rogue One’ Brought Back Familiar Faces” from December 27, 2016.

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