

Sad and Dreamy There

Exploring nostalgia, narrative, and family histories through experimental video

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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ABSTRACT

My video-based practice, incorporating collage, voice, and manipulated sound, explores the ambiguities found among aspects of family histories, memory, nostalgia, and self-created narratives. My moving image artwork *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In?)* uses my late father's journal as a jumping off point to create a series of interconnected short films incorporating both family and historical photos, along with images created using Artificial Intelligence (AI) engines such as DALL-E. The sound includes cloning of my father's voice through the AI engine at Eleven Labs.

Combining the authentic and the inauthentic, history and falsehood, I am evoking an interior psychological space where memories are faulty or even wholly invented. At the same time, I am addressing current anxieties around AI's assault on factual information and truth itself, as well as on human endeavor, by exploring its weaknesses.

Finally, I use my love of surrealist art and experimental film, along with humour, to create a disarmingly engaging space for the viewer.

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INTRODUCTION

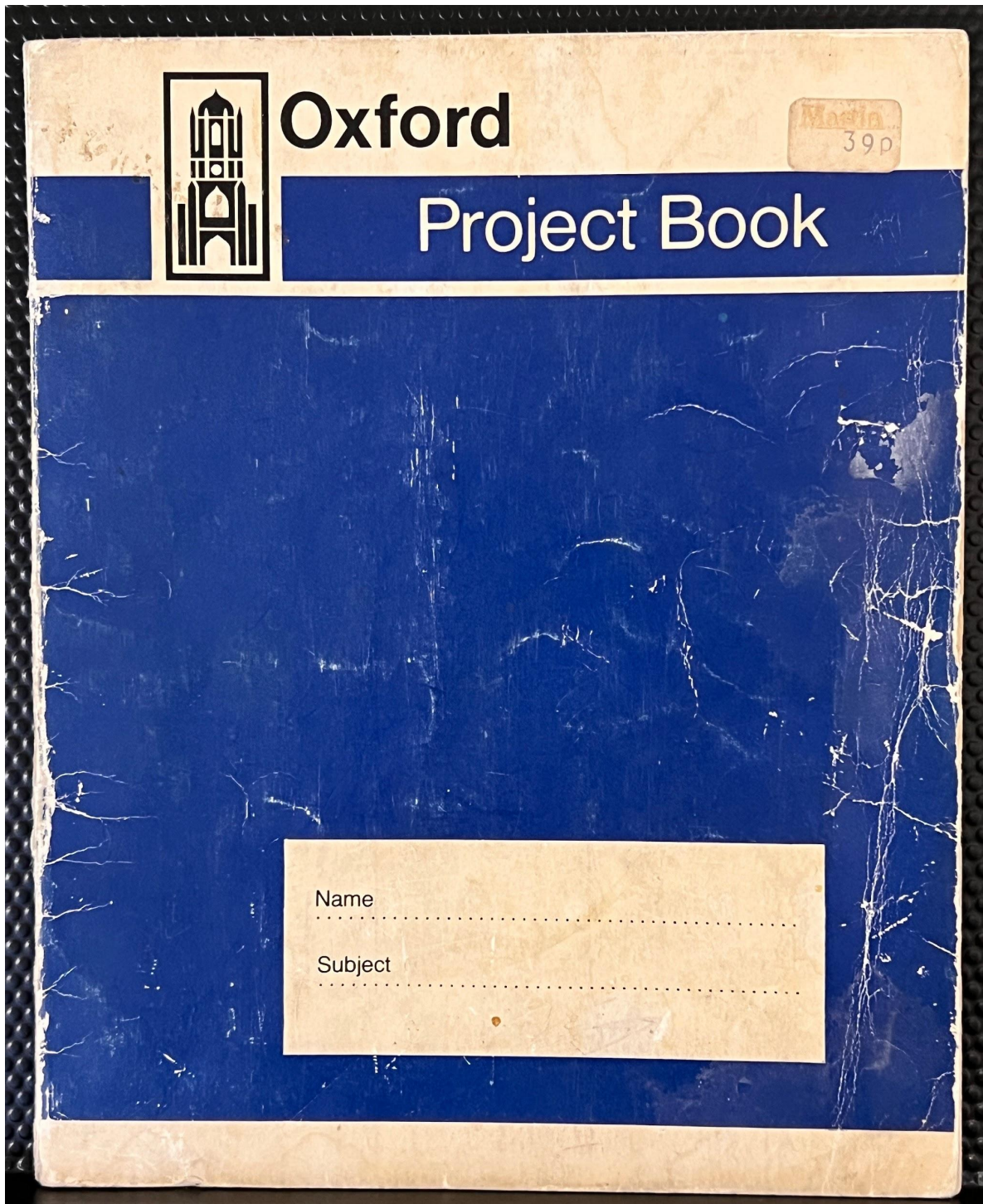


Fig. 1. The front cover of my father's journal, found among his belongings after his death, 2017.

*I hear a bird, Londonderry bird,
 It well may be he's bringing me a cheering word.
 I hear a breeze, a River Shannon breeze,
 It well may be it's followed me across the seas.¹*

When I found my dad's journal (Fig. 1) after his death in 2017, I found a bound collection of pages that weren't in any order, were not meant to be read by anybody else, and spanned the last three decades of his life. I remember standing in the shed where I stored his stuff and reading the journal in dreamlike wonder. I could almost see him writing some of these pages. For others I was mystified. The journal was full of elements that felt like a sample dip into his mind: his desire to tell and retell his childhood story but only up to a certain age; concerns about health; horse racing tips; the occasional turn or phrase or quote; a book recommendation; a draft of a letter to his ex-wife (my mom).

So I had an object, one that elicited all sorts of feelings within me—nostalgia, mourning, a sense of mortality, but also a strangeness that felt like the kind of films I was starting to create again. The idea of a video work formed in my mind, one that would devote a short tableau to each page from the journal, and one that would leave the viewer with a portrait of a father in all his messy, private anti-glory, a glimpse into a subconscious filled with spiraling memories, regret, and the failures of aging. possibly viewers would consider their own families, the stories they tell, the truth that remains elusive, and how narratives help erase the random qualities of life, even while we live it. Realize that even under the best circumstances, we may never really know those that are closest to us. I mean, do we even really know ourselves?

For a long time, the project was temporarily known by its source object name: *Oxford Project Book*. That changed, for reasons discussed below, into *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In?)*. This work would form my final project for my Masters in Fine Arts, a multi-short-video work to be screened as one long piece.

¹ E.Y. "Yip" Harburg, 1946, "How Are Things in Glocca Morra."
<https://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/rosemary-clooney-how-are-things-in-glocca-morra-1>

A SCHEMATA IS FORMED

There are two dozen pages of writing in the journal, along with many blank pages. At the beginning of the project, I divided these pages up into eight themes.

- 1) Memories: a brain dump of names, places, snatches of dialog. Many of these were familiar to me, as my dad told me these stories over and over in late night reveries.
- 2) Horses: Pages used as notes about horse racing and gambling tips
- 3) Natural remedies: Pages used as notes about non-pharmaceutical ways to treat common ailments
- 4) Night Thoughts: Solitary lines that might have been his own writing, might have been somebody on television
- 5) Intrusion/Decline: Pages from his final years, including a nurse writing in the journal, and scraps of writing from his ailing/aging hand.
- 6) Notes: Bits of everything, from word definitions to book titles
- 7) Letter of Intent: A draft of a letter meant for my mother, written before we moved back to the United States after four years of living in the UK.
- 8) Opening and closing pages: The cover of the journal itself, interpreted as the opening and closing titles.

Initially *Glocca Morra* was going to be a multi-monitor piece, but after seeing a few installations in Wellington galleries that did so, and the resulting problems of fidelity and focus, I decided on a single screen work. It also made more sense as a single screen work to keep the viewer's focus on the progression of experimental narratives, and noticing returning elements.²

² However, in August 2023, I saw an installation of Cecilia Condit's 1983 work *Possibly in Michigan* as part of the *Steamed Hams* exhibit at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt (<https://dowse.org.nz/exhibitions-and-events/exhibitions/2023/steamed-hams/>). Condit's original was a single screen narrative, but here it was presented in a 3x3 video grid, with the sound and image synced in the middle screen, and differing delayed loops running in the other eight. This suggested a possible future screening option for *Glocca Morra*, but not this time around.

AT HOME/NOT AT HOME

Glocca Morra “takes place”—if it can be said to do so anywhere—at home, in the domestic space lived in by my dad. A kitchen space for meal making but also with a table for thinking and writing. A living room space for television watching and reading. A bedroom for sleeping. All areas for living, but spaces for ghosts: family photos on mantels, prints from the old country, antique copper bed warmers, Wedgewood crockery, signifiers of England’s past real and imagined. But the home is also where dreams unfold, where my dad’s mind could wander and return again and again to the past, and where the real unnerving material of *Glocca Morra* originates. The English word for it is “uncanny,” but I’ve always found that wanting, associated with pulp sci-fi and comic books. Instead, the word “unheimlich” is the much better descriptor, from the Freud essay “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919)³. Yet Freud’s own essay has a hard time defining “unheimlich,” as it is filled with contradictions. However, our best-known understanding of “unheimlich” is the domestic space that feels not of home, the once-safe space feeling unsafe, the hidden rising to the surface.

A modern word sharing the same meaning-space is “Lynchian,” named after director David Lynch. David Foster Wallace described the effect in his 1996 essay on the making of *Lost Highway* (also a favorite film of mine), as “a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former’s perpetual containment within the latter.”⁴

So this is all to say that *Glocca Morra* hopes to achieve *unheimlich* qualities in its form and delivery, and that the journal itself produces in me—in its more mysterious passages—an *unheimlich* feeling. In the original essay, Freud’s example of the *unheimlich* in fiction is the doubt as to whether a character is real or an automaton. This is a future echo of AI anxieties. Is the person on the other end of the chat a real human or an AI bot? Is that really my dad’s voice reading on the soundtrack of *Glocca Morra*? Nearly. But I know it (the real voice) when I hear it (the source recording).

³ Sigmund Freud, trans. Alix Strachy, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 1919, 2. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>

⁴ David Foster Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” *Premiere Magazine*, September 1996.

<http://www.lynchnet.com/lh/lhpremiere.html> Wallace’s phrase comes in the form of an imagined academic definition, noting afterwards that Lynchian escapes such confines and is really a case of “I know it when I see it.”

FAMILY MATTERS

This is a work by a son about his father. My dad was the second youngest raised within a working-class family of six in London: three boys, three girls. His mother doted on him after his rather sickly dad passed away in his fifties and after the war the family had relocated from Islington, London to a model garden village called Silver End, near Witham, Essex.⁵ (This model village, a mix of capitalist company town and socialist utopia, has been feted recently in modern coverage, television docs, and books). My dad's younger sister Shirley fell in love with, married, and moved to California with a serviceman. That's how five years later after marrying my mom, who was 15 years his junior, they visited California and decided to move there. It was the late 1960s. Three years later my parents birthed me.

My mom was in her early 20s in sunny, hip Santa Barbara, glad to be away from miserable, rainy, provincial Silver End. My dad was in his 40s, and homesick all the time, trying what he could to re-create the halcyon days of his youth, including installing a "mini-pub" with bar stools and bartop in our living room. We went back to the UK on summer vacations to see family, and various uncles and aunts would come out to visit. My mom got tired of it. Dad was a "traditional" man in that he expected my mom to be part wife and part mom, and had some regressive ideas. He was supposed to be the breadwinner, but never made enough money, spent too much of it on travel to cure homesickness, and objected to Mom's plans to get a second job and, even more frowned upon, to start attending community college and continue with her education.

Looking back at this, I can't say it wasn't a surprise that my mom had an affair and subsequently filed for divorce. Dad kept custody of me, and also kept the house, while Mom obtained a cheap apartment and started working at the City of Santa Barbara, a job she kept until her retirement. This broke my dad and I think it took until he passed for me to realize that he had low-level depression for the remainder of his life. It made his nostalgia all that much stronger, his stories of "back in the day" rosier than they were, and his situation a little more self-inflicted and seemingly helpless. On the other hand, it softened a once-chauvinist man. He became both my dad and my mom, and in a way he became *his mom*, who doted on me. Was this a bad thing? From age 7 (the separation/divorce) to my late teens, I didn't suffer the trauma of a child from a "broken home," as they used to call it. I had my needs met. And as an only child, I was usually lost in my own concerns—seven is when I really started becoming creative, as an avid reader, cartoonist, collector, filmmaker, "comedian" (with my friends)—so I did okay. In fact, compared to my friends who had siblings and both parents, I lived a charmed life.

Dad had no friends, and believed that family was the most important thing, although he never asked family for help. In fact, they all seemed to think he was the successful one, after all he lived where the movie stars lived, drove a Cadillac, and went golfing. However, he had nobody to help

⁵ BBC. "BBC - Essex - Places - Silver End - a Window on the Past," July 22, 2009.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/essex/content/articles/2009/01/27/silver_end_feature.shtml. This model village, a mix of capitalist company town and socialist utopia, has been feted recently in modern coverage, television docs, and books.

him through tough times, and we had to sell our home and move back to Silver End where my dad planned to ... well, I'm not too sure.

We still went back to the UK for summer holidays in the years prior to moving. In a little village I had a second, parallel childhood, "free-range" in ways that the car-centered life of Santa Barbara definitely wasn't. I'd make friends easily, disappear for entire days on my bike, kiss girls for the first time. No wonder that when we made a retreat back to Dad's home village, I was okay with it.

It was in those four years—my high school years—that the journal at the center of this work began. I might have even bought it for a school exercise, but never used it. And because I was a self-centered teen enjoying his life I never really paid much attention to what was going on with my dad. He was supportive, liked my friends, he came down the pub with "me 'n' me mates" a few times. He was the "friend/parent" to me, a generation before that became a thing.

I'm saying this too, because *Glocca Morra* isn't revealing "family secrets", or a "childhood trauma suffered at the hands of my father". The journal is a strange addendum to many of the narratives I got elsewhere—the biography, the memories—but here he's in conversation with himself.

My dad lived in the apartment we rented upon returning to the States in 1989 until 2013, when a fall and a neck fracture that nearly killed him led him into assisted living until 2017, when he went to hospice and then rather peacefully to the realm beyond. I suspect most of the writing in the journal is from the 1990s.

We always stayed close, and I had to look after him a lot in his later years, which became incredibly exhausting mentally. These final years, we're often told, were times to discuss and make amends, to deepen bonds, but instead, we simply wound up arguing a lot over trivial or imagined matters.

We both loved each other, and I still think about him every day (and not just because I have used his life as base material for art). I can hear his laugh in mine, and I like to think I see his kindness in the way I treat others. In his faults I can see tendencies to avoid, but in his best nature I like to think I'm carrying on his legacy.

HOW ARE THINGS IN GLOCCA MORRA?

Some of the entries in my father's journal are written as prompts, and I know their history. One is the phrase "deliver up the black pudding," which was a childhood game to fool one unlucky child to utter the phrase innocently, and then be pelted with horse dung from the streets of London. It's a story Dad often told me, because he wasn't the victim, and it made him laugh.

I understood the phrase "How Are Things in Glocca Morra" as a running joke between his older brother and friends, used in conversation to mean "What's up? What's going on?" Dad didn't explain its source, and I thought growing up that Glocca Morra was somehow related to my uncle's stationing in Southeast Asia during the war.

The journal however lists Bing Crosby after the title, and that's when I discovered it's actually a song by Burton Lane (music) and E.Y. "Yip" Harburg (lyrics) written for the 1947 musical *Finian's Rainbow*. In Harold Meyerson and Ernest Harburg's 1995 biography of Harburg, the song acts as a stand-in for homesickness and nostalgia:

...nostalgia is best unsullied by reality, and nostalgic utopia is what the new musical play of the forties was in large measure about...The triumph of the cities, which in the twenties and thirties Broadway had both celebrated and exemplified, was continuing apace as indigenous regional cultures gave way to the national media; as the depression and the Second World War uprooted millions of people across [America]. In the forties, the winners of the cultural conflict waxed nostalgic over what had been lost: Broadway spoke for the vanishing old worlds...Glocca Morra does not exist, the book says; it is another myth exploded. But real or imaginary, the score celebrates it, pines for it, as the curtain descends.⁶

"There's no such place, Woody," the character Sharon explains. "It is only in Father's head."⁷

Discovering this halfway through the making of the work, I had found a central element by fortuitous chance. Also a coincidence: Harburg wrote the lyrics to one of Dad's favorite songs, "Over the Rainbow," another song of longing, from *The Wizard of Oz*.

The music heard throughout *Glocca Morra* is a digital manipulation of Buddy Clark's recording of the song (Columbia Records catalog number 37223), recorded off an 78 rpm shellac and stored at the Internet Archive.⁸ I "auditioned" several recordings of the song, for it was a popular tune in 1947, covered by Dick Haymes, Martha Tilton, Henry Babbitt, and others. Clark's version reached number 8 in the charts that year, and appealed to me due to its mysterious reverb- drenched

⁶ Meyerson, Harold and Ernie Harburg. *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz: Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, (University of Michigan Press, 1993), 267

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Internet Archive. "HOW ARE THINGS IN GLOCCA MORRA : BUDDY CLARK : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive," 1946.
https://archive.org/details/78_how-are-things-in-glocca-morra_buddy-clark-harburg-lane-mitchell-ayres_gbia0349291a.

strings, dreamy vibe, and Clark's particular melisma that matches my Dad's style of singing. If the electronic drones used throughout are there to create a dream-bordering-on-nightmare energy, then the use of "How Are Things in Glocca Morra," manipulated or played straight, provides the emotional balance: sadness, regret, memories, nostalgia, mortality, the shoreline disappearing from view.

YOUR DAD IS AMERICAN



Fig. 2. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In?): Memories 2*

Media reports about the uncanny valley perfection, of replacing humanity, of the trick of it all, of AI are common, but my actual experiences working with it are different from those promoted on social media, where AI Instagram accounts show polished examples of “art” similar to the sci-fi/fantasy art found on the DeviantArt web page. More often than not working with AI is frustrating. It is a tool, first and foremost, and trying to bend this tool to my whims and desires has been challenging. Voice cloning and synthesis has interested me since the first examples popped up online. Hearing Obama and other public figures reciting Eminem lyrics reveals the potential for hilarious chaos⁹. But it also brought into focus my plan towards resurrecting my dad’s voice and feeding him, not Minecraft instructions¹⁰, but his own words, as recorded in his own journal.

I was perfectly fine with the reality that it wouldn’t be perfect. In fact, the imperfections would compliment the collaged emphasis within my art practice, where AI-created images are used alongside family archival photographs (see Fig. 2). I planned to employ three versions of my dad’s voice, recordings I have from the ‘90s, the 2000s, and some final recordings from the months before his passing, which would parallel the three styles of writing used within the journal.

⁹ *AI is getting a bit wild. This is Barack Obama singing "Lose Yourself" by Eminem part 1*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGYFDKGFg6o>.

¹⁰ *US Presidents Play Minecraft*, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pGT5jLlxb4>.

AI cloning software companies primarily reside in California, and service a clientele that desire a white-identified male American voice for business.¹¹ Currently the best web-based AI cloning software is from Eleven Labs. And yes, it can successfully clone regional accents from New York to Florida to California to Texas. But no, it did not “understand” my dad’s London-Essex accent, returning a bland American voice (possibly Connecticut-located?) that I did not recognize.¹²

This “Connecticut Dad” can be heard in the earlier films I made for *Glocca Morra*. As I continued making films, ElevenLabs improved their code. As of this writing my dad’s accent has relocated from Connecticut to Australia. But in terms of texture and inflection, it’s almost close to delivering a version of my Dad’s voice that I could imagine making me feel like I’m talking to the dead. (How would I actually feel when that happens? I’m ambivalent even typing the sentence.) Eleven Labs has also gotten better at identifying non-word based characters and removing them from the spoken results. However, the intrusion of “underscore underscore underscore” and “vertical line, vertical line” into the original generative passes of my dad’s voice—reading the text as I transcribed his journal into a Google Doc—was an enjoyable bit of alienation. To then recreate it by now typing out the words seemed forced.

¹¹ Wilfred Chan. “The AI Startup Erasing Call Center Worker Accents: Is It Fighting Bias – or Perpetuating It?” The Guardian, August 24, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/23/voice-accent-technology-call-center-white-american>. One company provides real time AI-based accent “neutralisation” for its Southeast Asian call center workers, turning Indian/Filippino/et al voices into (white) American ones. According to the company, a non-American accent increased the customer’s anxiety and anger, a white American voice resulted in a successful interaction.

¹² On the other hand, it has cloned my reading voice exceptionally well.

A DEMON IN THE MACHINE

When I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand to begin in-situ work on my MFA at Massey, online A.I. art engines were just coming into public access. These text-to-image generators require a text prompt (subject matter, style of image, color, mood, et. al. information), which then produces within a browser page an image using proprietary or open-source deep-learning code. The first of these to debut was DALL-E (initial release January 5, 2021 but open to the public until September 28, 2022), followed by Mid-Journey (rel. July 12, 2022) and Stable Diffusion (rel. August 22, 2022). The strengths and weaknesses of each are notable, but beyond the scope of this writing. For the majority of my AI work within *Glocca Morra*, I have used DALL-E.

My interest in AI art creation lies not in how well these engines respond to text prompts, but how badly, and often how nightmarish the outcomes appear. Its problem with hands is well-known¹³, but it also fails to render eyes correctly. In early 2023, the progression to text-to-video AI generation continued this terrible trend. A horrific “AI commercial” for something called “Pepperoni Hug Spot”, created by online artist/Reddit user u/PizzaLater, features unstable, melting hands; an engine that cannot discern how humans eat; and mouths that look similar to photos of wounded soldiers in WWI¹⁴. DALL-E does not know the alphabet—ask it to create a poster featuring specific words, and it just can’t do it¹⁵. These results aren’t actual words; often there aren’t even letters involved, just shapes that appear to be letters from afar.

DALL-E’s text has a similar alienating quality to trying to read a book in a dream, a frustration of cognition. However, these “problems” are what appeal to my dream/hypnopompic aesthetic.

Worry pieces in the American press fret over AI taking over¹⁶, and writer/artist Molly Crabapple has been leading the charge over AI’s scraping of copyrighted material¹⁷. And while it’s important to stand for creative rights, AI art engines present an opportunity to play around with the technology at its weak points, shaping it to our will. Of note is the artist Beth Frey aka Sentient

¹³ Kyle Chayka. “The Uncanny Failure of A.I.-Generated Hands.” *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-uncanny-failures-of-ai-generated-hands>. “As others have reported, the hand problem has to do, in part, with the generators’ ability to extrapolate information from the vast data sets of images they have been trained on.” That is, most photographs of hands do not show a whole hand, so AI “guesses.”

¹⁴ PizzaLater. “Reddit - Dive into Anything,” n.d.

https://www.reddit.com/r/midjourney/comments/12xw3d2/definitely_wasted_3_hours_of_my_life_making_this/

¹⁵ Eliza Strickland. “DALL-E 2’s Failures Are the Most Interesting Thing about It.” *IEEE Spectrum*, March 29, 2023. <https://spectrum.ieee.org/openai-dall-e-2>. Features a DALL-E-created homage to René Magritte’s “The Treachery of Images.”

¹⁶ Ross Andersen. “Does Sam Altman Know What He’s Creating?” *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2023.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/sam-altman-openai-chatgpt-gpt-4/674764/>. This *Atlantic Monthly* article is a good example.

¹⁷ Jo Lawson-Tancred. “Molly Crabapple Has Posted an Open Letter by 1,000 Cultural Luminaries Urging Publishers to Restrict the Use of ‘Vampirical’ A.I.-Generated Images.” *Artnet News*, May 4, 2023.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/open-letter-urges-publishers-not-to-use-ai-generated-illustrations-2294392>.

Muppet Factory¹⁸ who has found a way to work with AI and produce horrific work on her own terms. For my own explorations into the “heart” of DALL-E’s engine, please see Appendix: Exploring DALL-E’s Demon Through “Enshittification”.

¹⁸ Beth Frey, @sentientmuppetfactory, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/sentientmuppetfactory/>

EIGHT MILLIMETER



Fig. 3. Still from *What a Pool Believes* (2014), showing the 8mm Vintage Camera app's "noir" filter.

The humble Super 8 film stock has been a constant in my practice. I inherited my parents' Super 8 camera and shot films with friends. By the time video attained its equity with film, in terms of frame-rate, motion, grain, and focus, I was trying to find ways back to a film-based aesthetic, but through using video. In my 2010 film *Wallace Carothers*, I used a recipe of effects in Final Cut Pro 7 to recreate an anachronistic film look¹⁹. In 2013, I learned about an iPhone app called 8mm Vintage Camera²⁰ that the filmmakers of *Searching for Sugarman* used when their funding to shoot on Super 8 pulled out²¹. Nobody noticed the digital look, and the film won an Academy Award for best documentary, so I was intrigued. The app was exactly what I wanted, offering 13 different "stocks." I made a film with it the next year, the short silent comedy *What a Pool Believes*²², using the app in post production editing to lend a vintage 1920s look (Fig. 3, 4).

This method has influenced all the video works I have made since that time. The app is my little "magic box," that last bit of seasoning that makes the meal that much more complex. The *Poems from Nowhereland* were processed using the app's filters, as did my thesis proposal (*My Thesis with*

¹⁹ <https://vimeo.com/38743108>

²⁰ <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/8mm-vintage-camera/id406541444>

²¹ Rob Hardy. "Oscar-Winning, Partly iPhone-Shot 'Searching for Sugar Man' Proves Content Is King." No Film School, November 6, 2014. <https://nofilmschool.com/2013/03/oscar-searching-sugar-man-shot-iphone>.

²² <https://vimeo.com/102864295>

*Edward*²³) film from last year, as is *Glocca Morra*. To bring things full circle, 10 years later the app returned with an update that gave us 42 filters. My color tests, with 42 lines of poetry, became *The Colour Chart* (2023)²⁴.

The grainy, silent aesthetic of super 8 film frequently represents nostalgia and memories. In *nowhereland* (2000) I used actual Super 8 to make the lo-fi movie look divorced from its own time. By the time of the *Poems*, the filter was used to distance and alienate the audience. For *Glocca Morra* the filter contains both alienation and nostalgia, an incorrect memory of a time.

And yet I must admit to some nostalgia as well. When I started as a filmmaker, video looked terrible unless that was the aesthetic one was going for, and film was prohibitively expensive. I wanted to be taken seriously; film was “serious,” video was not.²⁵ My desire to start filmmaking as an adult was also influenced by seeing experimental films on 16mm as part of a UCSB course I crashed in 1997.²⁶



Fig. 4. Still from *What a Pool Believes* (2014), showing the 8mm Vintage Camera app’s “noir” filter.

²³ <https://vimeo.com/765423027>

²⁴ <https://vimeo.com/853878866>. Password: massey.

²⁵ Student Hut. “Countering Culture: Analog Horror | Student Hut,” July 7, 2023.

<https://studenthut.com/articles/countering-culture-analog-horror>. The current trend of “analog horror” and degraded VHS tape as an aesthetic shows how each generation links old technology with “authenticity”.

²⁶ Films included and subsequently stolen from unabashedly were Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks* (1947) and *Rabbit’s Moon* (1972), and the most influential of all, Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), all shot on black and white film.

RETURN TO NOWHERELAND



Fig. 5. Full-frame still from *nowhereland* (2000).

When I began the poetry series that initiated my return to artmaking and undertaking this MFA course, I titled them *Poems from Nowhereland*. The “nowhereland” referenced in the title was an allusion to my first ever film, a 30 minute, sci-fi short film shot on black and white Super 8 stock. (Fig. 5)

There’s something about that mysterious film, some element I was trying to recapture. Part of it was the “zen mind/beginner's mind”²⁷ element of creating this film from youthful confidence and willpower, using tools at hand, wanting to shoot on film, and choosing the medium from my childhood.²⁸ It was also good to accept that I had come full circle, and attempting to get back to a kind of film/video/art making that was emerging from my subconscious.

When I mounted an exhibition in August to show some of the videos and photographic works that I’ve created over 18 months, “nowhereland” once again presented itself as a kind of personal branding. *nowhereland (outskirts)* opened August 10 on Massey Campus.²⁹ It featured a 30 minute

²⁷ Shunryū Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Weatherhill, Incorporated, 1973, pg. 21. “In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's there are few.”

²⁸ My mom had been our family’s home movie “director,” after the divorce the camera came into my possession for silly films made with my childhood friends.

²⁹ Located at Test Space Gallery (T24), the show took up three rooms on opening night, and two rooms for the rest of its five-day run. Photographs included selections from the *Enshittifications* series (see Appendix),

video loop of recent work: *Cat Melt*, *Carter to the Bough*, three poem movies, three selections from *Glocca Morra*, and a brand new film, *The Colour Chart*. (Fig. 6)

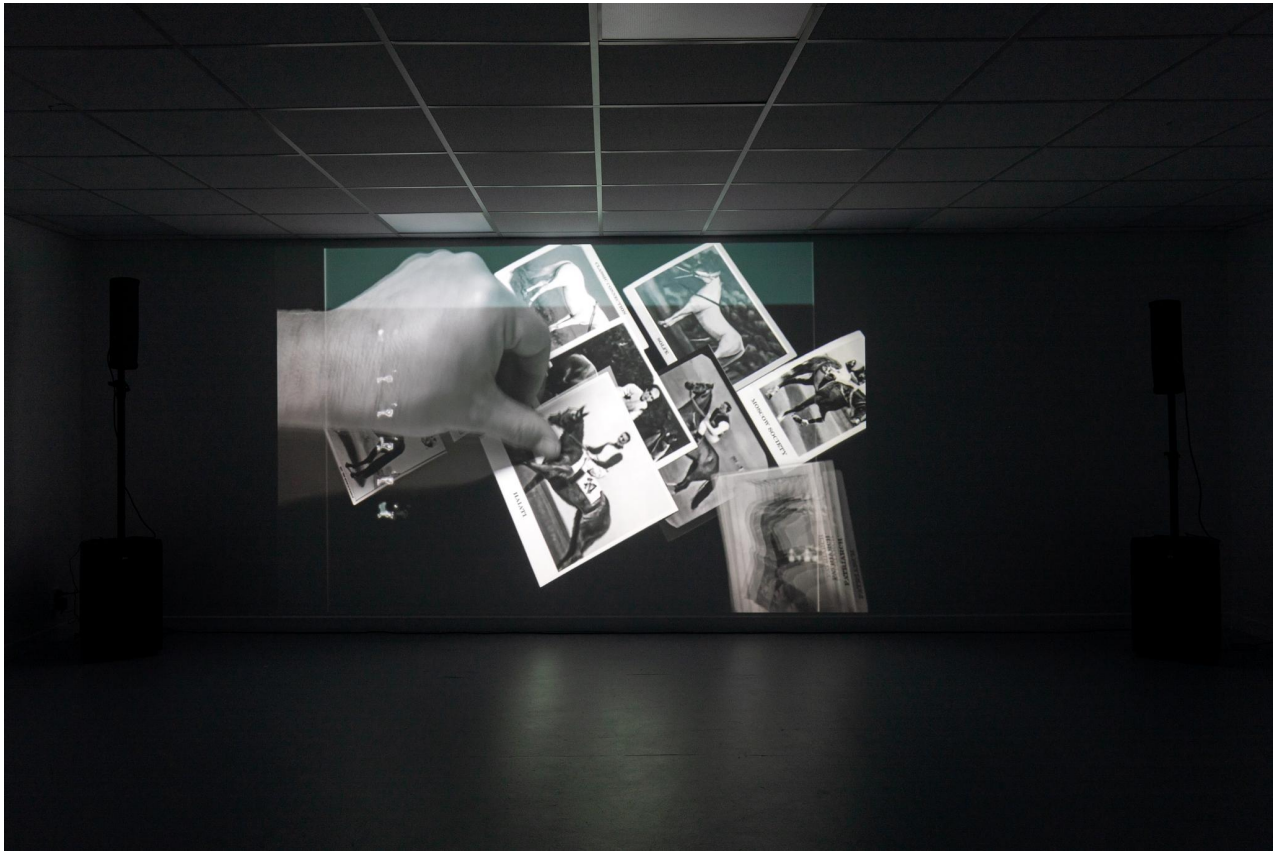


Fig. 6. Installation view of selections from *Glocca Morra*, as part of *nowhereland (outskirts)* at Massey University, 2023.

stills from selected videos, and on opening night, a half hour of spoken word pieces set to music loops, *Tales from Nowhere*.

INFORMED SPACES

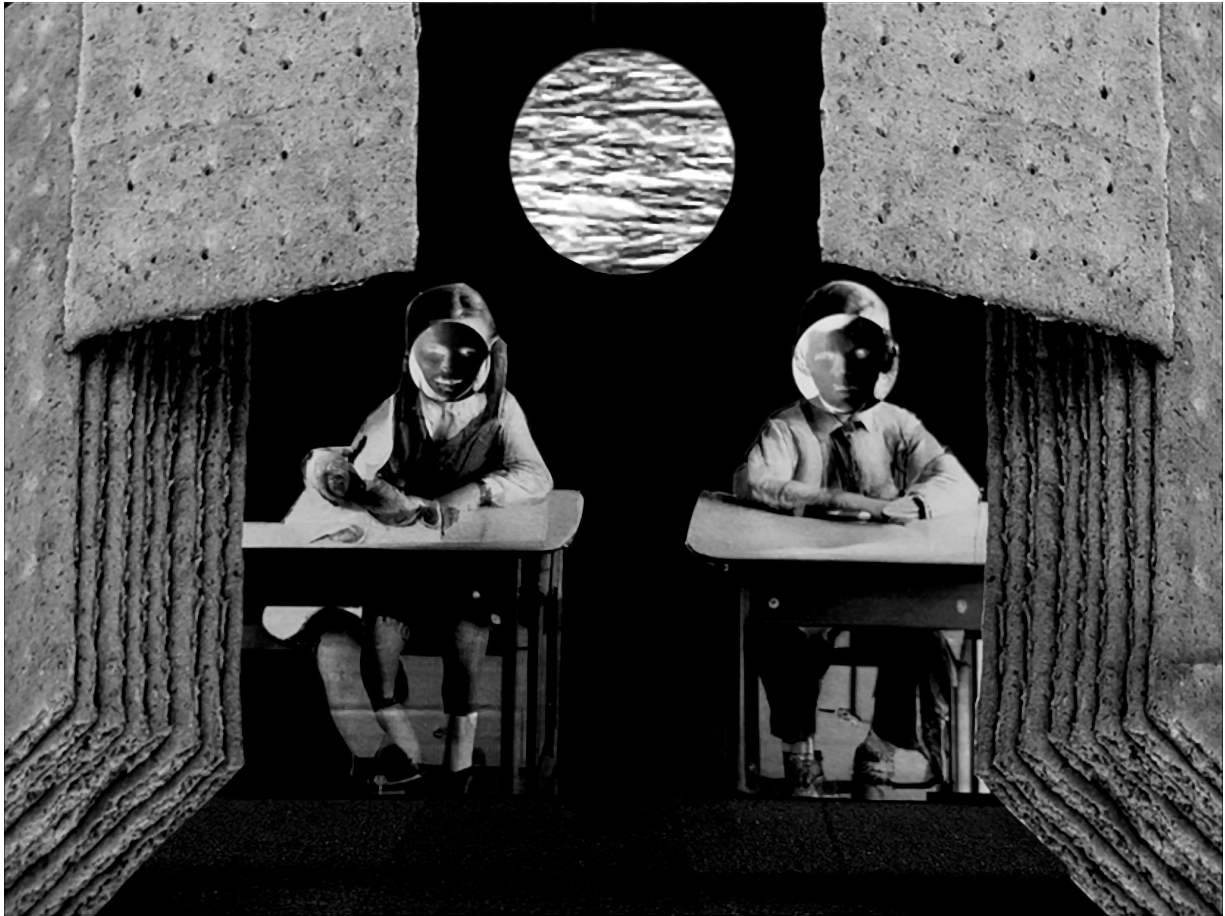


Fig. 7. Still from *Poems from Nowhere: United Nations* (2022)

The *Poems from Nowhere* videos came first, and out of all the works I have created, they've informed *Glocca Morra* the most. The diorama format, which started out of necessity of shooting on a patio table with an iPhone8, became the theater into which *Glocca Morra* would take place. (Fig. 7, 8). The idea of a miniature theater shows the influence of Lynch, and his restricted spaces (usually with a proscenium arch) found in his films *Eraserhead*³⁰, *Blue Velvet*, and *Twin Peaks*, along with his paintings and animations from *The Grandmother* onwards³¹. But its inky blackness also comes from the magical works of Harry Smith's epic mystical animation *Heaven & Earth Magic* (Fig. 9). This is a work I've only seen bits and pieces of, and have yet to find any print of high quality. But it is the link between Max Ernst's surreal collages³² and The Brothers Quay films³³.

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awVNCljOq1A>. The "Lady in the Radiator Scene" in particular.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebuOONW6NpQ>. *The Grandmother* (1970), Lynch's first long-form narrative, features an inky black set, with no walls or floors visible, mostly white props, white face make-up, and dashes of color.

³² In particular, his three "collage novels," made of Victorian pulp illustration/engravings cut up in a surreal style, *La femme 100 têtes* (1929), *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel* (1930), and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934)

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3LPwyjtjXw> Their short MTV idents were an important visual influence of my early 20s.

The black space also provides a way to hide the mechanics of the lo-fi work under film filters and high contrast. Strings, sticks, and more vanish with a little turning of the contrast dial. The diorama also allows me to play with scale, to use AI's unheimlich elements to create a dream state, and to unsettle the viewer. *Glocca Morra* and *Poems from Nowhereland* hopefully create an uneasy tension, a space before the “jump scare” that never comes.



Fig. 8. Still from *Poems from Nowhereland: In the Backroom* (2021).

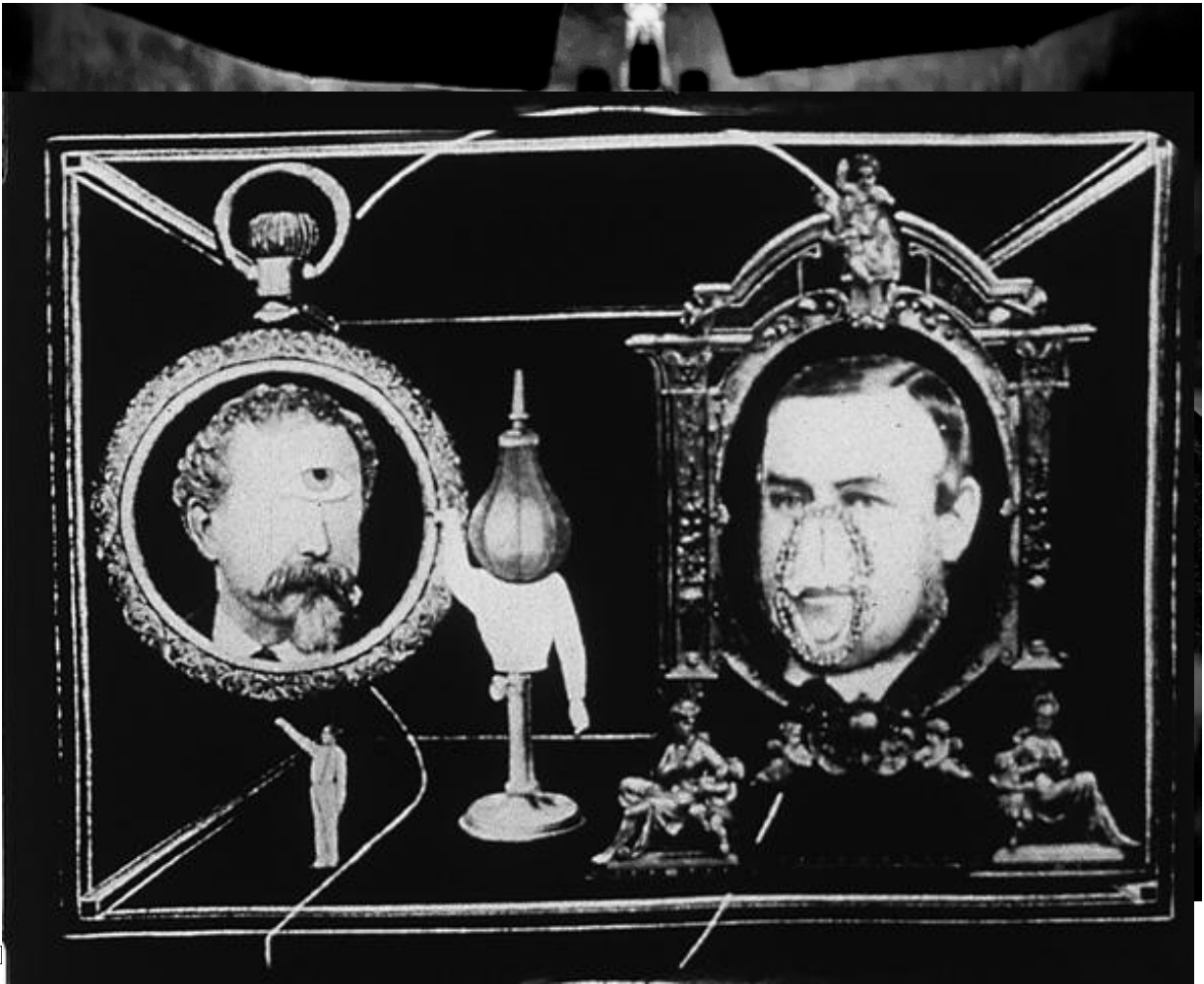


Fig. 9. *Film 12: Heaven & Earth Magic* (1957-1962). Dir. Harry Smith. Used with permission.

JOE FRANK

One of the biggest influences on my current work is the American radio artist Joe Frank (1938–2018). He created and hosted a one-hour radio show from the late ‘70s onward, consisting of absurdist monologues, phone calls, and scripted drama. His deep resonant voice “like dirty honey”³⁴ delivered stories filled with noir-ish menace and black humor, under which he’d run drones and/or looped music.³⁵ In the early ‘90s his show *Work in Progress* was broadcast in syndication on our local college station around midnight, the best time to hear these tales.

Around that time, I began volunteering at the same college radio station and met a group of radio artists influenced by Frank, Firesign Theater, Monty Python, and Negativland, and we began writing and performing monologues and dialogues in the same vein as part of a weekly radio show called *Off the Air*.³⁶ This show was short-lived and I didn’t return to radio until 2017 when I became a correspondent/writer/producer for KCRW’s Santa Barbara-based *Curious Coast* programme. Once again I was writing and performing my own texts and the experience reminded me of the significant power of text and voice.

So when I wound up a few years later with thirty poems on my hands, recording these works in a “late night” voice and providing collage-based tableaux, all bound for YouTube, was a way to once again explore Frank-ish voices and narratives. Although *Glocca Morra* doesn’t feature a low, soft voice, it demonstrates the influence of Frank in the specific context of its framing background drones and sound design. Moreover, the *Tales from Nowhereland* performance paid homage to Frank, and in so doing, I went as far as to research, source, and loop one of his original drones. However, Frank’s neuroses and mine share little Venn diagram crossover.

³⁴ Jamie Diamond, “Radio Noir : On the Air, a Voice like Dirty Honey Tells Stories Grim as Nightmares. If You Think Radio Is All Top 40, You Haven’t Heard Joe Frank.,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-11-22-tm-23630-story.html>.

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIhZuc6gYkM> Joe Frank, “Islands,” *Work in Progress*, Los Angeles, CA, KCRW, 1988. One of my favorite episodes.

³⁶ Colin Marshall. “Santa Barbara’s Sonic Satirists.” *The Santa Barbara Independent*, July 12, 2010. <https://www.independent.com/2010/07/12/santa-barbaras-sonic-satirists/>.

RUSSELL MILLS



Fig. 10. Russell Mills. *Driving Me Backwards: Meet my relations / All of them / Grinning Like Facepacks (d)*, 1977. Used with permission. Compare this with Fig. 8.

Another influence on the style of *Glocca Morra* is British artist Russell Mills (b. 1952), in particular his three-year Masters thesis work illustrating the lyrics of Brian Eno and collected in the book *More Dark Than Shark*³⁷. Here he used collage and illustration to complement the surreal, playful lyrics of the first four Eno albums, of which I was a rabid fan since 1987. Using “incorrect” materials (tea trays, gridded paper, duplicating machine base plates, etc.) as canvas, he half-illustrated, half-found objects to create these works (Fig. 10). *More Dark Than Shark* was one of the first art books I owned and one of the most consumed, so much so that certain Eno songs are forever associated with Mills’ art. The sense of playfulness in his method echoes throughout *Glocca Morra*.

³⁷ Brian Eno, Russell Mills, and Rick Poynor. 1984. *More Dark than Shark*. London: Faber And Faber.

MEMORIES



Fig. 11. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In): Memories 1*

There are five pages of the journal where my dad fills the space with names, fragments, dates, and memory triggers. These are the densest parts of the journal, and I wanted to create a series of films (Fig. 11) that replicated the density with a mix of family photos, historical photos of Islington, London (my dad's birthplace), and AI-created "vintage photos" of events referenced by my dad. There aren't many photos from my dad's side of the family, I might have the largest collection. And nobody else in the extended family, as far as I know, has taken on the role of family genealogist. I can understand about 80 percent of my dad's notes, as I can remember stories he told me; here he is telling those stories again.

One of the themes *Glocca Morra* explores is the stagnation of memory in somebody who became depressed. The narrative stops because it seemed like the story of his life had gone wrong, like he had taken the wrong path, or had the right path taken from him. And I realized over time that the well of memory was actually very shallow. These memories all came from the first ten years of his life, up to the point where he and his younger brother were relocated to the Essex village of Silver End. My dad was taken out of Hugh Myddelton Primary School, where he showed promise (and a way out of his poor upbringing), when the war came to London. Separation from his parents, suddenly responsibility for his younger brother, city life changed to that of the countryside—here was the trauma replayed over and over. He *did* speak on life in Silver End, but not in the rose-tinted way of those years in London.

Looking over all these memory landscapes is the moony visage of a cherubic child, created in DALL-E, a symbol of that ideal childhood that can never let my dad out of its sight.

HORSES

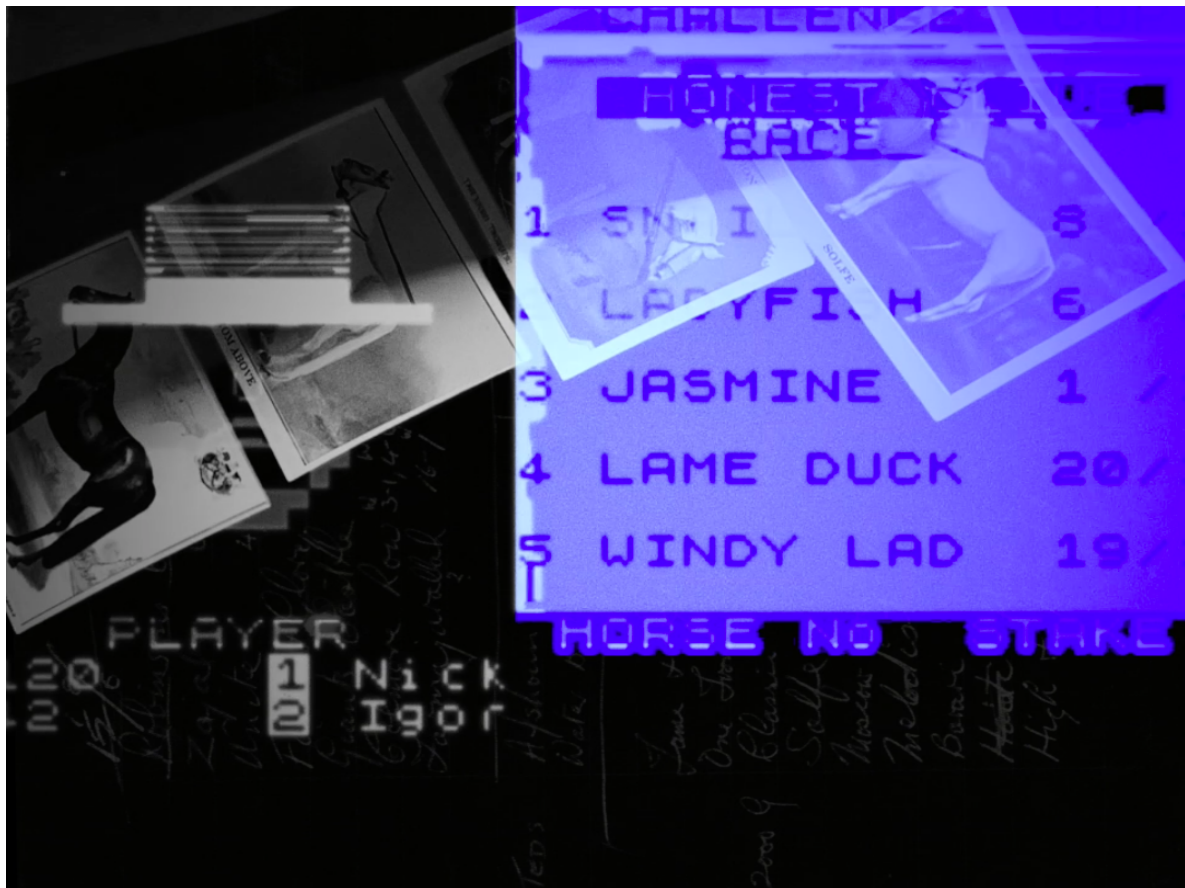


Fig. 12. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In): Horse 1*

My dad did most things in moderation. He drank, but I never saw him drunk or out of control. Alcoholism does not run in our family. He drank socially like most of his male peers, and I still remember the old divided pubs of the UK: a “saloon” where the men stood around near the bar, smoked, drank bitter, and talked. And next door the “lounge” where the wives, aunties, and grandmothers sat in plush booths and drank gin and tonics, vermouth, and brandy.

Likewise, he also played the horses and went to the dog racing (as the nearest horse track was too far for him). There was a betting shop in the village, hidden within a shoe repair shop, an open secret. And horse racing was on television during the day. But he never gambled that much, and didn't lose a lot of money. That didn't stop him, during our time in the UK, from trying to figure out a system to win at horse racing.

The horse racing pages in the journal are probably some of the earliest writings. Despite having the very idiosyncratic horse names at my disposal, it has been very difficult to pinpoint the races he was writing down, but likely it was in 1986–87.

I decided to recreate horses by using AI. Up through World War II, popular horses were available as collectible cards found in packs of cigarettes.³⁸ Instead of trying to source these through Etsy or eBay, I decided to turn to the machinations of DALL-E, using its “variations” function, and feeding it some of the higher quality scans of old cards. I then used Photoshop to give them the actual names from the journal, then printed the series out and dealt them like a pack of cards on top of a green screen. DALL-E added its own kind of sci-fi weirdness, giving some horses robot legs, or depicting horses in motion with leg joints that bent both backwards and sideways, or six-foot tall jockeys. (Fig. 13, 14)



Fig. 13. Horse card no. 1 *Robinson's* created in DALL-E.

³⁸ Historic UK. “Cigarette Cards and Cartophily,” July 4, 2017. <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Cigarette-Cards-Cartophily/>.



Fig. 14. Horse card no. 9 *Water Boatman* created in DALL-E.

To this I added a further video element: recordings of horse racing games that were available in the mid-1980s for the ZX Spectrum computer, the game console I owned at the time (Fig. 12). Audio was also sourced from video of the Grand National broadcast circa 1986. Whether real life gambling, card games, or video games, they are all games of chance where the house inevitably wins.

NATURAL MEDICINE

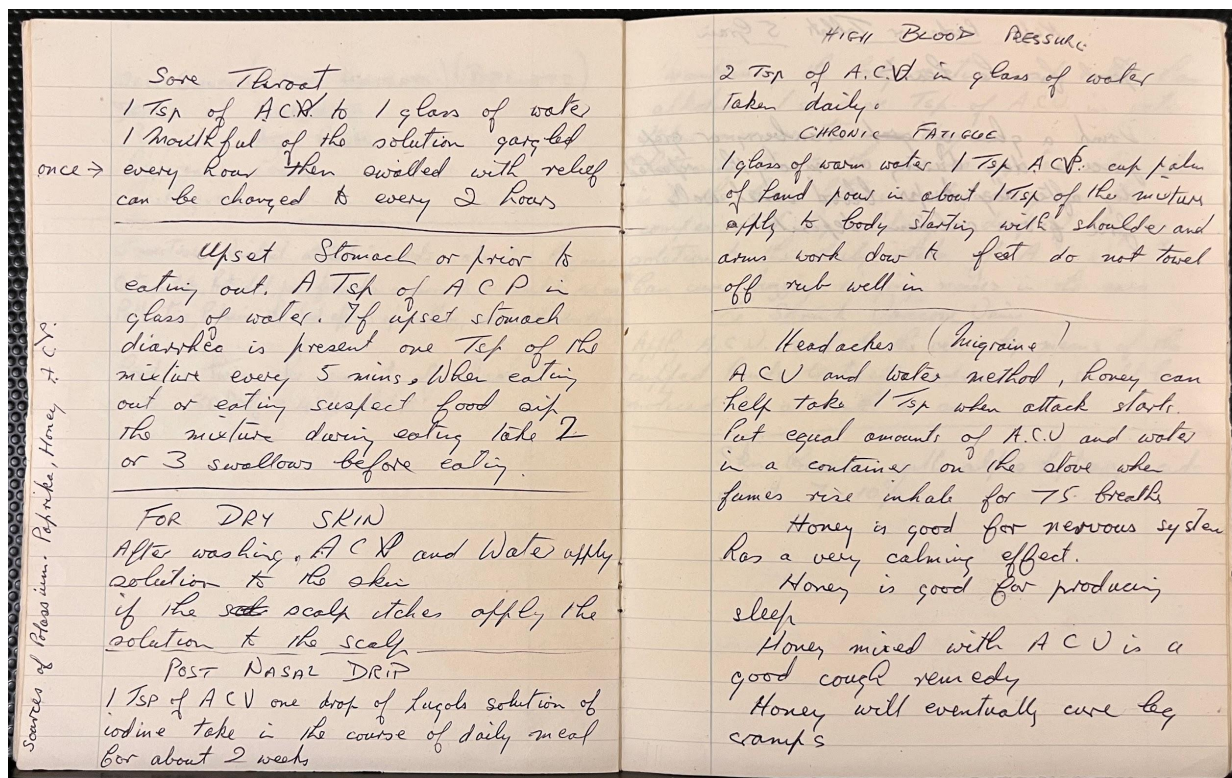


Fig. 15. Two pages from my father's journal focused on natural remedies.

Many pages of the journal are filled with notes my dad was writing down about natural remedies (Fig. 15). As a teenager I was aware of the poor circulation in his legs, his varicose veins, his thinning hair (out of the three Mills brothers, however, he had the best head of hair—I've inherited my hair gene from my maternal grandfather's side, thin but full. His medical history is a reaction to shoddy, non-existent healthcare in the UK, followed by its financial inaccessibility in the US.

He likely thought about outliving the age that his father died. He stopped smoking cold turkey when we moved to the UK. He came from a generation where everybody smoked, and he and his sister Shirley (the one who moved to California) are the only ones of the Mills clan that managed to quit. While we were in the UK, his mother passed away—my Nan. She'd been in hospital since 1981, after her stroke. (Actual trauma alert: I was the one who found her.) He processed it in his own way, but I never saw him cry about it. But going up to the hospital to see her was one of his weekly duties. The village doctor was pretty useless, and not known for his bedside manner. Taking control of his health was a way my dad took control of his life, which was often generally out of his control.

When we returned to Santa Barbara in 1989, my dad returned to our original family doctor, Dr. Kay, and did look after himself for a while. He was very much into supplements, but that was not uncommon in California. He was likely making up for the lack of such things during our UK sojourn.

The first natural remedy I remember was Apple Cider Vinegar, which provides the basis of most of his remedies. ACV was a cure-all that my dad learned about through television and newspaper supplements, and was very popular during this time (1980s/1990s)³⁹. (Example from his notes: *“Sore Throat: 1 tsp. of A.C.V. to one glass of water. 1 mouthful of the solution gargled once —>every hour then swallowed with relief can be changed to every two hours...Upset stomach or prior to eating out: A tsp of ACV in glass of water. If upset stomach diarrhea is present, one tsp of the mixture every 5 minutes. When eating out or eating suspect food sip the mixture during eating take 2 or 3 swallows before eating.”*)

He tried it on his thinning hair and on his poorly circulating legs. It was a gargle, a skin cure, and so much more! (I will vouch for one thing—a spoonful does settle a heartburn). When this turned up in our household, I’m not certain, as the US and UK were both susceptible to natural remedies. I know that homeopathic medicine—those little vials of sugar pills—were in our UK medicine cabinet.

I decided to treat these pages of the journal as a set of instructional videos, shooting myself against a green screen, and following the instructions as set down in his notes. I decided to video myself as he would have been—short sleeve shirt unbuttoned, underpants, post-shower. The shoot was also a chance to compare my not-exactly-healthy physique to what I remember of my dad’s. I don’t like to compare belly to belly, but I think I’m getting close to his beer-based one, despite my not drinking to the same extent he did (mostly beer, several pints a night) (Fig. 16).

Later on he would suffer from poor circulation in his legs, and then from a botched leg operation that made his condition even worse. My dad gave too many people the benefit of the doubt and didn’t want to be a bother, so while we lived in a country where medical malpractice suits are just a way of doing business, my dad never followed up on what was plain negligence. His other ailment, much later, and explaining the falling off of his handwriting, was macular degeneration, which creates a blank spot in the center of one’s vision. There’s little that science can do for this, and as peripheral vision works but the center does not, his conversations later in life involved him tilting his head.

³⁹ Nadia Berenstein. “The Myths, Benefits, and Legends of Apple Cider Vinegar.” *Epicurious*, July 28, 2022. <https://www.epicurious.com/ingredients/apple-cider-vinegar-history>.



Fig. 16. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In): Home Remedies 1*.

NIGHT THOUGHTS

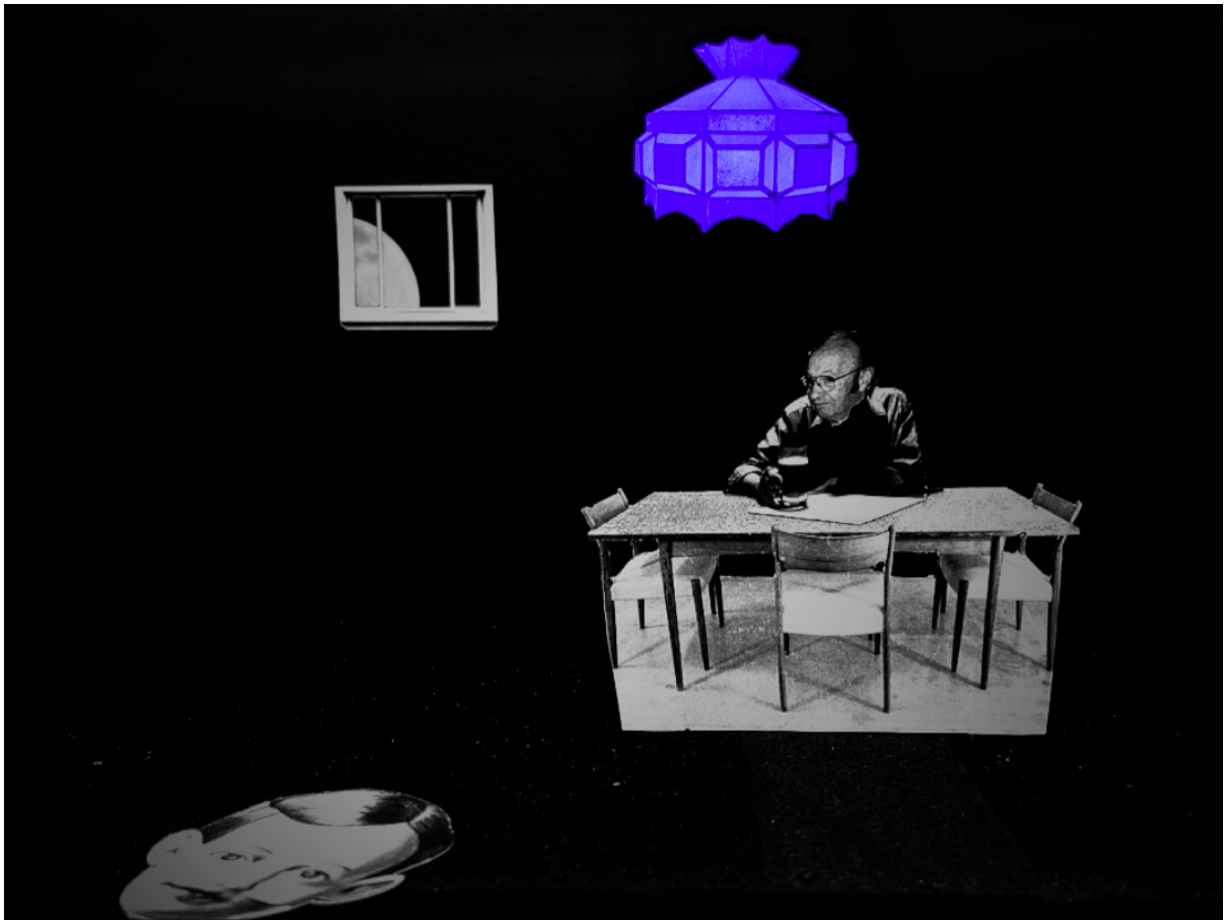


Fig. 17. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In): Night Thoughts 1*

The *Night Thoughts* series of videos involves my memory of my dad sitting in the kitchen at night, rolling thoughts around in his mind (Fig. 17). There’s a pint glass of beer, a “pizza parlor” glass lampshade, the kitchen window, and the surrounding ambient noises of the neighborhood — crickets, trains, a dog barking somewhere. These are the sounds of our Santa Barbara apartment after we returned to the States from the UK. I can’t say he shared these particular thoughts with me, though we discussed the first Gulf War a lot during those days. We both wound up reading Noam Chomsky. But the line about loneliness (“Daytime is easy but night is not your friend.”) jumped out at me—to me that became one of the treasures of the journal and one of my favorite moments in *Glocca Morra*.⁴⁰ I assumed he must have been lonely, but he did little to change that. So to see it written there was another glimpse into his heart.

⁴⁰ Crickets, distant trains, and dogs barking in the distance, are all evocative sounds.

INTRUSION/DECLINE

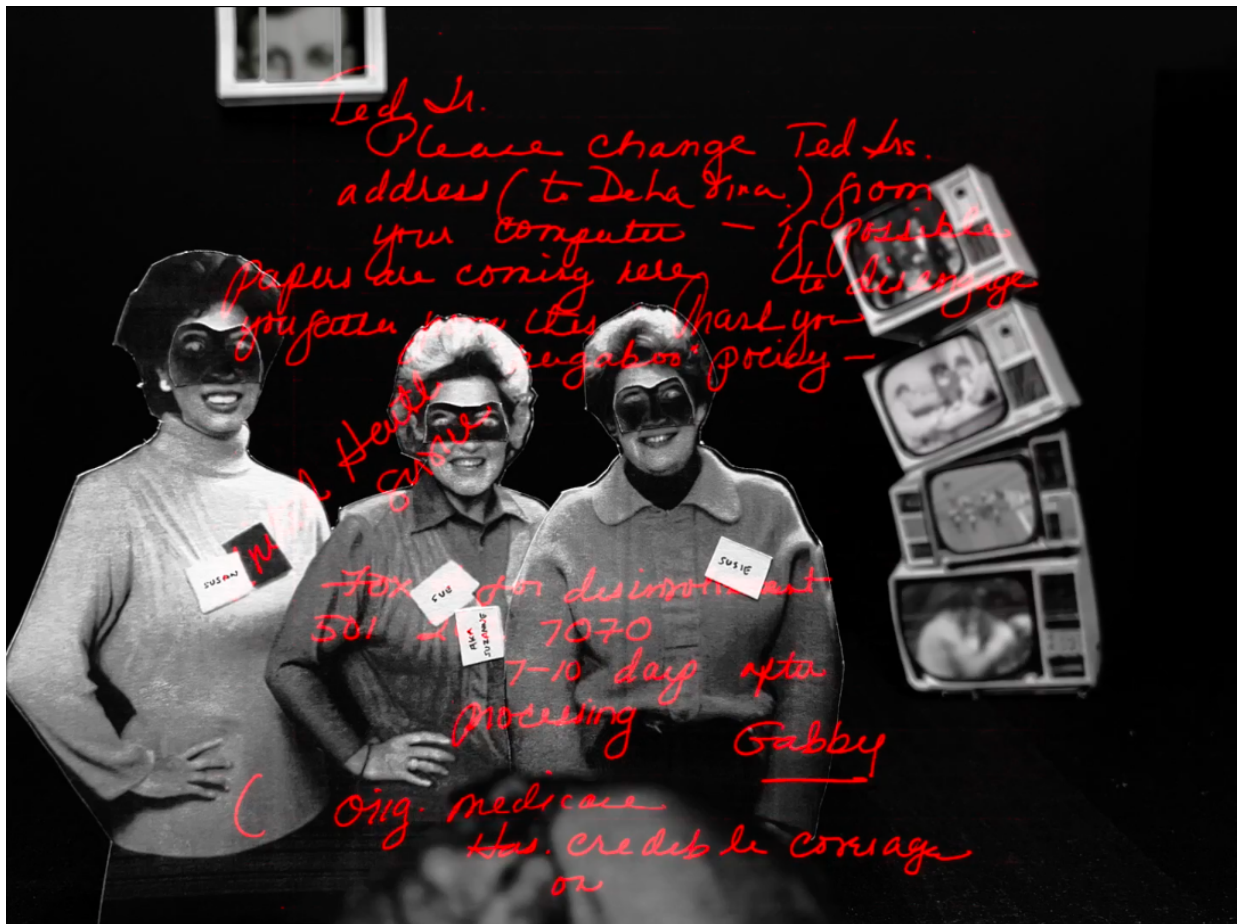


Fig. 18. Still from *Glocca Morra (How Are Things In): The Susans*.

My dad did not do well in assisted living. He had lost agency and did not take kindly to anyone telling him what to do, despite him having the hardest time doing things by himself. I became the go-between, his advocate, but also listened to the assisted living staff, and visiting nurses and therapists when needed. However, I did gasp when in the middle of the journal I found a page where “Susie” had written a note addressed to me, the son, about my dad’s complaints. It felt so invasive, this foreign handwriting in this private space. Having used blue as the only spot of color throughout most of the films in *Glocca Morra*, it made sense to render these writings in warning-light red (Fig. 18). For the voice I did not use AI, but instead manipulated my own voice, recording a parody of Laurie Anderson’s “male voice”⁴¹ and pitching it back up to something like a woman.

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVv4THSmzZ4>. Specifically her voice here in “Sharkey’s Night,” *Home of the Brave* (1986).

FAILURE (IS AN OPTION)

Glocca Morra addresses many things, and among them failure and regret. I'm not sure exactly what Dad's goals were before his marriage fell apart. It's a question that only came to me after his passing, especially as I am reaching the same age when he made these life choices. He was living the "American Dream" circa 1970, with a steady job and a middle class home. Theirs was an immigrant success story, and in so little time, just to fall apart in as many years. There was no sense of anything past divorce that was a "plan". Most things centered on simply surviving and raising me. But then I matured and left home, and he managed to survive. But he had no friends or helpful business partners or spiritual advisors. He had "family," which he often wrote and spoke about. He blamed my mom for ruining everything, but in time that became a comforting excuse to paper over his almost existential inability to fix his path. As I have mentioned elsewhere, he had mild depression.

And as I got older, I hoped that discussions in his later years would reveal some deeper truths, but when I tried to explore those hidden histories, my dad would fall back on reveries of the past, blaming my mother for all his woes, idealizing the past, even though the family that was so important to him rarely checked in on him. When I look at the journal, I can see those narratives going around and around, a sort of protective mantra. (Over those five pages of memory prompts mentioned above in the Memories section, there are numerous repetitions.) The closer I tried to get to the "truth," the more it eluded me. The narrative deflected all inquiries.

The journal is in some ways a visualization of that broken man and stuck mind. He starts reminiscing, then stops. He writes notes, scraps of information, a standout quote about loneliness which formed the basis for the *Night Thoughts 2*. *Glocca Morra* does not try to fill the gaps or answer the troubling questions. Instead it tries to replicate the circular narratives that are fending off any inquiry. At the same time, within the surreal space, truths can and will leak through, as per the *unheimlich*, "everything that ought to have remained...hidden and secret and has become visible."⁴²

There is also a personal fear within all this. I have also decided to restart a career, moved countries, and had my second marriage fail as a result of this decision.⁴³ It's not a repeat but themes echo, and sons try not to become their fathers if they can help it.⁴⁴ *Glocca Morra* continues the questions I have asked myself since my dad's death: could he have changed course? Are we doomed by trauma? Is nostalgia a terrible coping mechanism?

I know that *Glocca Morra* isn't the final word on my father. There's already a few stories about fathers prepared for *Tales from Nowhereland*. Not only did I carry the journal with me in the move, but his ashes. For now, I will let both of these rest, while I prepare the next step in an adventure that I hope won't be taking me back to my own personal *Glocca Morra*.

⁴² Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", 4.

⁴³ For further discussion, take me out for drinks.

⁴⁴ At least this is the philosophy of my three best male friends, all who are dealing with this question.

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POSTSCRIPT/DEDICATION



Fig. 21. Cheers to Edward Mills, 1927 - 2017

APPENDIX: EXPLORING DALL-E’S DEMON THROUGH “ENSHITTIFICATION”



Fig. 19. *Enshittified Trump 10*. Digital print, created with DALL-E.

I took a side trip for a week or so in July 2023 to create what I called *Enshittifications*, exploring DALL-E’s engine as a feedback loop. I wanted to find out what rested at the heart of the algorithm. DALL-E allows a user to upload a photo and then produce four “variations” on the image. One of those four can also be chosen for variation. However, most people stop at one variation or change the text input.

The word “enshittification” comes by way of writer Cory Doctorow, from a 2023 *Wired* article entitled “The ‘Enshittification’ of TikTok: Or how, exactly, platforms die.”⁴⁵ Doctorow defines his term in the opening paragraphs:

⁴⁵ Doctorow, Cory. “The ‘Enshittification’ of TikTok.” WIRED, January 23, 2023. <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/>.

HERE IS HOW platforms die: First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.

I call this enshittification...

Continuing, he offers the example of Amazon.com:

For many years, it operated at a loss, using its access to the capital markets to subsidize everything you bought. It sold goods below cost and shipped them below cost. It operated a clean and useful search. If you searched for a product, Amazon tried its damndest to put it at the top of the search results.

However:

Searching Amazon doesn't produce a list of the products that most closely match your search, it brings up a list of products whose sellers have paid the most to be at the top of that search. Those fees are built into the cost you pay for the product, and Amazon's "Most Favored Nation" requirement for sellers means that they can't sell more cheaply elsewhere, so Amazon has driven prices at every retailer.

Having monopolized its industry through offering its customers free services (think Facebook, Twitter, and other social media), these sites then turn inward, consuming themselves.

Working with Doctorow's neologism "enshittification" as a metaphor, feeding the AI engine that powers DALL-E would potentially reveal what lies underneath. For the original element, I selected photos of 10 of the worst people (IMHO) currently making 2023 a comparative hellscape: Elon Musk, Donald Trump (Fig. 19, 20), Rupert Murdoch, Mark Zuckerberg, Andrew Tate, Joe Rogan, J.K. Rowling, Joe Biden, Jeff Bezos, Jordan Peterson.

My artistic input was limited to selection of the original image and which of the four variations to choose. For the former, the criteria reduced to: an image that didn't editorialize (I chose Trump's official White House portrait for example), and contained an interesting background (as DALL-E prefers multiple elements). The latter was choosing the most grotesque, interesting, or unnerving of the four.

I discovered that DALL-E starts to become surreal about 5 iterations in, then plateaus around 15, and keeps delivering in a similar fashion after 20. I briefly considered going further than 20 but DALL-E did not make the next attempts (23, 24 times) any more interesting to pursue visually. For nearly all of the 10 portraits, DALL-E will settle on a plastic figurine-style end goal, each comically terrifying. Mark Zuckerberg evolved into a devilish Wednesday Addams figurine.

Only the image of Trump sent DALL-E heading towards abstraction: the original stars and stripes behind him continued to morph into Rauschenberg-like meditations, and his screaming rictus returned again and again as a metonymic body part representing the whole.



Fig. 20. *Enshittified Trump 20*. Digital print, created with DALL-E.

After conducting eight of these experiments, I grew disinterested. But after 10, I was officially over it. Not that I was imbuing the algorithm with an anthropomorphized heart, but there really was nothing interesting at the center, just a smoothing into digital code, into a FunkoPop vision of everything.