



Framed in front of a staticky TV monitor, Karen's subjectivity is influenced by the media and further washed out and disfigured by video reproduction in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*.

Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics

Lucas Hilderbrand

The year is 1970, and suddenly the nation finds itself asking the question, “What if, instead of the riots and assassinations, the protests and the drugs, instead of the angry words and hard-rock sounds, we were to hear something soft and smooth, and see something of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith?” This was the year that put the song onto the charts that made the Carpenters a household word.

—*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*

The Carpenters have “only just begun” when a male narrator dryly delivers this speculative historical analysis. His somber voice is juxtaposed with flickering, pixelated period images shot off the surface of a television monitor: bombs falling, California governor Ronald Reagan, an American flag, a flurry of angry protesters, Richard Nixon with his daughter Tricia, a stock photo of a happy heterosexual couple, and the final triumphant moments of a beauty pageant. Immediately following this commentary and montage, the opening piano notes of “(They Long to Be) Close to You” knell on the soundtrack as the film cuts to the inside of a

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recording studio. The camera pans to show Karen in the booth, and just at the moment when she should begin singing, “Why do birds suddenly appear,” she coughs instead.¹

“Karen, are you all right?” asks her brother Richard, the musical duo’s other half. “I’m sorry, Richard,” she replies. “God-damn, I’m really flubbing it up today, aren’t I? I’m sorry, guys. I don’t know what’s the matter with me.” “Just relax. Take a deep breath,” Richard coaches. “Look, we’ll just do it until it’s right. Just do what I tell you, and it will be great.” Karen responds, “I just want it to be *perfect*.” And in her retake, it is.

This sequence appears early in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (dir. Todd Haynes, US, 1987), a forty-three-minute 16mm film that uses dolls to portray sibling supergroup the Carpenters’ rise to fame and singer Karen Carpenter’s struggle with anorexia. Since 1989, the film has been forced out of legitimate distribution and into an underground economy of bootleg circulation for copyright-infringing use of the Carpenters’ music. Although this scene presents an opportunity for its audience to hiss at Reagan’s appearance and to cackle at the plasticky good girl botching her signature song, the sequence also concisely presents the film’s critique of cultural signification and its personal effects. The contrasts among the iconic, reshot images of American culture, circa 1970, are striking, whereas the dissonance between the degraded footage and its indexical capacity to portray history—and between the rough images and the purported softness of the Carpenters’ sound—is perhaps more subtle. *Superstar* strips away the media’s surface sheen and exposes the human frailty behind easy (if often melancholy) listening. As I will argue in this essay, appropriated music and images function expressively within the text to reproduce the mass-mediated context of the Carpenters’ work and to re-present an affective cultural memory of the 1970s. Pirated videotapes of the film, by extension, inscribe a bootleg aesthetic that exhibits the audience’s engagement in a clandestine love affair—watching, sharing, and copying the illicit text so that the viewers’ reception of *Superstar* becomes historically, perceptually, and emotionally reshaped.

Superstar positions the sunny Californian Carpenters, whose

image as performers promoted conservative family values, as something of an anomaly during a period of social revolt. They were, however, extraordinarily popular and scored twenty top-forty hits between their debut single “Close to You” in 1970 and Karen Carpenter’s death by heart attack following an overdose of Ipecac syrup in 1983. Haynes’s *Superstar* is at once a portrait of a historical period and a critique of popular culture’s failure to respond adequately to it. Yet the Carpenters’ popularity may in fact suggest that their conservative image was not anomalous and that instead, perhaps, our skewed historical perspective erroneously assumes the majority of the population to have participated in the counterculture movement rather than longing for a stable status quo. Or, perhaps most commonly, viewers find themselves in the ambivalent position of singing along to songs they might otherwise be ashamed to enjoy.² As personal tastes in opposition to historically and socially specific trends, guilty pleasures are generational, so that younger viewers are perhaps less likely to feel shame about liking the Carpenters’ music—or feel its emotional resonance.

Haynes simulates the Carpenters’ domestic and professional dramas with a cast of Barbie-type dolls (and occasionally human body doubles and talking heads) and presents cultural context for the group’s fame and Karen’s body issues. In the process, the filmmaker structures the narrative through the generic modes of star biopics, disease-of-the-week television movies, health educational films, and feminist documentaries. Haynes imitates and combines familiar film and television genres not to critique these modes but to use them strategically to present allegorical narratives—functioning as shorthand for expressing the characters’ emotional states and for producing audience affect. Haynes’s focus on body genres and intertextuality in *Superstar* presents themes and modes that have remained central to his subsequent films. Haynes not only combines disparate narrative methodologies but also textures the film by interweaving a variety of media and formal styles. His work in *Superstar* was influenced by the late-seventies and early-eighties shift from purely formalist experimental cinema to an avant-garde cinema of narrative experimentation used to

explore social issues.³ At the time of the film's release, it would have proven difficult to miss the connections between Karen's anorexic wasting and the emaciating effects of AIDS. I suspect that the more historically removed we get from the 1980s public panic over AIDS, the less the text will be read allegorically, so that *Superstar* will increasingly be seen as "just" about eating disorders and media culture.

The film opens with a black-and-white point-of-view shot—"A Dramatization," as it is marked—that presents Karen's mother searching through a house and finding a dead body lying in the closet. The abrasive bass synthesizer score and the mother's cries of "Carrie!" suggest a horror film. The film then quickly changes tone, as a male narrator's authoritative voice offers rhetorical questions that promise to be answered to make sense of the horror. Mundane images of homes in Downey, California, drift across the screen as the fancy, cursive credits appear and Karen Carpenter's disembodied voice sings the familiar, sad opening verses of "Superstar." Following the discovery of Karen's corpse, the song has a surprisingly chilling effect—until it shifts to up-tempo beats for the chorus, when the sad love song inexplicably turns celebratory, drowning out the heartache scripted in the lyrics of youthful love and desperate hopes: "Don't you remember you told me you loved me, baby?" This song's shift in tone presents a dual affect of melancholy and feigned joviality; these are the emotional tensions and transitions that appear throughout the film's shifts in genre and address, alternately conveyed with irony and sincere mourning.⁴ The Carpenters' songs set the film's rhythm, and Karen Carpenter's authentic singing voice imbues the dolls with their much-acclaimed subjectivity. The film allows the audience to giggle early on at the dolls' stunt casting and joke moments—such as Karen's cough or punctuating shots of a human hand hitting a tambourine during "We've Only Just Begun"—before becoming progressively more tragic. Frequently the film operates in dual registers, as in the parodic educational film-within-the-film about anorexia, which is laughably didactic, yet conveys substantial information. Throughout *Superstar*, musical montages not only function as dress rehearsals for the complicated musical

structure of Haynes's later film *Velvet Goldmine* (UK/US, 1998) but also, as in *Goldmine*, present the visualizations of music that provide the essential narrative exposition while exploiting the songs' emotive potential.⁵ Without the melancholic sound of Karen Carpenter's sonorous voice and occasionally ironic literalizations of the lyrics, *Superstar* simply would not work.

Much of the fuss over the film has emphasized the novelty and, with a sentiment of skepticism undone, effectiveness of the doll stars. The doll scenes, however, comprise only about two-thirds of the screen time, and the "acted" scenes with dialogue look stiff in comparison to sequences in which the Carpenters' songs provide the primary soundtrack and inspiration for fluid montage sequences. Little critical attention has been given specifically to these musical montages or the use of appropriated footage during key dramatic moments throughout the film.

Although later writings on Haynes's oeuvre have alluded to the film's status as an underground classic and bootleg favorite, they have not attempted to account for its prevalence or the ways in which piracy has altered the text.⁶ Rather than solely positing the dolls' emotive capacity, I argue that the film's wit and its affective ability are attributable to its use of the Carpenters' music, to formal and generic play, and especially to the material degeneration of rerecorded videotape dubs. This essay attempts to reconstruct the film's all-too-brief public life and pose a reading of its bootleg aesthetics. Videotape duplication of the work formally changes the text so that its thematic concerns—mass-media distortion and its relations to subjective and bodily breakdown—become rendered on the surface; significantly, this analog duplication also makes evident the cult audience's participation in reproducing *Superstar*.

For All I Know

Superstar's reception has been significantly influenced by the conditions of its exhibition and circulation, even more so since its withdrawal from legitimate distribution. Therefore it seems essential to revisit the film's history and perhaps correct some of

the lore surrounding it prior to continuing with a reading of bootleg aesthetics.

Haynes's scholarly history—a bachelor of arts, with honors, in art and semiotics at Brown University in 1985—is referenced with remarkable regularity in articles on the filmmaker, as if to legitimize his stated intentions in academic publications and to peg him as brainy in popular ones. Less frequently cited, however, is Haynes's stint in the MFA program at Bard College, where he was enrolled in his first summer of studio work when he began producing *Superstar*, which he cowrote with friend and fellow Brown alumnus Cynthia Schneider. The film was funded in part by a grant from Art Matters Incorporated and was made using art-school and gallery resources in addition to the in-kind support of friends and family. As such, the film was conceived and produced as a student art project.⁷ Haynes initially pitched *Superstar* for screenings at museums and underground cinema spaces, rather than at film festivals, thereby indicating that he promoted the film as an art piece rather than as a commercially viable film. Early on, it was rejected by an impressive list of venues, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Collective for Living Cinema, the Millennium Film Workshop, and the Film Forum. As longtime collaborator and producer Christine Vachon recalls in *Down and Dirty Pictures*, the film was “too narrative” for some downtown venues.⁸ In other cases, decisions to decline showing *Superstar* were justified on the basis of institutional self-defense: a number of prospective exhibitors already feared that the film would cause legal problems because of uncleared music rights.

Haynes, however, found alternative venues for the film's public screening premieres: the film debuted at the East Village space Films Charas on 28 July 1987 and screened again with Haynes's previous film, *Assassins: A Film concerning Rimbaud* (US, 1985), two days later at Millennium, which Haynes rented for a semiprivate event. On 23 August, the film screened twice as part of the Karen Carpenter Night at Pyramid,⁹ a gay-friendly post-punk nightclub on Avenue A. Although they were public events, it is likely that only underground film and downtown nightlife insiders saw these first few screenings.

The film's public life came of age, however, with high-profile reviews by J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* and Barbara Kruger in *Artforum*. In one week in November, Hoberman featured *Superstar* as the second review in his lead film article, accompanied by a still of Karen's White House performance (snapped off a television set) and the headline "Valley of the Dolls."¹⁰ Hoberman's review was paired with a profile of Haynes, who was already being positioned as a formidable talent and a rising art star: "Haynes is receiving attention for his short films at a time when the experimental underground is experiencing only mild tremors."¹¹ The *Voice*, then more than today, was the arbiter of sub-cultural credibility and a must-read forum for arts criticism. The film received even more enthusiastic coverage as the sole topic of Kruger's December column, accompanied by a large if obscure production still of Haynes's hand holding a doll on the film set. Kruger summarily raved, "It is perhaps this small film's triumph that it can so economically sketch, with both laughter and chilling actuality, the conflation of patriotism, familial control, and bodily self-revulsion that drove Karen Carpenter and so many like her to strive for perfection and end up simply doing away with themselves."¹² These articles exposed a broader audience to Haynes, and an experimental film superstar was born.

That November, *Superstar* screened at the Naked Eye Cinema and had an extended run as a looped single-channel video installation in the exhibition *Social Studies* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.¹³ *Superstar* also played repeatedly at the 55 Mercer Street Gallery in December 1987 and January 1988, as well as at Artists Space in the spring 1988 exhibition *Unacceptable Appetites*, presented again as a looped single-channel video installation, here in the context of predominantly feminist videos about consumption, addiction, and body issues.¹⁴ During the first nine months of *Superstar*'s public exhibition, it was thus repeatedly presented within a gallery context on a monitor and probably seen by more viewers that way (although perhaps not in its entirety) than on film.

Judging from two retrospective accounts, *Superstar* was the rage of downtown New York in 1987—almost to the point of sat-

uration. When *Artforum* retrospectively looked at the 1980s art scene, *Superstar* was singled out as one of two featured milestones for the year; Andy Warhol's death was the other.¹⁵ Jim Hubbard, cofounder of the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, recalled, "I saw the film at least once and probably twice during the summer of 1987. . . . The film was shown so often and so many people saw it that I thought that everyone who wanted to see it would have by then. That's why we showed *Assassins* at the first festival instead. So much for my understanding of marketing and audiences."¹⁶

Although the film's public history as recounted so far has been limited to New York City, the film had a vibrant life across the country, with extensive popular screenings in 1988 and 1989. In 1988, the film finally played at a few festivals, including the USA Film Festival in Dallas, where it won the National Short Film and Video competition; the San Francisco International Film Festival, where it won the Golden Gate Grand Prize for Short Narrative; the United States Film Festival (renamed Sundance a few years later); and the Toronto International Film Festival. Concurrent with the film's festival events, it screened at museums, colleges, artist centers, and repertory houses as part of special events or midnight runs across the country.¹⁷ In addition, the film screened several times at the influential music venue Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey, where the film crossed over from film and gallery audiences to music ones, including the members of Sonic Youth, who later covered "Superstar" for the tribute album *If I Were a Carpenter* (1994). Haynes suggests these screenings "established the film in the alternative music world, where it surely influenced a Carpenters reappraisal."¹⁸

During the first two years of the film's release, *Superstar* had already been integrated into the curriculum for college courses and was being used at eating disorder clinics as an educational and discussion aid. Additionally, tapes circulated among film industry folks, who would watch *Superstar* over lunch hours or at parties; preview tapes had gone out to the press and curators as well. Haynes also sold approximately sixty VHS copies of the film (complete with homemade covers and transcriptions of the

film's difficult-to-read intertitles) through Amok bookstore in Los Angeles, and bootlegs were already available in alternative video stores across the country. In other words, both legitimate and pirated tapes already began circulating simultaneously with the film's theatrical showings. This range of public screenings and private viewings (a history likely unknown or fading) suggests the varied ways that *Superstar* was positioned for audiences: as an avant-garde art film, as a party musical, as a fan text, as a video artwork, as a midnight cult flick, as a festival indie, as a museum piece, as a pedagogical tool, as a therapeutic text, and as a collector's item. These multiple identities and modes of address may in part suggest the film's appeal to varied audiences on different affective and intellectual frequencies.

If the film's gimmick of using dolls for actors helped make it infamous, *Superstar's* ultimate withdrawal from official distribution due to legal trouble has made it legendary. Haynes was conscious during production that his film might court unwanted advances from both the Carpenters and Mattel. Coscreenwriter and coproducer Schneider, now a lawyer, began her forays into the legal field during production and conscientiously tried to avoid allegations of libel for the film by only portraying biographical details that had appeared in print. At around the same time—late in production—Haynes attempted to secure rights to the Carpenters' music by sending form letters to the various music publishers. "Top of the World," cowritten by Richard Carpenter, was among Haynes's requested tracks and later figured prominently in the film (all the other songs were written by other composers). Haynes received an immediate response from Richard Carpenter's representative asking for more information, and he replied with a synopsis and a personalized statement of intention, saying that the film was sympathetic to Karen Carpenter and explaining that it was a student film that would not be screened for commercial purposes. Two months later, Richard Carpenter's representative replied that Haynes could not make the film, use the songs, or portray any biographical information. By that point, *Superstar* was in late postproduction, and Haynes decided to complete the film anyway. Soon it began to screen publicly, and for a

couple of years Haynes did not hear back from Richard Carpenter's representatives or anyone else in the music industry. Significantly, Haynes's press release for *Superstar*'s first three screenings acknowledged its outlaw status in the first sentence: "*Superstar* is an unauthorized film . . . using Barbie-sized dolls."¹⁹ The phrase "Barbie-sized dolls" is especially interesting because it seems to anticipate and circumscribe Haynes's first near lawsuit following the film's release.

Mattel, the manufacturer and patent owner of Barbie, her pals, products, and trademarked identity, first took notice of the film in 1988. The corporation was already involved in lawsuits against knockoff products and was clearly intent on protecting its market share by whatever legal means necessary. The company expressed concern about associations between their products and death, fearing that portraying a Barbie doll as anorexic would mar her happy, healthy image. Mattel sent Haynes a series of letters, including one with copies of their patents for Barbie and her various individual body parts—Barbie was not merely a brand but also the precise width of her arm or curvature of her torso. The dolls used in the film were an assortment of Mattel and Mattel-like products (for instance, Dionne Warwick was reportedly embodied by the head of a Michael Jackson figure attached to a female doll body),²⁰ mostly found at thrift stores and rendered unrecognizable by appearing in the drag of period garb and remolded faces. As a gesture of good faith, Haynes offered to add either a disclaimer stating that the dolls in the film were not Mattel products and not to be confused with them, or a note of gratitude to the company for their after-the-fact permission. Mattel never responded or pursued full-fledged legal action against the film. Since the film's release and suppression, however, a flurry of doll media and criticism has been produced, and Mattel has threatened such projects as Mark Napier's Internet images *The Distorted Barbie* (1997) and the Brazilian short *Barbie Can Also Be Sad* (*Barbie también puede estar triste*, dir. Albertina Carri, 2001). Late in 2003, a federal appeals court ruled that "Mattel cannot use trademark laws to censor all parodies or satires which use [Barbie's] name."²¹

One issue that plagues the Barbie name is its common usage. The term *Barbie* has, in effect, experienced “genericide”—the moment at which a trademarked name no longer refers exclusively to a specific brand identity, but is used generically to refer to the product category itself—so that, through common usage, *Barbie* has come to mean pretty much any doll of a certain size and style. In these instances, corporate trademark owners attempt to prevent their protected names from becoming public domain by “advertis[ing] their proprietorship over the brand name”—for instance, through phrasings such as “Barbie-brand dolls” instead of simply “Barbie”—and by policing appropriation of brand identities through correspondence (such as that Haynes received) from corporate affairs or legal departments.²² Mattel’s efforts to control Barbie usage are especially interesting because they contradict the basic premise of doll play: children (and adults) use dolls to enact imagined, unauthorized narratives. At times, these fabrications are based on corporate-owned mythologies and brand identities (playing Barbie), but just as often—if not more so—doll play rehearses generic situations (playing “house” or “school”) or reenacts actual personalities and events (playing Karen Carpenter through Barbie). Part of *Superstar*’s transgression is rendering private play in a public forum.

Superstar’s legal troubles resumed in October 1989,²³ when Haynes received three cease-and-desist letters: one from Richard Carpenter’s music publisher (Almo Music Corporation/Hammer and Nails Music Incorporated, ASCAP), one from the Carpenters’ label (A & M Records), and one from the Karen Carpenter estate. These letters and subsequent correspondence charged that *Superstar* violated copyright laws through unauthorized use of the Carpenters’ logo (which appears on props throughout the film, such as the drum kit and miniature albums), their images (such as the photograph of Karen and Richard Carpenter on the wall in Karen’s bedroom), life story, and music. The objection to uses of the logo and likeness, which function as authenticating markers within the plastic *mise-en-scène*, points to a desire not only to protect the Carpenters’ privacy and property but also very literally to preserve the duo’s image(s). But it is the Carpenters’ music, used without per-

mission, that poses the insurmountable obstacle to the film's above-ground circulation.²⁴

Reproduced without significant alteration, the songs as used in *Superstar* do not fit within the confines of a parody defense, wherein only the minimum necessary resemblance to the parodied text is excused from copyright restrictions. Perhaps a stronger case could be made under the so-called fair use defense, which protects the portioned use of copyrighted materials for critical examination. As written, fair use guidelines are intentionally vague and open to interpretation, and lawsuits against artists who have appropriated copyrighted material have tended to settle out of court, so relatively few legal precedents exist. Perhaps not surprisingly, court rulings on these issues have historically given the greatest weight to the issue of financial damages or market loss due to infringements. Significantly, Haynes was not asked to pay any damages for copyright infringement; instead, the legal correspondence demanded that the film be completely removed from circulation.

The press has characterized the motivation behind the injunctions as the result of Richard Carpenter's personal offense, but in fact, these assumptions remain unsubstantiated. However, it is clear that the case against the film was never phrased in terms of the artist's or record company's revenue loss or desire to recoup damages. Indeed, if anything, *Superstar's* popularity increased sales of the Carpenters' albums and functioned as an incredibly effective promotional film for the by-then unfashionable duo. Attempting to negotiate, Haynes requested that the film be allowed to continue screening nontheatrically and noncommercially as an educational tool for schools and clinics, offering to donate all proceeds from rentals to the Karen Carpenter Foundation for Anorexia Research. Haynes's proposal was declined, and the final agreement stipulated that the film could not screen publicly and that Haynes had to do everything he could to stop circulation of videotapes (such as recalling them from video stores). Richard Carpenter did allow for one major concession, seeming to understand his fellow artist's need to build and promote a career: Haynes can show the film to critics in relation to his other

work. Since 1989, Haynes and his lawyers have made some efforts to clear the ban on the film so that it can be released again. Although it seems that Haynes could make a clear case that *Superstar* uses the Carpenters' songs in a critical, even scholarly, way, and although he has proposed a nonprofit intention for distribution, the glitch in the film's potential fair use defense comes from the song clips' extended durations. One of the four criteria that determines fair use is "the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole."²⁵

For a film that has been removed from distribution and historically difficult to access, *Superstar* has had an astonishing, seemingly irrepressible afterlife. Although its primary mode of circulation since late 1989 has been through an informal underground network of shared bootleg videotapes, *Superstar* continues to be seen in group-audience (if not always exactly *public*) settings. Friends of mine recalled seeing the film in the early 1990s in a variety of settings, from a Dallas nightclub to a party in a rented Los Angeles storefront to a Washington, DC, cult film club's monthly bar night to a meeting of the São Paulo Carpenters Fan Club. University classrooms continue to rank among the most prevalent venues for illegal—if educational—screenings. But semicautious institutions and festivals have also repeatedly made this "surprise," "secret," and "early" Haynes short available for public consumption, typically within the context of the filmmaker's other work or within doll-themed programs; the film either shows unannounced or is promoted through keywords (such as those indicated above) for in-the-know audiences. Museums, microcinemas, theaters, and festivals in San Francisco in 1999, Columbus, Ohio, in 2000, Queens in 2002, Providence, Rhode Island, in 2003, Brooklyn in 2003, and Austin, Texas, in 2003 have recently screened a certain unmentionable (and therefore undocumented) Haynes film—in some cases on 16mm and making a point to publicize that fact. According to Haynes, who self-distributed the film, five 16mm prints were struck and in release in the late eighties; three of the prints that circulated remain unaccounted for, presumably lost in the flurry of screenings as venues frequently shipped prints directly to the next play dates, rather than return-

ing them directly to Haynes. Sources for post-1989 16mm screenings remain dubious.

Other public events have explicitly lauded the work's illicit status for the counterculture kids, advertising the film by title and assuredly showing bootlegged videos. For instance, in 2002–3, *Superstar* toured as part of the exhibition *Illegal Art: Freedom of Expression in the Corporate Age* to such prominent venues as Anthology Film Archives in New York, the Roxie Cinema in San Francisco, and the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia. Ironically, the publicity for the *Illegal Art* show ran the disclaimer “Used without permission” at the end of its *Superstar* blurb, a note that did not appear in other descriptions for individual works.²⁶ The drive to show and share the film must be worth the gamble for venues—a testament to programmers’ and audiences’ love for it. To my mind, the most telling promotional text for a *Superstar* screening appeared in the calendar listing for a 1998 event at the Blinding Light Cinema in Vancouver, Canada: “Though we swore we’d never show it again . . . due to overwhelming public demand we are pleased to present this long-banned underground classic. . . . the mediocre quality dub which you [will] see here, [is] viewed with a certain charm and respect rarely given to degraded video.”²⁷

Grainy Days and Mondays

As the Vancouver screening advertisement mentions, the bootleg tapes of *Superstar* typically reveal lost resolution from multiple generations of duplication, so that the color looks washed out and the audio sounds distorted. The standard transfer format—the American NTSC VHS—ranks among the lowest-fidelity commercial tape stocks, and VHS-to-VHS dubs reveal steep resolution loss from generation to generation. This residue, interestingly, places the *Superstar* bootlegging phenomenon within a specific technological moment: it only became possible with the pervasiveness of personal VCRs, while the generational deterioration specific to analog recording predates digital video reproduction, which has no information loss (although digital formats may be

just as quickly obsolete).²⁸ Since the film went underground, isolated hush-hush and self-consciously transgressive 16mm screenings offer film purists opportunities to see the work in a more pristine condition than bootleg tapes offer. When I saw *Superstar* projected on 16mm, the auditorium was packed with people who had seen (and likely owned) pirated copies but had never seen the film “in the flesh.” As a low-budget film shot over the course of a couple of weekends, *Superstar*, even in its original format, still has nearly illegible titles, generally grainy images, and shrill sound. Seeing the film on film made me nostalgic for my warped dub at home. For me, part of the experience was missing.

Analog reproduction of the text, rather than destroying the original’s aura, actually reconstructs it. Materially, the fallout of the image and sound mark each successive copy as an illicit object, a forbidden pleasure watched and shared and loved to exhaustion. Furthermore, the deresolution of the tapes formally reflects the narrative of Karen’s wasting away. The film’s theme becomes expressed on the tapes’ surfaces, even as deterioration obscures the visual and audio information, thus frustrating standard spectatorial engagement with the narrative.

Not entirely coincidentally, the period portrayed in *Superstar* overlaps with the rise of video as a medium, artists’ and intellectuals’ engagement with Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” musings,²⁹ and the American academic adoption of French poststructuralist critiques of sign systems. Notably, Haynes pirated not only music for his film but television footage as well. Taped from television broadcasts with a VCR and then played back and reshot in 16mm from the surface of a monitor, these images appear with the film camera’s flicker out of sync with the televisual pixel scanning, so that the images are distressed by black lines rolling vertically across the screen and by loss from the transfer between formats. Although Haynes worked to minimize the deterioration effect during production, a trace of the format mismatch remains and contributes to the film’s expressive effect. Of course, film has been shot off of television monitors since the television medium’s first transmissions; prior to the invention of videotape recorders, live television broadcasts were documented

(kinescoped) by filming screens receiving the signal. This was a standard process that in many instances continued well after the development of magnetic tape and that accounts, in part, for the flicker and extreme contrast in extant early television footage. These images both suggest a nostalgic, decayed quality and foreground their own plasticity.

Although there is a rich history of reused film in underground cinema—*Rose Hobart* (dir. Joseph Cornell, US, 1936), *A Movie* (dir. Bruce Conner, US, 1958), and *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* (dir. Ken Jacobs, US, 1969), to name the most canonical examples—the invention of video technology has made corporate media more accessible for repurposing. Dara Birnbaum is generally credited as the pioneer of television appropriation in short-form video art with *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (US, 1978); subsequently “found” footage has seen exponential use in video art. Galleries and festivals today show a near surfeit of appropriated images, typically from Hollywood films and commercial television, used to critique consumer culture, problematize spectatorship, or demonstrate the texts’ roles in personal identity formation.³⁰ Informed primarily by contemporary art criticism and cultural studies, the discussions of these modes of image recycling typically focus on the concepts of recontextualization or appropriation. However, the effects and potential affects of material distortion that occur in all these works tend to be overlooked.

Haynes uses found footage as television transmissions and media-effected memory in *Superstar*. Television monitors appear within the miniature mise-en-scènes throughout the film, and footage is intercut to rupture the diegesis of the doll scenes. Although the references are identifiable in the distressed footage of President Nixon, the American troops in Vietnam and Cambodia, the protests on the domestic front, and moments from *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74), *The Partridge Family* (1970–74), and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), they do not necessarily refer to specific speeches, moments of war, or episodes of sitcoms, but to a general cultural memory of the time.³¹ Here Haynes’s appropriation functions less as a recontextualization or subversion of corporate

media than as a historicizing method to present the cultural context for the Carpenters' anachronistically wholesome stardom and music that "led a raucous nation smoothly into the seventies." But their purported "smoothness" jars with the rough-textured television-to-film (-to bootleg video) footage, emphasizing a disjuncture between Karen Carpenter's soothing voice and the violence that is documented and remembered.³²

In other words, the duplication degeneration that appears within Haynes's film—complemented by a Carpenters soundtrack—presents a historical distance that can be read nostalgically. At the same time, this resolution loss exerts pressure against the images and frames them as representations. As I read the film, *Superstar's* critical analysis of media influence is persistently in tension with the emotional allure of an entertainment utopia, and fondness and respect for Karen Carpenter are essential for a sympathetic engagement with it.

As a film about simulation, hypocritical images, media reproduction, and self-destruction, the narrative and its aesthetic to a certain extent challenge each other, even as they are conceptually complementary. Although the film was conceived as a test case of sorts to see whether inanimate dolls could generate spectator identification, the experiment is not a seamless one. The film is composed of abrupt generic shifts and jump-cut ruptures that foreground the work as image and sound, not as constitutive of a diegetic world. K. Burdette has written the most extensive and rigorous published study of *Superstar*, decoding the signs and queer meanings in the film: "The cumulative effect of pastiching together contrived dramatic scenarios enacted by plastic dolls, the Carpenters' now dated and hopelessly sentimental music, and found footage from seventies sitcoms serves to expose the patent artifice (and outrageousness) of these images/texts/structures and the inadequacy of the ideologies they embody. . . . It's this concern with the oppressive and alienating effects of these cultural norms which makes *Superstar* queer."³³ Burdette presents an insightful reading of the film's construction, but this analysis does not consider the film's perceptual or emotional resonance. I disagree with Burdette's appraisal of the Carpenters' music, and



The appropriated image of David Cassidy reveals formal distress and manipulation.

therein may lie our different responses and agendas. Whereas Burdette writes of the film's queer politics, I take these meanings as given and am more interested in charting the murkier territory of media affects. The use of appropriated footage within the film not only presents the film's mediascape setting; the images also incorporate nostalgic symbolism intensified through accompanying songs, montage, and formal distressing.

Although I am not invested in presenting an essentially queer reading of Haynes, the film may, in part, reflect his identity-defined subjective relationship to historical popular culture. Roger Hallas has wonderfully articulated this structure of feeling in relation to found footage in AIDS media: "A significant number of experimental films and videos . . . approach the visual archive of popular culture as a rich source of affect, rather than merely as a site for ideological analysis. . . . This is a cinema of moments. . . . Central to these practices is what I am calling gay cinephilia—the set of gay cultural practices revolving around a collectively shared passion for cinema and its history."³⁴ Haynes's



Karen smears food on her face as she binges in front of a broadcast of *The Brady Bunch*.

historical genre work, in particular *Far from Heaven* (US/France, 2002), has outed his personal cinephilia; it is with television that he has a much more ambivalent relationship. Haynes has recalled his complicated relationship to the entertainment of the period: “The early Seventies had felt like the last moment of pure, popular culture fantasy and fakeness that I shared with my parents, when we were still united in this image of happy American familyhood. . . . And The Carpenters’ music seemed especially emblematic of that time.”³⁵ What Haynes describes is simultaneously a desire for and a distrust of a perfectly constructed pop and television past.

Superstar repeatedly presents Karen watching television. Early on, she watches a televised performance with her family, and it is by seeing herself on television that she increasingly misperceives her body as overweight. By the end of the film, when she has moved to Century City to live on her own, a solitary and starving Karen stares blankly at her giant television screen, and the footage becomes staticky. Karen’s loss of self-control and subjective breakdown are portrayed through a disarray of television images edited amid documents of Holocaust-emaciated corpses

and a woman vomiting. Simultaneously, slowed-down, overlapping samples of Carpenters songs and snippets of dialogue replay on the audio track. The effect both literally deconstructs media images and formally expresses Karen's self-perception as mediated by television. The media's direct effects on Karen are made even more explicit through close-ups framing Karen in front of imposing televisual transmissions.³⁶ The distressing of appropriated footage functions expressionistically as a device to convey Karen's psychological state, reflecting the film's themes in its form. Subsequent, repeated video reproduction of bootleg videotapes has compounded this effect, so that the image loss with each successive VHS-to-VHS duplicate aesthetically reflects Karen's subjective and bodily wasting: her disappearing body becomes manifest in the material information loss.

Little has been written describing the effects of decay and reconfiguration that occur when video is reshot on film—or when it is then repeatedly recorded from video to video. In examining the pervasive piracy in Nigeria, anthropologist Brian Larkin acknowledges the aesthetics of distortion evident in third-world, black-market reproductions; in the process he has written the only qualitative discussion of video duplication I have seen.³⁷ Within cinema studies, Laura Marks has emerged as the pioneer on this materialist frontier, most notably with her essay “Loving the Disappearing Image,” in which she acknowledges an erotics of image deterioration, whether due to age, wear, or artistic intervention. Marks, following Vivian Sobchack's work, proposes that cinematic identification is founded in a bodily relationship to the screen and that films and videos that present hard-to-see, deteriorating, or pixelated images offer a haptic, melancholic empathy. But rather than presenting death as horrible, these mortified images offer the viewer a new, tangible, intimate, and frequently beautiful relationship to material loss. Reading through Freud (*Mourning and Melancholia*) and against Roland Barthes (*Camera Lucida*), the texts that Marks analyzes can be interpreted as materialist eulogies for loved ones who have died (particularly from AIDS-related illnesses) or simply for terminated relationships. Marks writes, “The works I discuss here turn their attention to the

images that were *not* precious but merely efficacious: the porno, the medical film. Loving a disappearing image can be a way of rescuing something that was not loved in its own time.”³⁸ Made just four years after Karen Carpenter’s death, *Superstar* used the Carpenters’ music before a retro cycle had reclaimed it, and it represents the singer to audiences too alternative or too cool to have taken her seriously the first time around. Haynes demonstrates enormous affection for Karen Carpenter and admiration for her vocal talent, even as he uses distressed TV footage and scrapes away the character’s plastic face.

Certain contemporary video art pieces have intentionally exhibited video decay. Slater Bradley’s *Factory Archives* (US, 2001) conceptually employs resolution loss from format shifting and duplication. Bradley shot footage of an actor portraying Joy Division front man Ian Curtis and transferred it from video to his computer and back again until it became so distressed and blurred that it could pass for an old, weathered tape, and the actor (with ultimately indistinguishable features) could pass for the deceased musician. Bradley’s tape offers a fascinating instance of video dropout and distortion used to create the text’s nostalgic tone and to simulate authenticity. A formalist exploitation of distressed video also functions in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *K.I.P.* (US, 2001) to present a history of desire. Nguyen edited footage from old video store gay porno tapes starring Kip Knoll that had been stretched, distorted, and damaged by viewer abuse—presumably from pausing, slow-motioning, rewinding, and replaying the most intensely sexy moments. Nguyen taped the footage from a television monitor, with his own reflection visible in the on-screen glare. This piece presents an archive of erotic consumption recorded (or, perhaps more appropriately, stripped) on the magnetic surface of the tapes themselves. These two texts use video decay—one through reproduction, the other through wear—that materially reflects the real-life death (Curtis) or disappearance (Knoll) of the figure on screen. The effect is one of melancholic videophilia—an aesthetic that finds the beauty in formal mourning—visible and audible on *Superstar* bootlegs as well.³⁹

Haynes’s nonsynchronous television-to-film recording can

easily be distinguished from cult audiences' video-to-video reproduction: sharp pixelation, scrambled signals, and visible, rolling black lines are clearly present in Haynes's piracy, whereas the video dubbing makes the image less focused and washes out the color intensity. Viewers of the bootlegs, extending Marks's argument, engage with the text on a medium-specific basis, knowing from the film's first moments (if not from word of mouth even earlier) that they are watching a self-reflexive collage of images that have been further decayed through wear and reproduction. To trot out an oft-cited Barthes argument yet again, video dubbing materially records the audience's (reader's) use and abuse, rendering the "death of the author." Haynes is quite likely the most theoretically influenced and self-conscious contemporary American auteur, but Barthes's paradigm-shattering argument that readers produce textual meanings, not authors or critics, is helpful in articulating the role audiences play in recreating and redistributing *Superstar*. Haynes's unauthorized star study effectively becomes "un-author-ized" through video reproduction. To phrase the issue in Barthes's terms, Haynes's use of found footage *expresses*—both Karen Carpenter's psychological state and a culture and media critique—whereas the video-to-video bootlegging *inscribes*—both a duplicated mourning of Karen Carpenter's death and a history of the video's circulation.⁴⁰ As Marks points out, every tape decays in a unique way, and I would add that every duplication has a unique effect on the transfer, so that each pirated cassette becomes a singular text that contains and compounds its circulatory history. Furthermore, the video signal's distress and disappearance, which cause tracking problems in far-from-heavenly VHS cassettes, call attention to the tapes as copies, illicit copies. These blurry bootlegs foreground piracy and remind us that we are indulging in pleurably transgressive viewing acts.

The filmmaker's expressions are not erased by bootleg inscriptions, but rather, the effect is one of mediation as the compound filtering of multiple-generation bootlegs alters the viewing experience. Although typically used and conceived as a transparent access format rather than as a formal medium, analog video-

tape's specific properties become most apparent in such instances of duplication degradation. Watching a bootleg increasingly becomes a constant negotiation of one's own perceptual attention; the viewer must choose to focus on the distortion or attempt to peer *through* it to see Haynes's original intended images, and must fill in the muffled pop tunes from memory while listening closely to comprehend the garbled dialogue.⁴¹ I suggest that watching distressed tapes of *Superstar* presents a model of spectatorship perhaps more illustrative of Christian Metz's formulation of cinematic identification than classical Hollywood cinema (although the ideological effects certainly differ): the video viewer becomes more aware of the medium through its interference, and thereby primary identification is with the viewer's own gaze, as Metz suggested, while identification with the anthropomorphic dolls must be secondary.⁴²

Although Metz attempted to move beyond the phenomenology of classical film theory, phenomenologist Marks engages Metz's model in "Loving the Disappearing Image." However, she presents an alternative identificatory duality: primary "identification with dispersion, the loss of oneself" and secondary identification with the inanimate thingness of the media and the objects onscreen.⁴³ In arguing against a Lacanian fear of alterity, Marks celebrates an amorphous fusing of one's own subjectivity with the materiality of a fleshy, decaying image. Metz and Marks present fundamentally differing approaches to human sensation: Metz divides the senses between those of contact (taste, smell, touch) and those of distance (sight, sound), whereas Marks desires to close the gap between touch and sight through the concept of haptic vision.⁴⁴ Yet as Marks herself is aware, no matter how much we feel, we know we are not actually touching the image. When video reproduction alters the tape's surface, it does so in a way that forces us to recognize our own visual and aural concentration. What Marks describes does not seem like a process of identification; rather, the video noise textures the image so that the "haptics" are perhaps better articulated as the polymorphous pleasure of dispersed sensation (to exchange Jacques Lacan's psycho-developmental mirror stage for Freud's sexual

developmental phase). One need not—and maybe cannot—“identify” with distortion in order to appreciate it. And readings that focus on spectatorial identification with the dolls (which is, of course, part of the experience and enabled by the soundtrack) while ignoring the film’s clever self-reflexivity and the bootlegs’ textural pleasures overlook much of *Superstar*’s affective potential. Identification in relation to bootleg aesthetics occurs through recognition of our own perceptual experiences.

As I will argue in the next section, subjectivity is additionally produced through relationships to the videocassettes themselves. Metz and Marks converge on a cinephilic point: “The cinema is a body . . . a fetish that can be loved.”⁴⁵ Fetishism—in religious, Marxist, Freudian, and vernacular conceptions—describes the associative values invested in objects that transcend their materiality. Bootlegged tapes of *Superstar* multiply function as fetishes: as precious objects, as the products of reproductive labor, as substitutes for absent film prints or commercially produced videos (not to mention Karen Carpenter herself), and as souvenirs of the fans who have made them.

(They Long to Be) Close to *Superstar*

Superstar’s unplanned bootleg circulation presents a democratization of distribution at the same time that it makes access elitist. Seeing or obtaining tapes, at least until they became available through eBay, depended on insider connections or simply the contingency of being in the right place at the right time. In addition to the conceptual connections that I have suggested between the narrative and the formal degeneration, the wear and fallout of pirated tapes present material evidence of fan use, duplication, and dissemination—marking an unwritten (and otherwise impossible-to-retrace) history of circulation. Catherine Grant and Tahani Nadim have pointed out the social relations evident in bootlegging: “The network of bootlegging is a way of relating to collaborators, audiences and guests that is as constitutive of the participants as it is a means to distribute artwork.”⁴⁶ Whereas the footage Haynes reshoots and inserts works (in part) to locate

the narrative within a specific historical setting, the defocusing and paling effects of video duplication suggest the tapes' geographic and temporal dispersion. The uncontainable and in many ways untraceable exchange of tapes produces a proliferation of meanings, responses, and personal engagements with the text. I like to think of the exponential duping and distribution of bootleg tapes as something akin to scattering Karen Carpenter's ashes—not tossed to the wind or into the ocean, but into the collections of fans and cinephiles. Of course, there is also the alternate perspective that bootleg circulation keeps the film and Karen Carpenter alive.

In *Superstar's* case, bootlegging thus resonates for viewers beyond formal concerns. Indeed the cassettes themselves come to be, to appropriate Ann Cvetkovich's phrase, "an archive of feelings."⁴⁷ In researching the film's and pirated tapes' ephemeral circulation, I sent out an informal mass e-mail inquiry to friends and colleagues who I assumed had seen *Superstar*, asking where they had first viewed it and if they had acquired their own copies. I received numerous enthusiastic responses detailing specific personal experiences; these replies revealed a spectrum of encounters and collection policies, all of which ultimately demonstrated considerable attachment to the tapes. I received anecdotes about illicit means of accessing personal copies, such as secretly duping a tape borrowed from a professor, stealing a tape from a boss, and nearly stealing a tape from a roommate. Some tracked down copies at specific alternative video stores or swap meets in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Providence, Northampton, and New York City. Most friends told all, while a few were adamant that their *Superstar* suppliers "remain nameless." Some attempted to account for the degrees of separation between their copy and the filmmaker—and, by extension, there were frequent speculations about what duplication generation their tapes were (third generation seems to be a popular, if unlikely, estimate). I heard of personal preservation strategies, such as supervising all screenings to avoid having a loaned tape lost and, impressively, remastering a bootleg onto a sturdier Beta format. A few viewers reported that their old bootlegs had worn out and that they had

tracked down replacement copies. One friend recounted showing a black-and-white dub of *Superstar* while teaching an urban youth media production class in Chicago; in spite of the tape's poor quality, the kids had such strong emotional responses to the film that it became the model for their own projects. A couple of people even reported having watched the tape on first dates; the lure of seeing a rare film apparently functions as a viable seduction tactic. Friends replying that they had not seen the film expressed a desire to do so—rather something close to insistence that I show it to them—or, in one case, embarrassment about not being able to claim the cool cachet of having seen it.

What all these anecdotes suggest is the multiplicity of values these tapes represent to their collectors. Although in most cases the root motivation for obtaining copies may simply have been one of wanting to possess a favorite text, *Superstar's* out-of-distribution status complicates the tapes' values. The film's relative scarcity, of course, drives viewers to reproduce tapes when they finally have access. These actions suggest viewers' fears that they may not obtain tapes again, as well as dedication to preserving their continued personal access. Higher-resolution dupes—those fewer generations removed from a master and displaying less distortion—are hot commodities, and eBay entrepreneurs make a point of advertising the quality of their copies available for bidding. The bootlegging phenomenon, in effect, has created a do-it-yourself strategy to preserve the work and keep it in semi-public circulation through a wily network of tape sharing.⁴⁸

While acknowledging that collectors are motivated by a text's rarity or, conversely, sudden availability, Charles Tashiro has suggested that video collecting is predominantly based on irrational "emotional" reasons, whether one has a completionist strategy that never allows time to watch the videos, or buys things on impulse without any apparent logic. He creates a hierarchy between acquisitions that are liked and those that are loved; liked ones are frequently viewed on tape—a format that inevitably wears out—while loved ones (or those that one should love and own) are often promoted to digital disc formats that sit on the

shelf in pristine, unused condition.⁴⁹ Tashiro's very personal account is provocative in the context of *Superstar*—both in his assertion that videotapes are intended to be disposable and in his acknowledgment that our collections reflect our subjective idiosyncrasies, as well as the tastes with which we feel obliged to identify. The like/love contradiction is also legible in bootleg proprietorship: the like impulse prompts the fan to watch and share the text as much as possible, whereas the love impulse makes preservation the priority. In the latter, there is a fear of watching the text too much—and thereby risking physical wear and emotional inoculation, corporeally damaging the cassette and getting sick of its content. A video collection and its uses thereby reveal its owner's personality on the shelf. Indeed, as Jean Baudrillard states, "it is invariably *oneself* that one collects."⁵⁰

My e-mail survey basically confirmed my assumptions about the economics of the bootlegs' circulation, but what really struck me about the replies was that in every case, the respondents recalled the exact sources and circumstances of obtaining personal copies. Even if they did not remember precise dates, they claimed to remember who gave them the tapes and what their relationships were, and they frequently specified whether their connections came through school, work, friends, relatives, or auctions. Each individual tape has been invested with a sentimental personal association or a quest narrative, such that it not only safeguards its owner's access to a favorite text but also preserves a personal history. A particularly affecting response came from Jim Hubbard, whose copy is quite literally a memento mori: "I have a VHS copy (more a copy of a copy of a copy of Dior) that I inherited from a writer friend who died in November 1994. . . . To me it's more important as an object that belonged to my friend Dave than as Todd's film (which is rather poorly represented by this copy)."⁵¹ Bootleg tapes exist as souvenirs of specific periods in their collectors' lives, intimate and professional relationships, and searches for elusive objects. By virtue of its underground, bootleg-based circulation, *Superstar* has primarily and significantly been available through *personal* connections. The tapes, then, not only present

an emotional narrative dependent on the viewers' nostalgic associations with the Carpenters' music and the "naive" early-seventies pop culture but also evoke memories of the tapes' sources.

After a decade-plus of underground life, *Superstar* cannot be discussed outside the context of its distribution. Nor, I argue, can it be analyzed without looking at the meanings encoded onto the dubbed tapes. As a film in which the surface expresses the emotional and physical states of its main character, as well as its political critique, it is perhaps fortuitous that *Superstar* has become primarily accessible in low-fidelity reproductions. Bootleg aesthetics visually and acoustically replicate the psychological and physical trauma experienced by Karen in the narrative; these warbled tapes also record the cult audience's participation in remaking the text with each new duplicate produced and circulated. One of the great ironies of bootlegging is that it preserves *Superstar* in the public's possession as it progressively destroys the original work. Piracy repeatedly renders the collective demise of the narrative subject, the author, and the format. Karen and Todd, we love you to death.

Notes

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1. Throughout this essay, historical persons will be referenced by their full names, while the doll characters in the film will be identified by first name—except in the final moment, when the two become conflated.
2. See, for example, Coco Fusco, "Regimes of Normalcy," *Afterimage* 16 (1988): 18.
3. Haynes refers to Sally Potter's *Thriller* (UK, 1979) as a particular influence. Todd Haynes, telephone interview with the author, 12 August 2003.

4. The film can only be read as camp in the sense defined by Richard Dyer—"passion-with-irony"—in "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 155.
5. *Superstar* and *Velvet Goldmine* cover approximately the same period of popular culture (1969–83 in *Superstar* and early 1970s–84 in *Goldmine*), but the two modes of music are literally worlds apart: the Carpenters presented a wholesome image of grounded, all-American normalcy, whereas *Goldmine's* glam rock persona Maxwell Demon purports to bring an extraterrestrial polysexuality to earth.
6. In 2003, *Superstar* ranked forty-fifth on *Entertainment Weekly's* list of the top fifty cult films of all time (Sumeet Bal et al., "The Top Fifty Cult Movies," *Entertainment Weekly*, 23 May 2003, 38). A *Film Threat* article on *Superstar* for the feature series "The Bootleg Files" commented on the *EW* poll: "Most of the choices were predictable, more than a few were fairly silly, but one stood out since it was the only film which attained cult status strictly because it can only be seen via bootleg video: . . . *Superstar*" (Phil Hall, "The Bootleg Files: *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*," *Film Threat*, 23 October 2003, www.filmthreat.com/Features.asp?Id=840).
7. Except where noted, production and legal histories are based on a telephone interview with the filmmaker, 12 August 2003.
8. Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 108. Biskind inaccurately called the film "a flop downtown." It may have faced initial rejection from programmers, but it quickly found audiences. The film eventually screened at the Collective for Living Cinema on April Fools' Day, 1988. Film listings, *New York Times*, 1 April 1988.
9. Todd Haynes, press release, July 1987, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center.
10. J. Hoberman, "Valley of the Dolls," *Village Voice*, 24 November 1987, 67.
11. Lisa Kennedy, "Doll Boy," *Village Voice*, 24 November 1987, 68.
12. Barbara Kruger, "Into Thin Air," *Artforum*, December 1987, 108.

13. The show was organized by William Olander and opened 20 November 1987. See New Museum: Exhibition History, www.newmuseum.org/more_exh_s_studies.php (accessed 7 June 2003).
14. Organized by Micki McGee, the exhibition ran 25 February–2 April 1988. Unacceptable Appetites exhibition pamphlet (New York: Artists Space, 1988), n.p.
15. Rhonda Lieberman, “Todd Haynes’s *Superstar*,” *Artforum*, April 2003, 93; and Stephen Koch, “Andy Warhol, 1928–1987,” *Artforum*, April 2003, 94.
16. Jim Hubbard, e-mail correspondence, 8 September 2003. The festival ran 16–20 September 1987 at the Millennium.
17. In 1988, *Superstar* screened at the Castro Theater (San Francisco), the American Museum of the Moving Image (Astoria, NY), the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY), Hallwalls (Buffalo, NY), the Pasadena Filmforum (Pasadena, CA), Cornell University (Ithaca, NY), and Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY). In 1989, the film had a popular theatrical run at the Biograph Theater (Washington, DC) and screened Friday midnights at the Castro (San Francisco); it had single screenings at the Brattle Theater (Cambridge, MA) and the Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC). Although I have been unable to confirm exact dates, it also screened at the New City Theater (Seattle) and a Laemmle theater (Los Angeles), on video at the Randolph Street Gallery (Chicago), and had extremely popular, extended theatrical runs at the Music Box Theater (Chicago) and the UC Berkeley Theater. I have reconstructed the screening history from my interview with Haynes, various e-mail correspondences, and event listings from relevant publications.
18. Todd Haynes, e-mail correspondence with author, 30 September 2003.
19. Haynes, press release.
20. Alice Echols, “Low-Impact Horror: Todd Haynes Talks about His New Movie, *Safe*,” *LA Weekly*, 30 June 1995.
21. Lawrence Van Gelder, “Arts Briefing,” *New York Times*, 31 December 2003, archived online at www.nytimes.com. Information about The Distorted Barbie can be found at

- users.rcn.com/napier.interport/barbie/barbie.html (accessed 8 August 2003), including a link to reproductions of the 10 October 1997 letter that Mattel sent to Napier's Web site host. *Barbie Can Also Be Sad* presents dolls of various genders (including an intersex Barbie with male genitalia) involved in an orgy. Mattel intervened in a screening of the tape in Mexico, although it had already screened in the United States as part of MIX NYC in 2001 and at the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2002. Other post-*Superstar* Barbie-centric video productions include the Barbie Liberation Organization's *BLO Nightly News* (1994), Paper Tiger TV's *Twist Barbie: Lynn Spigel Dreams of Plastic Feminism* (1994), and Joe Gibbons's *Barbie's Audition* (1995) and *Multiple Barbie* (1998).
22. On genericide, see Rosemary J. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 79–82.
 23. Manohla Dargis, "Toward Director's Chair," *Interview*, May 1990, 30.
 24. The published screenplay includes reprint permission notices for lyrics to all the Carpenters' songs in the film except "Top of the World." Todd Haynes, *Three Screenplays* (New York: Grove, 2003).
 25. *Copyright Law of the United States*, circular 92 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2003), 18. For an excellent, humanities-friendly introduction to copyright law, see Martha Buskirk, "Commodification as Censor: Copyright and Fair Use," *October*, no. 60 (1992): 83–109. Fair use formed part of the major revisions of copyright law enacted in 1976; like the concept of public domain, it is premised on the belief that educational, critical, and creative uses of existing works are for the public good. In the late 1970s, Betamax video recorders were targeted in a major lawsuit, *Sony v. Universal*, in which Hollywood studios alleged that the machine was a copyright-infringing device. In the early eighties, the suit was appealed to the Supreme Court, which found for Sony because of the machine's potential for noninfringing uses, effectively allowing for the mass personal use of VCRs. See Ronald V. Bettig, *Copyrighting Culture: The Political Economy of Intellectual Property* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 151–87.

26. Illegal Art, illegal-art.org/video (accessed 7 June 2003).
27. The Blinding Light, www.blindinglight.com/prog.asp (accessed 7 June 2003).
28. Technically, *Superstar* has already entered the age of digital reproduction. While researching this essay, a friend sent me a CD with the film saved as an MPEG file; six months later, in the middle of revisions, I picked up a DVD with a startlingly high resolution transfer. The DVD's bright colors and crisp soundtrack suggest a vivid future life, but viewing the disc also confirmed the urgency of reflecting on the way so many fans have seen and shared the text—on videotape—during its first bootlegged incarnations before we forget what VHS looked like.
29. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994).
30. More recent uses are too numerous to recount in detail, but for an excellent discussion of contemporary video art, see Malcolm Turvey et al., "Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art," *October*, no. 104 (2003): 71–96.
31. Cultural memory, as affected history, is often mediated through popular culture texts and composed of recalled or revived personal pleasures that would otherwise go unrecorded. See Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins, "Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory," in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 117–48; Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns," in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 357–80; and Michael Zryd, "Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory," *Moving Image* 3 (2003): 40–61.
32. Marita Sturken writes on video art that explores cultural memory while negotiating the medium's tendency toward physical decay: "While the notion of a video databank utopically envisioned by these collectives conjured up alternative histories stored neatly in electronic space and accessible to everyone, in reality tapes are

- material objects that stick, erode, and warp. Yet in this dual role of image retention and loss, video has increasingly become a medium in which issues of collective and individual memory are being examined.” Marita Sturken, “The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–4.
33. K. Burdette, “Queer Readings/Queer Cinema: An Examination of the Early Work of Todd Haynes,” *Velvet Light Trap* 41 (1998): 75.
 34. Roger Hallas, “AIDS and Gay Cinephilia,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 52 (2003): 87–89.
 35. Quoted in Chuck Stephens, “Gentlemen Prefer Haynes: Of Dolls, Dioramas, and Disease: Todd Haynes’ *Safe* Passage,” *Film Comment*, July–August 1995, 77.
 36. Television plays a significant role in forming character identities throughout Haynes’s work. In *Poison* (US, 1991), a television news report outs the diseased scientist to his girlfriend. In *Dottie Gets Spanked* (US, 1993), the sitcom *The Dottie Show* provides the site of fandom and fantasy for protogay Steven. In *Safe* (US/UK, 1995), a jolting cut to color bars on a television monitor gets Carol White’s (and our) attention at a chemical allergy awareness meeting, and she later discovers Wrenwood through an infomercial. In *Velvet Goldmine*, the program *Top of the Pops* launches Brian Slade’s career and presents uncomfortable shared family time for young Arthur. In *Far from Heaven*, the television manufacturer Magnatech markets an iconography of modern and happy domesticity; in contrast, father Frank Whitacker discovers gay cruising at a dim movie palace.
 37. Brian Larkin, “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy,” *Public Culture* 16 (2004): 289–314.
 38. Laura Marks, “Loving a Disappearing Image,” in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 109.
 39. In the earlier, less affective work *Maxell* (US, 1990), Jonathan Horowitz conceptually and visually degraded the media

manufacturer's corporate image by repeatedly duplicating a ten-second shot of the word *Maxell*; over the course of six minutes, the work portrays the steady devolution of the brand name and its plain black background as it erupts into fits of gray streaks and scrambled video noise.

40. Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), 146.
41. This observation is influenced by James Elkin's fascinating essays in *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
42. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 45–49.
43. Marks, "Loving a Disappearing Image," 97.
44. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 59. Marks briefly notes Metz's division of the senses in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 210–11. Marks also explains her use of "haptic vision" in this book, xi, 162–64.
45. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 57.
46. Catherine Grant and Tahani Nadim, "'Working Things Out Together': The Joys of Bootlegging, Bartering, and Collectivity," *Parachute*, July–September 2003, 53.
47. I am not using the phrase in quite the way Cvetkovich does. See *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
48. Writing on television tapers and cassette collectors, Kim Bjarkman addresses "self-fashioned archives" of ephemeral broadcasts in an excellent and relevant article published as this essay was in the final proofing stages. Bjarkman, "To Have and to Hold: The Video Collector's Relationship with an Ethereal Medium," *Television and New Media* 5 (2004): 217–46.
49. Charles Tashiro, "The Contradictions of Video Collecting," *Film Quarterly* 45 (1991): 12.

50. Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," trans. Roger Cardinal, in *Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12.
51. Hubbard, e-mail correspondence.

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A dissolve from a close-up of Karen to a TV monitor with signal interference expresses her mental distress.

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