7. Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics[1]

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A beloved and moving oddity, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) uses dolls to portray 1970s sibling supergroup the Carpenters' rise to fame and singer Karen Carpenter's struggle with anorexia. Filmmaker Todd Haynes presents the Carpenters' music and personas as conflicting with their tumultuous historical context and with their own lives and desires. *Superstar* strips away the surface sheen of media images and exposes the human frailty behind easy (if often melancholy) listening. Originally a 16 mm film, *Superstar* has been prohibited from legitimate distribution since 1989 as a result of its unauthorized use of the Carpenters' music. And yet this featurette has survived through bootleg circulation and launched Haynes's career as an acclaimed filmmaker. VHS tapes of *Superstar*, which proliferated through multiple generations of dubbing, betray the fuzzy images and warbled soundtracks of analog video reproduction—what I call bootleg aesthetics or the aesthetics of access.

Appropriated music and images function expressively within the film to reproduce the mass-mediated context of the Carpenters' work and to re-present a cultural memory of the 1970s. Videotapes of the film, by extension, inscribed a bootleg aesthetic that exhibits the audience's engagement in a clandestine love affair—watching, sharing, and copying the illicit text so that viewers' reception of *Superstar* was historically, perceptually, and emotionally reshaped. Videotape duplication of the work formally changed the text so that its thematic concerns—distorted mass media and their relations to subjective and bodily breakdown—were rendered on the surface; the image loss with each successive VHS-to-VHS dub reflected Karen's subjective and bodily wasting aesthetically so that her disappearing anorexic body became manifest in the material information loss.

Significantly, this analog duplication also recorded the cult audience's participation in re-producing *Superstar*. Bootleggers' participation is not limited to distribution but is also aesthetic and affective. Because the tapes circulated primarily through personal connections, they also became souvenirs of relationships. This chapter presents the film's production, exhibition, and legal histories prior to examining the bootleg aesthetics inscribed onto videotape reproductions.

Yesterday Once More: Analog Videotape Aesthetics

Although perhaps most commonly used to play commercial releases of Hollywood movies, workout videos, and porn tapes, home video was introduced as a *blank* format for the purpose of recording television without permission. As I argue through the concept of bootlegs' aesthetics of access, the specificity of videotape becomes most apparent through repeated duplication, wear, and technical failure: that is, we recognize videotape as tape through its inherent properties of degeneration.[2] Magnetic tape's core functions are recording and erasing, but it is through errors, muck-ups, and decay that users may become most conscious of the tape. Videotape recorders erase tapes before re-recording them, and through human negligence or mechanical failure and quirks, sometimes programs get accidentally taped over or don't get recorded at all. Most home tapers experienced the frustration of realizing that they had taped over part of a recording that they meant to save, either because the cassette hadn't been labeled or cued properly or because the deck was programmed incorrectly. On playback, the viewer may experience jarring accidental jump-cuts between unrelated texts and only then realize that one thing has been taped over another. In addition, if commercials are elided or videos are edited using two VCRs rather than higher-end postproduction decks, the transitions between recordings will often produce snowy glitches, squirmy images, or sound distortion as the VCR heads recalibrate. Audiences learned to ignore analog video interference and to filter out the mediations and artifacts, but distortion was always present and perceptible.

Analog tape emerges as visible and audible through the way the image and soundtrack degenerate due to (repeated) reproduction or aging. Each format has a specific aesthetic of failure, and analog videotape has unique modes of decay. Old phonographs betray crisp crackles, and used celluloid prints bristle with pops, scratches, and splotches; digital media's "corruption" skips, freezes, exhibits blocky interference patterns, or becomes wholly unreadable and inoperable. In contrast, videotape's wear tends toward the softening interference of muffled rainbow flares (called video moiré), skewed images at the top and bottom of the frame (called flagwaving or skew error caused by stretched or distorted tapes), white specks (called dropout), lines of distortion (called noise bars), exaggerated pixels, jittery framing, and muted sounds. In more extreme cases, tapes damaged by VCRs can cause tracking problems or trigger a default blue screen if the heads cannot detect a video signal. I consider these technical faults to be indexical evidence of use and duration through time. Here, the technology becomes a text, and such recordings become historical records of audiences' interactions with the media objects, whether through use (stress from repeated contact between the tape and the VCR heads) or reproduction (analog softening of image and sound).

Analog media, for which duplication involves degeneration, reflect an aesthetic of access. The altered look and sound of a text through its reduced resolution is both a trade-off for our ability to engage with it and indexical evidence of its circulation and use. We see this in analog photocopies, microfilm, videotapes, and even low-resolution digital PDFs and streaming videos. And although I am hesitant to make reference to the overly cited (though inspiring) Walter Benjamin, it strikes me that this is a source of his ambivalence about reproductions of art in the modern age. Artworks lose their physical presence, ritual function, and authenticity when they are reduced to images, yet such images vastly expand the potential audience that may come to learn from and about them. Reproductions exchange aura for access (Benjamin 1969, 217–252). In addition, if we think of aesthetics as relational, technologies of access, such as videotape, alter the reception of texts by opening up the audience-text dynamic; audiences can review, fast forward, pause, or simply turn videos off. In some cases, videotapes are presumed to be empty vessels—storage devices to save television broadcasts, films, or video art—and yet the technology necessarily mediates not only access but also aesthetics. My dual emphases on both videotape's reproductive innovations and its decay may seem contradictory, even counter-intuitive. But I suggest we cannot experience one without the other.

The aesthetics of videotape are not merely matters of formalist specificity but also engaged in broader social and cultural issues of circulation, reception, historiography, and regulation. Bootlegging illuminates the aesthetics of analog videotape because it so often involves multiple generations of reproduction and offers practical models that have challenged, expanded, or provided alternatives to existing intellectual property or distribution paradigms. I define bootlegging broadly, to include most noncommercial practices of timeshifting (recording broadcasts off-air for later viewing), tape dubbing, importing, and sharing of media content that is not reasonably available commercially. Bootlegging functions to fill in the gaps of market failure (when something has not been commercially distributed), archival omissions (when something has not been preserved for historical study), and personal collections. In the digital video age, bootlegging also includes excerpting and sharing culturally significant or newsworthy corporate media clips. Despite the often negative or criminal connotations of the term, I use "bootlegging" to reclaim its productively illicit meanings, its intoxicating pleasures, and its amorous relationships between texts and audiences. In distinction, I define "piracy" as the black market or extra-market duplication and circulation of otherwise commercially available media.

Comparative academic histories of "old" and "new" media have been prone to juxtaposing vinyl LPs and CDs or celluloid and streaming digital video while erasing "middle-aged" or residual magnetic tapes and cassettes from the evolutions of formats and practices.[3] Analog videotape was once a new technology, which has now become obsolete. By treating magnetic tape technologies as merely transi-

tional and inferior to what came before and after, such work presents a distorted and incomplete account, which ignores the material and experiential attributes of these recording and playback technologies—and the new modes and expectations of access that they introduced. I agree with arguments against seeing new media as revolutionary; rather, new media reveal continuities, collaborations, and periods of coexistence as technologies change. New technologies do not necessarily kill media when they upgrade the devices (Thorburn and Jenkins 1999, 1–16). What's new about new media are specific technologies, interfaces, and uses, but these technologies often rework pre-existing practices and concepts and live on as residual formats or as material clutter and e-waste.

Ladies and Gentlemen: The Carpenters!

Haynes' *Superstar* (Fig. 7.1) is at once a portrait of a historical period and a critique of popular culture's failure to respond adequately to it. As performers whose image promoted conservative family values, *Superstar* positions the sunny Southern Californian Carpenters as something of an anomaly during a period of social revolt and political crisis. They were, however, an extraordinarily popular anomaly, who scored twenty Top 40 hits between their debut single "Close to You" in 1970 and anorexic Karen Carpenter's lethal heart attack following an overdose of Ipecac syrup in 1983.

In portraying Karen's life, Haynes presents the cultural context for the group's fame and her body issues. He simulates the Carpenters' domestic and professional dramas with a cast of Barbie-type dolls—and occasionally human body doubles and talking heads. In the process, the filmmaker structures the narrative through the generic modes of star biopics, disease-of-the-week TV movies, health educational films, and feminist documentaries. Haynes imitates and combines familiar film and television genres, not to critique these modes but to strategically use them to present allegorical narratives that function as shorthand for expressing the characters' emotional states and for producing audience affect. Haynes not only combines disparate narrative methodologies but also textures the film by interweaving a variety of media and aesthetic styles. His work in *Superstar* was influenced by the late-1970s/early-1980s shift from purely formalist experimental cinema to an avant-garde cinema of narrative experimentation used to explore social issues.[4] *Superstar*'s allegorical connections between Karen's anorexic wasting and the emaciating effects of AIDS would have been nearly unmissable at the time of the film's release. I suspect the more historically removed we get from the 1980s public panics over AIDS, the less the text will be received allegorically, and *Superstar* will be seen increasingly as "just" about eating disorders and media culture.

Figure 7.1: A screenshot from a bootleg copy of *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. The image reflects the visible distortion of VHS reproduction, including flagwaving and desaturation of color.

For those who have not seen *Superstar* or who do not have ready access to re-see it, I will begin with fairly detailed descriptions of a few early montage sequences to convey the film's complex structure. 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 film then quickly changes tone, as a male narrator's authoritative voice raises rhetorical questions that promise to be answered, to make sense of the horror. Mundane images of suburban Californian homes 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 up-tempo 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; such emotional tensions and transitions appear throughout the film's shifts in genre and address, alternately conveyed with irony and sincere mourning. If the film can be read as camp, it is only in the way suggested by Richard Dyer's description of gay male audience attachments: "passion-with-irony" (1986, 155).

Although predominantly shot using dolls for actors, *Superstar's* framings, camera movements, and editing adhere to live-action modes. (The film was shot as live

action, rather than as stop-motion animation.) Comically, the establishing shot for the family home in Downey, CA is superimposed with the label "A simulation." The domestic and performance scenes are shot in the manner of Douglas Sirk's melodramas (prefiguring Haynes' *Far From Heaven*), with pans showing Karen framed in windows or in the background and with relatively few close-ups. When the Carpenters perform "We've Only Just Begun" for a television broadcast, the camera movements and cutting resemble the construction and décor of the period's TV variety show musical numbers. The sequence segues into a standard music montage, with various cutaways to different activities documenting the Carpenters' offstage lives, presented in hokey Super 8 rear projection; the illusion is ruptured percussively, however, by repeated shots of a human hand hitting "a lackadaisically brandished tambourine" (Hoberman 1987, 67). The film allows the audience to giggle early on at the dolls' stunt casting and jokey moments 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. Although presenting a pathology in factual medical terms, the construction of the sequence mocks pedantic documentary form: broken up as it is by overly awkward live-action shots of women on the street asking basic questions such as "What is anorexia nervosa?" and "Do they really think they look good like that?" Adding to the comic effect while reconnecting the pseudo-doc to the narrative's plastic world, doll arms substitute for human stand-ins to illustrate the "normal" arm (chubby baby doll arm) and the "anorexic" body (Barbie-type doll body). The following "Top of the World" sequence recasts the meaning of the first line, "Such a feeling's comin' over me," as a reference to anorexic euphoria. This montage begins with a graphic match, cutting from a turning globe to a turning disco ball, and Karen's world tour diet of salads, iced tea, and Ex-Lax become a routine, edited with a rhythmic series of shots of a bathroom scale dial turning to measure Karen's diminishing weight. The sequence ends with the Carpenter family watching a performance together on television. While Richard and the parents cheer the TV act, Karen complains, "I looked really fat." The film posits that her self-perception was being increasingly mediated by television broadcasts and music critics' barbs.

Much of the fuss over the film has emphasized the novelty and, with a sentiment of skepticism undone, effectiveness of the doll stars. The film was conceived as a test case of sorts to see whether inanimate dolls can generate spectator sympathy and identification. Ironically, that the viewer can empathize reflects Barbie cocreator Ruth Handler's original intentions: she recalled that the original doll's "face was deliberately designed to be blank, without a personality, so that the projection of the child's dream could be on Barbie's face" (quoted in Mandeville 1990, 12, cited in Rand 1995, 40).

The doll scenes, however, only comprise about two-thirds of the screen time, and the "acted" doll scenes with dialogue look stiff in comparison to sequences when the Carpenters' songs provide the primary soundtrack and inspiration for fluid montage sequences. As in melodrama (literally, drama-plus-music), the Carpenters' songs trigger the emotional cues throughout the film, and Karen Carpenter's authentic singing voice imbues the dolls with their much-acclaimed subjectivity. *Superstar* viewers may find themselves in the ambivalent position of singing along to songs they might otherwise be embarrassed to enjoy, as Coco Fusco observed in her self-reflexive review of the film:

> I was stunned by the realization that I and everyone else in the room knew every lyric by heart. Those sappy tunes had infected us all, just as much, if not more than, the Grateful Dead. And the extraordinary response to the film, which transformed the 27-year-old Haynes into an avant-garde superstar just weeks after the *Village Voice* proclaimed the death of avant-garde cinema, signals that the film hit an ever-vibrant pop-cultural nerve. (Fusco 1988, 18)

Without the melancholic sound of Karen Carpenter's sonorous voice and occasionally ironic literalizations of the lyrics, *Superstar* simply wouldn't work (for a recent account of Karen Carpenter's resonance, see Tongson 2019). Rather than relying solely upon the dolls' emotive capacity, the film's wit and its affective ability are attributable to its use of the Carpenters' music, formal and generic play, and, on video, the material degeneration of re-recorded tapes.

For All I Know: A History of *Superstar*

Although writing on Haynes' oeuvre has alluded to the film's status as an underground classic and bootleg favorite, it had not previously attempted to account for its prevalence or the ways in which bootlegging has altered the text. *Superstar*'s reception has been influenced meaningfully by the conditions of its exhibition and circulation, even more so since its withdrawal from licit distribution. Therefore, it seems essential to revisit the film's history and perhaps correct some of the film's production and distribution lore prior to reading analog video copies' bootleg aesthetic (for a more detailed history, see Hilderbrand 2004, 61–70).

Exhibition History

Superstar debuted at the downtown New York spaces Films Charas and Millennium in July 1987. In August the film screened again as part of Karen Carpenter Night at Pyramid, a gay-friendly postpunk nightclub on Avenue A, which was a hotspot for dancing and performance at the time.[5] In late 1987 and early 1988, the film continued to screen, on film or as a video installation, at various venues in the city. Beyond New York City, the film also had a vibrant life across the country, with extensive popular screenings in 1988 and 1989. It screened at the USA Film Festival in Dallas, where it won the National Short Film and Video Competition; 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 Toronto International Film Festival. Concurrent with the film's festival events, it screened at museums, colleges, artist centers, and at rep houses as part of special events or midnight runs across the U.S.[6]

During the 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, presumably screening on video. Additionally, there were tapes circulating 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 difficult-to-read intertitles within the film, through a bookstore in Los Angeles, and bootlegs were already available in alternative video stores across the country. Thus, legitimate and bootleg tapes already began circulating simultaneously with the film's theatrical and gallery screenings.

The public screenings and private viewings recounted here, though falling short of comprehensive and ultimately impossible to document exhaustively, demonstrate the film's extensive screenings across the country. In addition, the range of venues and presentation modes suggest the varied ways it 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 and demonstrate the film's complexity.

Legal Problems

If the film's gimmick of using dolls for actors helped make it infamous, its withdrawal from official distribution due to legal trouble has made it legendary. Significantly, Haynes was conscious during production that his film might court unwanted advances—from both the Carpenters and Mattel. Coscreenwriter and co-

producer Cynthia Schneider, now a lawyer, was beginning her foray in the legal field during production and was conscious that the film could avoid allegations of libel by only portraying biographical details that had previously appeared in print. Late in the production of the film, Haynes also attempted to secure the rights to the Carpenters' music by sending letters to the various music publishers. "Top of the World," cowritten by Richard Carpenter, was among Haynes' requested tracks and 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 personalized statement of intention, expressing that the film was sympathetic to Karen Carpenter and explaining that it was a student film that would not be screened for commercial purposes.[7] 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 the film began to screen publicly, but for the next couple of years, Haynes did not hear back from Richard Carpenter's representatives—or other music publishers or record company officials.

Mattel, the manufacturer and owner of Barbie, her pals, her products, and her trademarked identity, first took notice of the film in 1988 but never pursued fully-fledged legal action or sought damages against the film.[8] *Superstar*'s legal problems officially started in October 1989, when Haynes received three cease and desist letters: one from Richard Carpenter's music publisher (Almo Music Corp./Hammer and Nails Music, Inc. 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' music, logo, likenesses, and life story.[9] The complaint against the film was never phrased in terms of the artist's or record company's revenue losses. If anything, *Superstar*'s popularity increased sales of the Carpenters' albums and functioned as an incredibly effective promotional vehicle for the by then unfashionable duo. 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. Richard Carpenter did allow for one major concession, seeming to understand a young artist's need to build and promote a career: Haynes could show the film to critics in relation to his other work. Since 1989, Haynes and his lawyers have made a couple of efforts to clear the ban on the film so that it can be released again; clearing the music rights remains the necessary precondition for its reemergence.

Back in Circulation

For a film that has been removed from official distribution and has been historically difficult to access, *Superstar* has had an astonishing, irrepressible afterlife. Although its primary mode of circulation between late 1989 and the mid-2000s was through an informal underground network of shared bootleg videotapes, *Superstar* continues to be seen in large-audience (if not always exactly *public*) settings. University classrooms continue to rank among the most prevalent venues for illicit—if educational—screenings. I've heard of a screening in, curiously enough, an "intro to video" class; it has also been taught in classes on narrative structures, alternative cinemas, film theory, feminism, American popular culture, documentary theory, and introduction to art. One friend first learned of the film when it showed in the first weeks of his brother's freshman-level intro to film class for production students, apparently screening early in the semester as both an eye-opener for youths who had never seen anything like it and as a model for what low-budget filmmakers could accomplish. Other friends have recalled seeing the film in the early 1990s in informal settings, from a Dallas nightclub to a party in a rented Los Angeles storefront to a Washington, D.C., cult film club's monthly bar night, to a meeting of the Sao Paolo Carpenters Fan Club, to a television broadcast in Amsterdam. In the mid-1990s, it is rumored to have screened at film festivals and micro-cinemas in Baltimore, Ann Arbor, and San Francisco and a major art museum in New York City. Since 2000, museums, micro-cinemas, theaters, and festivals from coast to coast (and to some extent overseas) have also repeatedly made this "surprise," "secret," "early" Haynes "short" available for public consumption—in rare cases on 16 mm and making a point to publicize that fact. *Superstar* typically screens within the context of the filmmaker's other work or within doll-themed programs and is either shown unannounced or promoted through keywords (in quotation marks above) for in-the-know audiences. 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.

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, where it screened repeatedly: "Though we swore we'd never show it again . . . due to overwhelming public demand we are pleased to present this long-banned underground classic. . . . [T]he mediocre quality dub which you [will] see here, [is] viewed with a certain charm and respect rarely given to degraded video."[10]

Grainy Days and Mondays: Theorizing Bootleg Aesthetics

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 typical transfer format—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 places the *Superstar* bootlegging phenomenon within a specific technological moment: it was only possible after personal VCRs were pervasive, but the generational deterioration specific to analog recording predates digital video reproduction. (Digitized copies clone data but may have reduced resolution due to compression.)

Since the film went underground, the isolated hush-hush and self-consciously transgressive 16 mm screenings offer film purists opportunities to see the work in more pristine condition. I would suggest that the proliferation of degenerated copies of *Superstar* contributes to the allure of an idealized filmic original. The same might be said for home video generally, which prompted a comparative valorization of seeing classic films in restored prints on the big screen. When I saw *Superstar* projected on 16 mm, the auditorium was packed with people who had seen and likely owned copies but probably had never seen the film "in the flesh." As a low-budget film shot over the course of a couple of weekends, even in its original format, *Superstar*'s titles are still nearly illegible, the film generally grainy, and the sound still rough. Seeing the film on film made me nostalgic for my warped dub at home. For me, part of the experience was missing.

At the risk of getting all poststructural, video reproduction calls into question the very notion of an "original" film. Yet, at the same time that degeneration helps to invent the categories of originality or fidelity in reverse, I suggest that it also creates new, personal, and arguably technologically specific meanings. Analog duplication of the text, rather than destroying the original's aura, creates a new kind of aura that references the indexicality of analog reproduction and sensuously suggests the personal interventions that made the copy possible. Materially, the fallout of the image and soundtrack marks each successive copy as an illicit object, a forbidden pleasure that has been watched and shared and loved to exhaustion. Furthermore, the de-resolution of the tapes formally reflects the story of Karen's wasting away. The film's theme becomes expressed on the surface, even as it frustrates and interferes with standard spectatorial engagement with the narrative as the visual and audio information become obscured.

Significantly, Haynes not only appropriated music for his film but also repurposed television footage. Taped from television with a VCR and then played back and reshot in 16 mm 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 im-

ages are distressed by black lines rolling vertically across the screen as well as loss from reproduction 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.

Haynes uses found footage as television transmissions and media-effected memory in *Superstar*. TV 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 Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) and *The Partridge Family* (1970–1974), they do not necessarily refer to specific speeches, moments of war, or episodes of sitcoms but to a general cultural memory of the time. Here Haynes' appropriations function less as recontextualizations or subversions of corporate media than as a historicizing method to present the cultural context for the Carpenters' anachronistically wholesome star personas and music that "led a raucous nation smoothly into the '70s." But this 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 controversies documented and remembered.

Bootleg Aesthetics

My research on videotape began in response to a seeming lacuna in relation to the aesthetics of analog video and the ways in which bootlegging can be read as a cinephilic practice. Relatively little had been written describing the effect of decay and reconfiguration that occurs when video is reshot on film—or when it is then repeatedly recorded from video to video. I suggest that each videotape duplication can be understood as having a unique effect on the transfer and that each cassette becomes a singular text that contains and compounds its own history. The distress and disappearance of the video signal, which cause tracking problems for far-from-heavenly VHS tapes, call attention to the tapes as copies—analog, personal copies. These blurry bootlegs foreground duplication and remind viewers that they are indulging in a pleasurably transgressive viewing act.

Significantly, there are depreciable distinctions between *Superstar*'s internal image appropriation and the audience's video bootlegging of the film. The effects of Haynes' nonsynchronous TV-to-film recording differ from cultist video-to-video reproduction: sharp pixelation, scrambled signals, and visible rolling black lines are clearly present in Haynes' appropriation, whereas the video dubbing makes the image less focused and washes out the color intensity. Viewers of the bootlegs engage with the text on a format-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. But, to trot out an oft-cited Roland Barthes argument, video reproduction of the text materially records the audience's (reader's) use and abuse of the text, rendering the "death of the author." Haynes is quite likely the most theoretically influenced and self-conscious contemporary American *auteur*, but Barthes' paradigm-shattering argument that readers produce textual meanings, not authors or critics (1977, 146), is helpful in articulating the role audiences play in recreating and redistributing *Superstar* and the differences between the internal and external distressed image effects. Haynes' unauthorized star study effectively becomes un-author-ized through video re-production. To phrase the issue in Barthes' terms, Haynes' use of found footage *expresses* both Karen's psychological state and Haynes' media critiques, whereas the video-to-video bootlegging *inscribes* the histories of the videos' circulation.

Haynes' expressions are not erased by bootleg inscriptions; rather, the effect is one of mediation as the compound filtering of multiple-generation bootlegs alters the viewing experience. Watching a bootleg presents 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' original intended images and must fill in the muffled pop tunes from memory while listening closely to filter through the garbled dialogue. Of course, seeing and listening more generally are also learned processes of filtering sensory stimulation, and watching a film or video entails actively not seeing: by directing our attention to the screen, by ignoring audience noise, and by relying upon the innate perceptual slowness that allows for the persistence of vision (on vision and blindness, see Elkins 1996, 201–202; on listening and "audile technique," see Sterne 2003, 112–113). Likewise, there are all kinds of auditory phenomena and sound effects that are beyond the standard range of human hearing or attention but that nonetheless contribute to the soundtrack.

Precisely because analog video interference forces the audience to focus and filter perceptual attention, I suggest that watching distressed tapes of *Superstar* presents a model of spectatorship perhaps more illustrative of semiotician and psychoanalytic film theorist 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 format through its distortion, and thereby primary identification *is* with the viewer's own gaze as Metz suggested, while anthropomorphic identification with the dolls must be secondary (1982, 45–49).

Though Metz was attempting to move beyond the phenomenology of classical film theory (1982, 52), phenomenologist Laura Marks engages Metz's model. Marks (2002) acknowledges the erotics of image deterioration, whether due to age, wear, or artistic intervention. Marks proposes that cinematic identification is grounded 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 new, tangible, intimate, and frequently beautiful relationships to material loss (Marks 2002, 97).

As I will argue in the next section, subjectivity is produced additionally through relationships to the videocassettes themselves. The intersections of materiality and affect can best be articulated through the concept of the fetish. Fetishism—in religious, Marxist, Freudian, and vernacular conceptions—describes the associative values invested in objects that transcend their forms as objects. In the late 1980s and 1990s, cultural scholars and historians turned to fetishism as a new methodology (on fetishism, see Pietz 1993, 119–151; Stallybrass 1998, 183–207). 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. Perhaps appropriately for *Superstar*, plastic cassettes of the film, like dolls, are often anthropomorphized and imbued with sentimental meanings. And like Karen Carpenter, VHS has been hugely popular but rarely given its due praise or deemed worthy of aesthetic analysis.

(They Long to Be) Close to *Superstar*: Reception Studies

Superstar's unplanned bootleg circulation presents a democratization of distribution at the same time as it makes access elitist; seeing or obtaining *Superstar* in the analog era—before it became available through eBay, file-sharing networks, or free streaming sites—depended upon insider connections or serendipity. In addition to conceptual connections I have suggested between the anorexic narrative and formal degeneration, the wear and fall-out of tapes present material evidence of fan use, duplication, and dissemination—marking an otherwise impossible to retrace and unwritten history of circulation.

Whereas the footage Haynes reshot and inserted works (in part) to locate the story within a specific historical setting, the defocusing and the paling effect 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 duplicating and distribution of bootleg tapes as akin to scattering Karen Carpenter's ashes—not tossed to the wind or into the ocean but into the collections of fans and cinephiles. And, of course, there is the alternate perspective that bootleg circulation keeps the film and Karen Carpenter alive.

In the case of *Superstar*, bootlegging's resonance for viewers cannot be limited to playback aesthetics. In initially researching the film's and tapes' ephemeral circula-

tion, I sent out an informal mass email inquiry to friends and colleagues I assumed had seen it, asking where they had first seen it and if they had acquired their own copies. Later I posted similar surveys on relevant listservs. Here and in my project more generally, the anecdotal and the colloquial serve to suggest the personal and the everyday relationships and experiences users have with videotape.

I received numerous responses, especially from acquaintances and strangers, that detailed the specifics of their personal experiences. These anecdotes revealed a spectrum of encounters and collection policies, all of which ultimately demonstrated considerable personal attachment to the text. I received stories about illicit means of accessing personal copies, such as secretly duplicating a tape borrowed from a professor, stealing a tape from a boss, and nearly stealing the tape from a roommate. One person claimed that his source had been taped off-air from Japanese television. Some tracked down copies at specific alternative video stores, swap meets, or fan conventions. 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 was told personal preservation strategies, such as supervising all screenings to avoid having a loaned tape lost and, impressively, remastering a bootleg onto the sturdier Betacam SP format. A few reported that old bootlegs had worn out from use and loaning and that they had tracked down replacement copies. A couple of people even reported having watched the tape on first dates; the lure of seeing the rare film apparently functions as a viable seduction technique. Friends replying that they hadn't 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 cachet of having seen it.

What all these anecdotes suggest is the multiplicity of personal meanings and sentimental values these tapes represent for their collectors. Although in most cases the root motivation for obtaining copies simply derives from wanting to see an obscure film or to possess a favorite text, *Superstar*'s out-of-distribution status complicates the tapes' value. The film's relative scarcity increases its worth and drives viewers to reproduce it when they finally have access to it; these actions suggest fear that they may not have access to it again and dedication to maintaining their personal access. Because of the tapes' scarcity, higher-resolution dupes—those fewer generations removed from a master and displaying less distortion—become longed-for objects. The bootlegging phenomenon, in effect, created an amateur strategy to preserve the work and keep it in semipublic circulation through a wily and ultimately uncontainable network of tape sharing. Obviously, no accurate census of *Superstar* dupes will ever be possible, as they have circulated

and been reproduced, though the epidemic testifies to the grassroots potential of home taping.

While acknowledging that video collectors are motivated by a text's rarity or, conversely, sudden availability, Charles Tashiro has suggested that video collecting is predominantly based upon irrational "'emotional' reasons." 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 upon the shelf in pristine, unused condition (Tashiro 1996, 12; see also Bjarkman 2004, 217–246). 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, or getting bored by it. A video collection and its usage thereby reveal its owner's personality on the shelf. Indeed, as Baudrillard states, "For it is invariably *oneself* that one collects" (1994, 12).

My first email survey to friends 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 their copies. Even if they didn't remember precise dates, they expressed that they remembered who gave them the tapes, what their relationships were, and frequently specified whether they were connected through school, work, friends, relatives, or auction. Each individual cassette 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 records 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).[11]

Such sentimental value often does not transfer to extended users, however. Usually, whenever a friend would ask to borrow a copy of *Superstar*, they asked for my *best* copy. While this may contradict my claims for bootleg aesthetics' associative value, it does emphasize general recognition of the degenerative materiality of videotape and the specificity of personal attachments.

Bootleg tapes exist as souvenirs of specific periods in their collectors' lives, intimate and professional relationships, and searches for elusive objects (on souvenirs, see Stewart 1993; Olalquiaga 2002). By virtue of its underground, bootleg-based

circulation, *Superstar* in its analog era had primarily and significantly been available through *personal* connections. The tapes, then, not only present an emotional narrative dependent upon the viewers' nostalgic associations with the Carpenters' music and the "naïve" early-1970s pop culture but also evoke memories of the tapes' sources.

After two decades of underground life, *Superstar* cannot be discussed outside of the context of its distribution. Nor, I argue, can it be analyzed without looking at the meanings encoded onto the dub 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 it has become accessible primarily in low-fidelity dubs. Bootleg aesthetics visually and acoustically replicate the psychological and physical trauma experienced by Karen in the story; 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. Analog reproduction repeatedly renders the collective demise of the narrative subject, the author, and the format. Karen and Todd, we love you to death.

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Notes

1 An early version of this chapter was first published in *Camera Obscura*, no. 57 (2004). This chapter has been condensed and reprinted from the revised version published in "Introduction: The Aesthetics of Access," in *Inherent Vice*, Lucas Hilderbrand, pp. 1–32 and "Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics," in *Inherent Vice*, Lucas Hilderbrand, pp. 161–190.

2 After developing this argument through this manuscript, I belatedly discovered a similar argument in Ernst (2002, 625–637).

3 I conceived and wrote this work in the wake of such comparative histories of "new media"; video studies and infrastructure studies have emerged as important fields in media studies since that time (see, for instance, on video Klinger 2010, 106–124; Benson-Allott 2013; Herbert 2014; Newman 2014; Neves and Sarkar 2017, and, on infrastructures, Larkin 2008; Lobato 2012; Gillespie, Boczkowski, and Foot 2014, Parks and Starosielski 2015).

4 Haynes refers to Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979) as a particular influence. Haynes, telephone interview with author, August 12, 2003.

5 Haynes, press release, July 1987.

6 Exhibition history reconstructed from the interview with Haynes, as well as reviews and listings in relevant publications and email survey responses.

7 Haynes started the film while in an MFA program at Bard College.

8 Both previously published versions of this chapter give a more detailed account of the film's legal history and of Barbie's cultural resonance.

9 Notably, the published screenplay includes reprint permission notices for lyrics to all of the Carpenters' songs in the film except the Richard Carpenter-composed "Top of the World." Todd Haynes, *Three Screenplays* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), n.p.

10 Source: http://www.blindinglight.com/prog.asp (June 7, 2003). The venue closed in July 2003.

11 Hubbard, email correspondence, September 8, 2003.