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**DELUSION AND MYTH**

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## I. Introduction

In contemporary culture dissemination of myth is no longer confined to the age-old tradition of oral communication passed from one group to another, cultivated from centuries of folklore. Instead, we find ourselves absorbing visual mythology in every aspect of our lives, by the grainy images on film screens in darkened theatres, by the advertising in streets and the constant assault on our senses via the growth of the Internet. Through this, we are embedding ourselves in a finely crafted fantasy that seems more tangible than our own reality. In fact, so immersive is our new method of relaying myth that reality and fantasy have become blurred, the separation between the real and the imaginary almost impossible. Guy Debord refers to this as the Society of the Spectacle, a “*tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations*”.<sup>1</sup> Myth has now become the tool for communication, supported by a visual web of codes and signs to convey narratives, social norms and social structures that further maintain the hyper-reality we operate in. Jean Baudrillard argues that this unreal world in which we now inhabit stems from the onslaught of American Pop Culture, creating a further state of delusion for outsiders who grapple with the projection of a foreign reality and the part it plays in the subconscious construction of their identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Soul Bay Press, 2009), 30.

My own journey and practice is at one with these ideas, as they are firstly a great interest to me and have also provided clarity to both the construction of my identity and the inner workings of my practice. Themes within the explorations of my work deal with my personal struggle to define myself in a reality where much of my identity has been informed by American mass media. In particular, a journey to Los Angeles in 2013 contributed to a rupture in my identity and forced me to redefine an intrinsic part of myself and how I view the world. Debord states that the Spectacle makes its participants feel, “*at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere*”.<sup>2</sup> This became evident during my time in Los Angeles, as I had spent many years desiring the projection of the fantasy of America, only to find it delusionary in reality.

My thesis seeks to explore firstly the construction of mythology utilized in American mass media, aided by the texts *Mythologies* and *Image, Music, Text* by Roland Barthes, as well as Umberto Eco’s essays in film semiotics. These texts break down the basis of myth, providing a structure of visual coding and a language of signs in which the myth is communicated to the audience. The basis for this exploration stems from the theories of Guy Debord’s 1967 manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle* and in Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, both dealing with the presence of mass media and its effect on personal identity and narrative. This is further supported in the two films I have selected as a counter-point to my own work; I have purposely not chosen artworks in the realm of print media as I feel my work resonates more strongly with the visual culture and manipulation of myth

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<sup>2</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 30.

in the medium of film. Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo's *Electroma* alongside Quentin Dupieux's *Rubber* will be investigated in their utilization of the mythology of 1970's American Film, and their position as outsiders to the predominately American mass media of the spectacle. Their films recognize the principles of their chosen mythology and the effect it has had on the building of their identities, seeking to manipulate this framework as they present personal narratives and criticisms of a reality steeped in American fantasy. Finally, my project *Postcards from L.A* will be discussed and unpacked using the theories and examples given in the previous two chapters, and it's inherent relation to structure of identity within the presence of American mass media.

## II. Theories

The intuitions that have driven this project are supported by Guy Debord's manifesto *Society of the Spectacle*, arguing that we exist in a space where our relationship with the world and with our own identities are formed by the presence of mass media, or the spectacle. This is furthered by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and Umberto Eco's essays in linguistic film theory, expanding upon Debord's writing to theorise the method of visual communication functioning within the spectacle. This communication can be broken down into three concepts; the myth or mythology, a language given to the viewer to read an object or image as the author intended, and the sign alongside coding, which work together as a series of linked rules. However my work operates from the unique perspective of a foreign outsider to a predominately American mass media culture, and is thus able to manipulate the coding, sign-posting and visual language forming the construction of mythologies.

Visual culture relies upon a series of intricate signs, codes and iconographic imagery to communicate with its audience, pre-determined by their interaction in what Guy Debord calls the Spectacle. Debord writes of a society in which mass communication mediates our relationships, forming links and at times blurring the line between the saturation of the spectacle and our reality. Jean Baudrillard furthers this culture of communication and disconnect between the real and the hyper-reality in his essay, *Simulacra and Simulation*; he argues

that we do not just live in the spectacle, a society of mass media, but within a simulation constructed of visual coding, a representation of a reality.

Baudrillard deems our current era as one steeped in nostalgia, as we seek to find what is real and instead continue to merely represent what we think is a true reality.<sup>3</sup> Closely linked in their thoughts, both Baudrillard and Debord had the unique disposition of deconstructing a mass media culture from afar, as it is apparent that the spectacle and simulation they speak of is predominately American, presenting a homogenised view of the world and crafting a reality deeply rooted in a fractured, consumer-driven society. Baudrillard mentions the visible simulation of Disneyland presented as –

*“An imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.”<sup>4</sup>*

Debord’s notion of the spectacle closely relates in its separation of the real and the imagined, instead referring to the tendency to see the world by specialised mediations, as reality can no longer be grasped directly.<sup>5</sup> In a commentary on American films directed and created by European directors, James Morrison elaborates on Debord’s theories by extrapolating on the attraction and perspective of foreigners to the American dominated spectacle; its delusional qualities and projected reality are akin to their own feelings of

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory*, (New York: A&C Black, 2004), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 18.

alienation from a culture deeply embedded at a young age, separate from their own.<sup>6</sup> Debord writes in relation,

*“The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his, but those of another who represents them to him.”*<sup>7</sup>

It is this that allows my project to function, as it utilises an outsider’s lens through which the spectacle is viewed and consumed. While still active as a participant, it presents a further level of complexity to the relationship with mass media.

This is furthered by the deconstruction of the spectacle into the language of myth or *mythology*, constructed by a series of signs and visual coding. Firstly, Roland Barthes states in *Mythologies* that myth is a type of speech, and therefore not an object, or a concept or an idea but rather a mode of signification.<sup>8</sup> A myth therefore refers to the dialect between an object and the audience, and what that object may be is not defined by any set of rules. He gives the following as a prime example of a myth in action:

*“A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Druoet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence,*

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<sup>6</sup> James Morrison, *Passport to Hollywood*, (SUNY Press, 1998), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Random House, 1993), 109.

*revolt, images, in short with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter.”<sup>9</sup>*

The viewer is aware of a myth when their prior history allows them to read the object, or in this case imagery, with a different set of rules apart from the form of it's existence. Myth relies on repetition throughout the visual history of the object or imagery in question, and draws upon the knowledge and memory of the viewer to allow for the successful communication of the myth. Secondly, Barthes deconstructs his definition of myth using semiology and the usage of signification, or signing. In the study of Semiotics and Language, the usage of sign was not clearly defined until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure considered one of the leading scholars.<sup>10</sup> However for the purposes of unpacking imagery rather than language, which Saussure's theory primarily dealt with, Umberto Eco's definition will suffice - the sign is a gesture produced with the intention of communicating.<sup>11</sup> In his essay *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes further deconstructs the visual sign into two parts, which the viewer receives simultaneously; the perceptual message, based on what the viewer sees at first glance, and the cultural message, which is based in the function of the mass media. Within the sign the notion of code comes into effect. If the sign is seen as a particular method of communication, the code refers to the system of linked prescriptions or rules that enable the receiver of the sign – in terms of film this is the audience – to

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<sup>9</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Bouissac, "Saussure's Legacy in Semiotics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, edited by Carol Sanders, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 240.

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, (Indiana University Press, 1986), 16.

understand the message in the way the sender intended. Following Barthes theory, the code is closely linked to the cultural message and allows the sign to operate on a level of mass consciousness, or a common lexicon of symbols that the viewer can draw from. While the sign and the code operate as one unit, the myth can be seen as to both co-exist and expand upon the properties of each. Like the code, it acts upon a predefined history or according to Barthes, '*a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions.*'<sup>12</sup> In a similar fashion, Barthes outlines the myth into three levels. The signifier (the form), the signified (the concept), and the signification (the sign), with the later acting as the final property. In the first level, the form relates to the wealth of knowledge that can be called upon rapidly by the myth, and dismissed where not needed. However in order to understand the purpose of the form, the concept must be brought into play, as it acts alongside as almost a partner. While the form retains the information or biography required for the myth to operate, the concept draws upon the perception of reality; associations rather than concrete fact, appropriated symbols rather than imagery. In short, the concept seeks to alienate to the point where the historical becomes mere gestures. In it's final form, the myth becomes a sign. When the form, the concept and the sign work together they create a new reality based on shadowy relations, however of the three levels it is the sign that is visually marked. This is particularly evident in the films *Electroma* and *Rubber*, which both rely heavily on the myth and the sign to put forth their individual stories.

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 131.

Building upon the mentioned theories of the sign, Umberto Eco outlines a further concept in the way of the iconic sign, as read in his essay *Articulations of the Cinematic Code*. Similar to Barthes' myth, the iconic sign possesses some qualities of the object it seeks to represent, in that it relies on the recollection of perceived things and the recognition of familiar objects.<sup>13</sup> Eco further argues that, '*every image is born of a series of successive transcriptions.*' The iconic sign also harbours a series of codes that further define its function, and are again broken down into three levels; the figures, relating to the condition of perception and the relation between the subject and the surrounding landscape, and the signs and semes, both adhering to the visual formulation of phrases or chains, much like the code as previously discussed. It is also necessary to outline a few of the types of codes of the iconic sign, as they aid to characterise its nature and bring a greater understanding to its purpose. Iconographic codes refer to the signified, in that a visual relates to its predetermined context in terms of historical and learned culture. Eco uses the example of the imagery of a horse, but coupled with iconographic coding such as a white coat, ethereal presence and wings it is then read as Pegasus, the fabled steed of Greek Mythology. On the other hand, rhetorical codes demote both a premise and an argument; a man walking in the distance signifies to the audience a sense of loneliness, however an argument takes place in the editing of frames where, for example, a man is shown arriving at the scene of a murder and is shown to eye the body suspiciously in a separate shot, leading the audience to believe a sense of guilt. A stylistic code adheres to a similar principle as the film genre, relying

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on a pre-defined history to communicate successfully with the audience that a scene is perhaps a homage or pastiche to a well-known director or actor. Finally, codes of the unconsciousness which permit certain identifications based on the stimulus given by the sender, or in the case of the film, the director.<sup>14</sup> These codes can be combined to create a genre of a film, or visually communicate with the audience complex ideas that would otherwise clutter dialogue or screen time. In particular relation to the codes manipulated in *Rubber*, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, Jonathan Bignell in *Media Semiotics* states that,

*“Cinema is a signifying practice, a way of making meanings in which different codes interact in films or film genres in certain ways.”*

A connection can be established with a familiar genre of film by the construction of a series of specific codes, yet do not recall an explicit movie. They simply adhere to the rules given by the history of the film genre, based upon previous applications of coding and the viewer’s ability to evoke these at whim. In *Semiotics of the Media*, Hans Krah argues that iconic signs and therefore the codes that define it, allow films to use these properties without the need of reconstructing another specific film as an object of reference.<sup>15</sup>

Aided by the theories of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, further deconstructed by Barthes’ *Mythologies* and Umberto Eco’s cinema-centric

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<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco, “Articulations of the Cinematic Code” In *Movies and Methods*, edited by Bill Nichols, (Berkeley: University of California P, 1976), 593-596.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Krah, “Media Shift and Intertextual Reference” in *Semiotics of the Media: State of the Art, Projects, and Perspectives*, edited by Winfried Noth, (Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 355.

writings, it is now possible to explore and unpack the films of Dupieux,  
Bangalter and De Homem-Christo followed closely by my own work,

*Postcards from L.A.*

## II. The Films of Bangalter, De Homem-Christo and Dupieux

Though rooted aesthetically in the cues of pop art, *Postcards from L.A.* draws its theoretical and visuals from film, primarily those created from an outsider's lens looking into the American landscape of popular culture. Quentin Dupieux's 2010 film *Rubber* and Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo's *Electroma* (2006), are both works created from an understanding and manipulation of the spectacle, and a further utilisation of mythologies and coding to craft narratives that are both personal and loaded with commentary specific to the position of the outsider. *Rubber* draws upon a series of tropes unique to 1970's American films, while displaying them from an almost twisted point of view as familiar characters frequently break the fourth wall to become spectators of their own story. Similarly, *Electroma* utilises the same aesthetic values in its presentation of the Californian landscape often seen in movies such as *Easy Rider* (1969), but places two outsiders within a created universe. These methods of conveying narrative through the theories of Barthes' *Mythologies* and the usage of mythology related to American Cinema, are both reflected in *Postcards from L.A.*

Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo, an Electronic music duo formed under the name of Daft Punk, utilise these concepts in their 2006 film, *Electroma*. Born from a mutual attraction to cinema and then later the then-considered underground music of Electronica, Daft Punk (figure 1) is presented as a concept unto itself, operating both as a set of alter-egos for

Bangalter and De Homem-Christo and a creative outlet that has taken form across several mediums. The duo is always seen clad in metallic robot helmets that draw their origins from their childhoods; though both raised in metropolitan Paris, the imagery from American cinema of the 1970's heavily influenced their early friendship and became the basis for their future works. Visually the robotic outfits seem to recall films such as the underground cult-classic *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974) and the better-known *Star Wars* (1977), with their combination of futuristic aesthetics and the cool of biker-esque leather. Sonically this association is reflected in their usage of sampling, a tradition in music based in crafting new sounds from split-second grabs of old records. This has been most famously seen in their more well known songs such as *One More Time* (2001), built around a sample of Eddie *John's More Spell on You* (1979). However the pair are adamant at using songs and imagery to create new works, encasing them into their own mythology. It is clear that Daft Punk manipulate the language and tropes of cinema, in this case the mass media stemming from American pop culture in the era they grew up in, to form their own identities and stories both visually and sonically.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Yañez Manu, "Interview With Daft Punk" as appears in *Arts Festival Magazine*, (2008), accessed 25.06.2014, <http://letrasdecine.blogspot.com.au/2008/07/entrevista-con-daft-punk.html>.



Figure 1: Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo (left) and Thomas Bangalter (right) of *Daft Punk*, 2006, Mark Abrahams.

This is most evident in their aforementioned film, *Electroma*. Completely without dialogue and with long stretches of silence punctuated only by an eclectic mix of music that boldly features none of their own works, *Electroma* on the surface appears to be an extended universe of the duo's visual identity. The film sees the familiar robot alter egos dressed in leather outfits, driving through the California desert in a fittingly dated car (a 1987 Ferrari), before arriving in a lost-in-time town. It is apparent by the carefully shot cinematography, sourced from original Kodak 35mm film, and constructed visuals steeped in Americana, that Bangalter and De Homem-Christo have employed a specific mythology to communicate with their audience. This mythology is instantly recognisable as it uses the tropes and visual conventions of 1970's American Film, primarily based around the genre of

road movies and the portrayal of the hero-outsider. In fact, this is exactly the roles Bangalter and De Homem-Christo have assumed since childhood; as French born citizens, they were not raised in American culture but lived it vicariously through films, music and the visual landscape open to them through the consumption of mass media in France during the 1970's. Colin Wilson states in *The Outsider* that,

*“The outsider is a man who cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois... because he stands for Truth. What can be said to characterise the outsider is a sense of strangeness, or unreality... The outsider is a man who has awakened to chaos... Even if there seems no room for hope, truth must be told... chaos must be faced.”*<sup>17</sup>

The appearance of two, robotic characters set against a landscape seen dozens of times in countless films, is perhaps the apex of strangeness and unreality; a surreal blending of mythology and personal narrative. It becomes natural, then, for the pair to manipulate this on a grander visual scale than previously explored in their music.

*Electroma* firmly states its mythology despite citing no date, no time and no place but by giving it's audience coded visual cues in order to ground itself. Set out before the two outsider-heroes is a stark, sunny day in the Californian desert, quiet at first except for the rumble of the car engine (figure 3).

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<sup>17</sup> Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956),15.

However the opening strains of Todd Rundgren's *International Feel* (1973) then punctuate the air, and an accompanying panning shot out from the duo in their car mimics the establishing credits of any given film in the road movie genre of the 1970's; 1969's *Easy Rider*, Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971) or *Badlands* (1973) spring to mind. *International Feel* is an intentional, loaded choice from Bangalter and De Homem-Christo, who hand picked the film's soundtrack from their personal collections. The song comes from Rundgren's ambitious album *A Wizard, A True Star* which perfectly encapsulates the early, cosmic vibe of the 1970's.<sup>18</sup> It successfully plants the opening scene and therefore *Electroma* as a whole – as it sets the tone here after – in the realm of 1970's Film aesthetics, drawing from the audience's prior knowledge and ability to pull from a visual library to assign meaning to the imagery before them. Jonathan Bignell in *Media Semiotics* argues that,

*“Cinema uses codes and conventions of representation, so that the audience actively constructs meaning by reference to codes which structure mythic meanings.”*<sup>19</sup>

By creating this universe around a carefully selected mythology, communicated to the audience via a constant stream of coded imagery, Bangalter and De Homem-Christo are then free to play with the narrative element of the film. Building upon the aforementioned aspect of outsider-hero and the imagery of their robotic alter egos, it is clear that *Electroma* is deeply

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<sup>18</sup> “Todd Rundgren: A Wizard, A True Star”, accessed 25.07.14, <http://www.headheritage.co.uk/unsung/thebookofseth/todd-rundgren-a-wizard-a-true-star>.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Bignell, *Media Semiotics*, (Manchester University Press, 2002), 197-199.

personal to the pair, as the story is laced with tones of acquiring acceptance from society and a two-against-the-world mentality. Though stronger in its visual readings, the film plays upon aspects of the *Society of the Spectacle* as the two hero characters find themselves both existing within the spectacle, and harbouring a need for escape. In a climatic moment after rejection from the public following a masking of their robotic helmets in poorly re-created human features, Bangalter's silver alter-ego stares at the remains of the melted mask in a gas-station bathroom mirror (figure 2), trapped between two identities; his outside appearance, akin to his gold partner and the people who populate their world, and the grotesque, human face that he undeniably wishes for instead. In an interview with *Stop Smiling Magazine* in October 2008, Bangalter notes,

*“Electroma’s story is very close to us, and the characters that we’ve built around this micro-myth.”*<sup>20</sup>

Given that their alter egos – one silver robot and one gold robot – were specifically chosen as the main characters in the film, it is abundantly clear that Bangalter and De Homem-Christo have intended the story to be a reflection of their own lives, told through a manipulation of visual cues that construct their chosen mythology.

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<sup>20</sup> Matt Diehl, “Q&A: Daft Punk”, *Stop Smiling Magazine* 36: Expatriate (2008), accessed 25.05.14, [http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story\\_detail.php?id=1139](http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=1139).



Figure 2: *Electroma*, 2006, Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo.



Figure 3: *Electroma*, 2006, Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo

Similarly, Quentin Dupieux's 2010 film *Rubber* relies on a mythology taken from American cinema to construct a narrative, albeit one more heavily steeped in commentary on its origins rather than a personal reflection. Also born in France in the 1970's, Dupieux was exposed to similar strains of

American Pop Culture. Though beginning his career in electronic music in an adjoining crowd to Daft Punk, Dupieux branched out into film far earlier than Bangalter and De Homem-Christo. The fascination with American films and the mythologies constructing them first began with his 2007 film, *Steak*; built around the trope of high school gangs in small town America, though the film is exclusively in French, *Steak* cleverly subverts its genre by including the element of surreal violence ala *A Clockwork Orange*, producing a film that balances the line between homage and pastiche. However, Dupieux is always critically aware of his inspirations, and conveys this through his constant and skilful manipulation of the mythologies he's chosen. Like *Electroma*, *Steak* does not state it's era of origin, but rather relies on sending the audience visual cues via clothing, dated cars and buildings and quick references to pop culture of a by gone era. In one particular scene, Dupieux cools off a violent burst of action quickly by having a character almost ominously declare, "*Last one there is a Phil Collin's fan!*" It is apparent that Dupieux regards himself as an outsider submerged in a foreign mass media culture – *American* – much like Bangalter and De Homem-Christo, both aware and at times, unwilling.



Figure 4: *Steak*, 2006, Quentin Dupieux.

His film *Rubber* presents far more interesting subversions of genre and tight weavings of signs and codes, constructing a more full mythology. The film deals firstly, with a subversion of the slasher genre popularised in the late 1970's with such films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978). This category was an offshoot of the classic Horror film, typified by an omnipresent force or character that slowly consumes a great number of victims under a veil of terrifying mystery. It's most successful forerunner was the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, brought to life in the early 1980's by the ominous Freddy Kreuger, undertaking his killings in the once-safe land of dreams. In the case of *Rubber*, the titular role is given to a tyre that awakens in the familiar desert landscape of California (figure 5), gaining telekinesis powers, which are soon used for more murderous purposes. The film ticks all the genre boxes; a beautiful girl who the main character can't bring himself to kill, a dim-witted police force who can't quite capture him, and

needless yet gleeful gore orchestrated to kitsch music. Like *Electroma*, *Rubber* provides its audience with a visually firm setting but vaguely dances around a specific era or time. Instead Dupieux relies on the clichés of the era the genre was born in, populating the film with visual references that could easily exist both in a slightly by-gone past and the present day. The film's only female character drives through the desert in visually 1970's car, and later watches a tube television mindlessly in a wooden-panelled motel. Also employing a fourth-wall technique, the film has a self-awareness of its usage of visual coding borrowed from American cinema. A group of people representing the films' 'audience' stand on a dusty hill and observe the main narrative, not quite taking part as they peer through pairs of binoculars and drop annoyed comments on the pacing, the obviously irate choices of the main characters and the overall lack of cohesive plot. Already Dupieux has removed the voice of his real audience, not allowing them to be completely submerged in the story but to carefully point out the construction of the mythology he's employed. By blatantly alerting the audience that the film is following a set genre and therefore the sign-posting associated with it, Dupieux both draws attention to the appeared absurd nature of American films from an outsider's perspective but also allows himself to manipulate it for his own narrative, in the way only someone deeply entrenched in the spectacle of American mass media could. Jason Anderson of *Cinema Scope Magazine* writes,

*“Dupieux continually finds new ways to not just extend the obviously limited mileage of Rubber’s premise but invert and ridicule a wide array of narrative and genre conventions.”*<sup>21</sup>

The strength of *Rubber* therefore becomes clear from Dupieux’s constant stream of sign-posting and visual coding, using his audience’s subconscious participation as he draws upon their previous knowledge of American cinema particular to the era and genre. *Rubber* recreates this specific mythology in both barefaced and subtle ways; a county sheriff character introduced early in the film is dressed specifically in a uniform unique to mid-70’s America (figure 6), and thus reads as an iconographic code that signs both it’s era, and the coded nature of the character – in this case, it recalls visually the sheriff in *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). A setting of a drive-thru motel situated in a lonely desert reminds the audience of plot-driven signs seen previously in similar movies. Dupieux presents it as not just a motel, but a carefully crafted setting of a scene that relies on his audience’s previous knowledge. It’s as if Dupieux is saying, *here are all the familiar things you should expect and have been groomed to expect, but something is not quite right*. In an interview with the American based website *IFC*, Dupieux states,

*“I’m using codes from fantastic movies from the ’80s and they are not French movies. They’re “Christine,” “Duel,” things like that. This old cop car from the ’80s means something. It’s like I’m using American cliché*

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<sup>21</sup> Jason Anderson, “The Important Element of No Reason: The Mad World of Quentin Dupieux’s *Rubber*”, accessed 25.06.14, <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interview-the-important-element-of-no-reason-the-mad-world-of-quentin-dupieuxs-rubber/>.

*in “Rubber.” Obviously, the desert, the road movie, the cop – all these elements are clichés from your country here.”*<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, at the same motel a few scenes later, the sheriff turns to his officers after cleaning up another one of the titular character’s grizzly murders – again reminding the audience of the film’s usage of the slasher genre – and simply states that it’s all over, and they can stop pretending and go home. It is a surreal breaking of the fourth wall as nobody else seems to be aware that they are existing in a film built entirely on clichés derived from a mythology. Dupieux uses *Rubber* to provide his own commentary on the spectacle of American cinema, even poisoning his own audience in order to end the film altogether from the sheer stupidity of it. He is both a frustrated outsider and a willing admirer of the craft, and delicately balances both in mastery of manipulation of genre and mythology.

Both *Rubber* and *Electroma* deal with certain levels of self-awareness in manipulating mythologies, conveying an outsider’s perspective to the overwhelming force of American mass media culture, and a lovingly crafted homage to a language of cinema that Dupieux, Bangalter and De Homem-Christo use to express their own narratives and thoughts. It is then apparent that this self-awareness is proof of an existence outside the spectacle but also a willing participation within it, using aspects as a method of communication to their audience.

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Saito, “AFI Fest 2010: Quentin Dupieux, The One Man Rubber Band” accessed 24.05.14, <http://www.ifc.com/fix/2010/11/quentin-dupieux-the-one-man-ru>.



Figure 5: *Rubber*, 2010, Quentin Dupieux.



Figure 6: *Rubber*, 2010, Quentin Dupieux.

### III. Postcards from L.A.

In December of 2013, I undertook a trip to Los Angeles, planning to live there and further my art practice. However, the experience proved a dramatic contrast to the idealised vision I had been expecting as a result of the absorption of American mass media. The landscape I encountered in Los Angeles was startlingly different; naively I was faced with a bout of reality, finding a city that bore almost no resemblance to the imagery I had grown up with. In *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings*, Michael Sorkin notes that L.A. is probably,

*“The most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive scrim of it’s mythologises”.*<sup>23</sup>

I found myself with culture shock as I realised the world I had idolised, was in fact nothing more than fabricated myth created for mass consumption. I visited several locations I knew, but found them devoid of the emotional connection that I had experienced while watching them on screen; they were simply just buildings. Even looking at the Hollywood sign perched in the hills near the apartment I had rented did nothing to stir any sort of response in me, even though I had been trained by American mass media to feel a sense of excitement as emoted by the various characters who populated my favourite movies. Disappointed and lost, as I had planned to plant myself directly in the

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Sorkin, *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings*, (Verso, 1991), 49.

culture that had inspired all my previous work and assuming it would further my practice, I returned home to Sydney with a handful of photographs. It was not until months later that I began to use them within my art, albeit in an entirely subconscious fashion, as I tried to rebuild what was once a huge part of my identity and had become shattered by the reality I had faced in Los Angeles.

In order to explain my position and relation to American mass media, a short introduction to my previous work must be addressed. Last year I undertook a large-scale work, *Dreams*, taking the form of a paste-up poster wall akin to the kind seen in urban areas. *Dreams* was an exploration in nostalgia and childhood, with a heavy emphasis on re-contextualising familiar imagery and manipulating tropes seen in American cinema. The posters featured stylised photography of my own; the places could be anywhere U.S.A, highlighting how Americanised Australian culture is, but are in fact locations where I grew up and feel a sense of familiarity due to their aesthetically similar values to the imagery I saw in movies and advertising from American mass media. There is an element of facelessness to each poster; the photography recalls no particular location, the titles no specific plot nor movie. This highlighted the aspects of mythology and pastiche, which I manipulated to convey my innate submersion in the spectacle from childhood.



Figure 7: *Dreams*, 2013. Digital prints pasted onto MDF board, 7m x 4m.

*Postcards From L.A* more accurately reflects my mood during my Los Angeles trip and my then process of rebuilding, as I realised the imagery I had relied upon in *Dreams* was in fact part of a fantasy that was no longer viable. I found myself struggling to bridge the gap between this fantasy I had submerged myself in since my childhood, perhaps unwillingly as I had not been aware of the spectacle and it's effect on my communication with myself and the world around me, and what I had seen in Los Angeles with my own eyes.

Like film, posters adhere to a visual language based around a mythology. While not given the breadth of an unfolding plot and the ability to string out a narrative over an extended time period, posters instead communicate a more condensed, crystallised cinematic moment. Thus, the principles of film theory can still be applied, but operate on a more immediate visual basis as the

viewer must be communicated to via one frame, or in this case one image. In its natural form, a film poster illustrates perhaps a group of significant plot points, or the major idea behind the narrative; it must be careful, however, to leave the audience guessing and therefore prompted to see the movie itself. The poster is free to play visually apart from this, and often displays experimentations in perspective, cropping and imagery suggestive to themes within the film. For example, in relation to the films touched on in the last chapter, the poster for *Easy Rider* (1969) features an ink and tone illustration of the main character, his back to the viewer as he ventures a wistful look into the cross-hatched landscape in front of him. The illustration is washed in a bright yellow, which suggests the sun-bleached atmosphere of the Californian desert where most of the film takes place. Though the poster carries a tagline which lends further context – “A man went looking for America, And he couldn’t find it anywhere...” – the image functions on its own both as a condensed emotion associated with the tone of the movie, and as a product of its era, signalling the merging of underground counter-culture and the commercial world. Lee Hill states in his analysis of *Easy Rider* that the film is,

*“At once a travel poster proclaiming the continued presence of the old West and its historical and mythic associations, and a nightmarish portrait of small towns, cities and the end of the frontier...it is a celebration of the freedom of the road and a dissertation on the end of the road and the repulsive banalities and industrial blight that disfigure the scenery.”*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Le Hill, *Easy Rider*, (BFI Publishing, 1996), 72.

Thus, the poster succinctly communicates the cinematic narrative into a single image; the melancholy last look back at the landscape that defined a country, and yet was slipping away quickly.

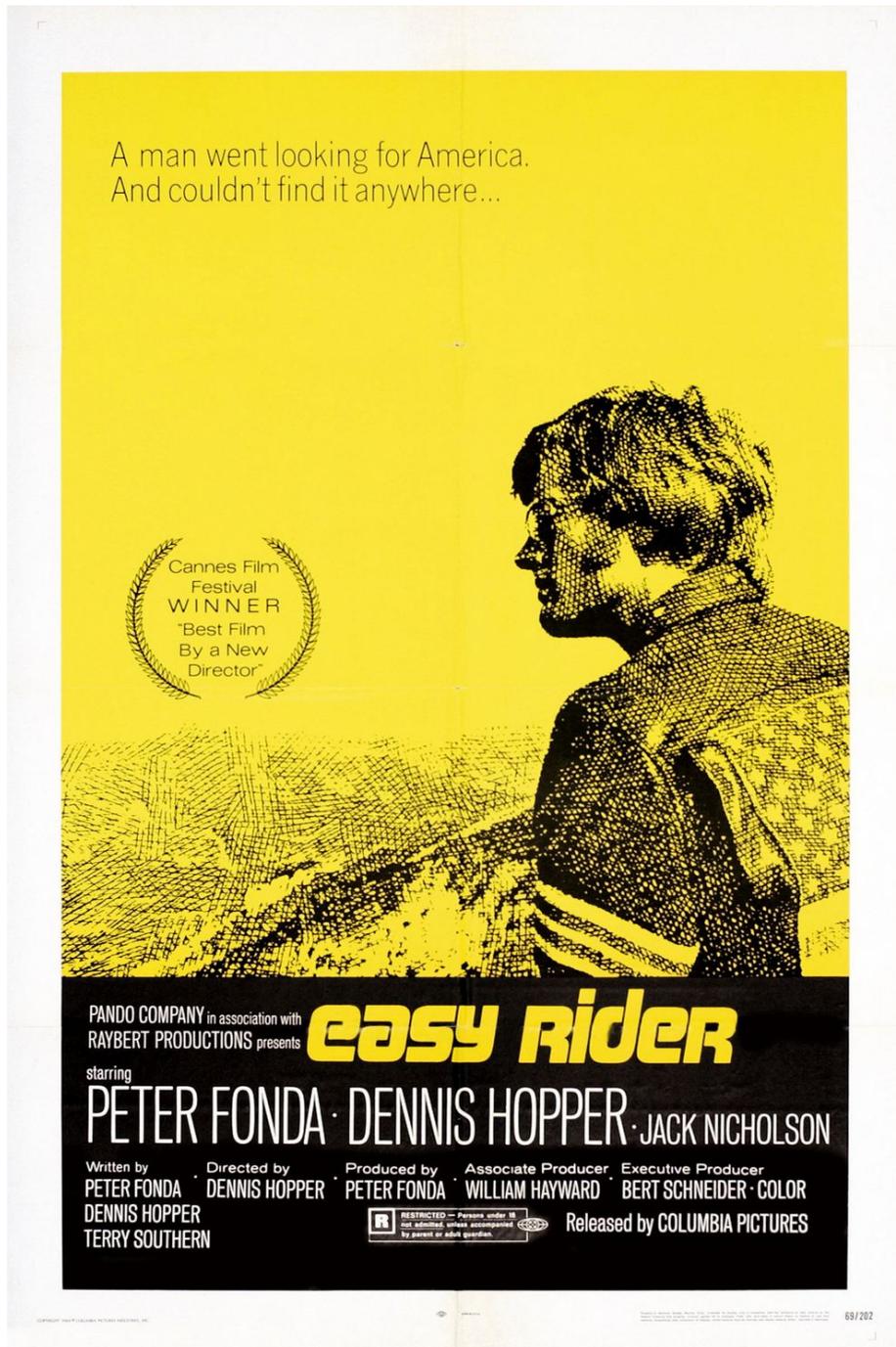


Figure 8: *Easy Rider*, 1969, Dennis Hopper.

*Postcards from L.A* however, while operating on the same basis visually as a film poster and adhering to the underlying aesthetic and communicative principles, has no greater product attached. The four posters instead suggest a narrative, and communicate this to the audience in the same, coded language as a film poster would. Photographs stand as a backdrop, highlighting the Los Angeles landscape via the sprawling Hollywood hills and the surrounding suburbs, and have been manipulated to resemble the grain and colour tones of 1970's photography, utilising a dot-gain to mimic printing techniques of the time. Two figures populate each poster, appearing in poses that convey a sense of familiarity; in one piece, a dark-skinned, afro-styled boy smiles downwards as his long-haired friend drapes an arm around him, a cigarette dangling from his hand. They are both dressed in sports clothing that perhaps suggests that they could be at a sporting event, popular in the 1970's as many charity athletic carnivals featuring celebrities were often shown on TV such as the 1976 *Rock'n'Roll Circus*. The appearance of these figures are an example of the manner in which we internalise mythologies, as they each represent real-life individuals who have had a personal impact on my life and the construction of my identity. The boy with the long hair is coded to resemble Eddie Van Halen, a musician whose work provided the backdrop to my last two years of practice and growth as an artist. I was drawn to him on both an aesthetic level, as his personal expression through his fashion I found similar to my own methods, and emotionally as he portrayed a sense of positive determination in his music and in his drive to present his ideas to the world. Van Halen is often regarded as one of the most innovative guitarists of

his generation, a feat which he achieved by inventing his own methods of playing and constructing his guitar completely from scratch, unheard of in the 1970's as many musicians used store-bought instruments.<sup>25</sup> Thus, he represents a part of myself that is relentlessly striving to be better in my creativity and to accomplish this in my own way, rather than what has come before me. In contrast, the second figure with a billowing Afro is a depiction of Michael Jackson, specifically during his late teens, which marked a tremendous period of growth in his life. Shortly before he attained worldwide acclaim with *Thriller* (1982), Jackson spent a year living on his own in New York City for the filming of the Motown Musical, *The Wiz* (1978). A Los Angeles native after spending his formative years in small town Indiana, Jackson had led a sheltered existence that was soon shattered by the decadence of the party life in New York, frequenting the infamous *Studio 54* alongside celebrities such as Bianca Jagger, Andy Warhol and Grace Jones.<sup>26</sup> As this heralded a shift in Jackson's life that was previously dominated by his family, I found great comfort in his story during the two years I spent in Melbourne by myself across 2010-2011, my first time away from home. I experienced a loss of identity as I struggled with my new surroundings, and drew upon similar events in Jackson's life to guide me, his imagery often appearing in my artwork at the time.

Thus, the appearance of these two figures work on multiple levels – on the surface they are presented as coded visuals to the audience, working with the

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<sup>25</sup> Mitch Gallagher, *Guitar Tone: Pursuing the Ultimate Guitar Sound*, (Boston: Course Technology, 2012), 335.

<sup>26</sup> George Nelson, *Thriller: The Musical Life of Michael Jackson*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 2010), 50.

sign-posting in the photography to convey the era of 1970's films, but the interaction of the figures in fact represents two halves of myself. I experienced a relapse in my emotional state during my trip to Los Angeles, thrown into a new environment similar to my time in Melbourne, yet aided by the growth I had experienced in the years since. My method of coping and attempting to convey this manifested itself in the depiction of both Jackson and Van Halen. In particular, the struggle of coming to terms with the breaking down of my identity so steeped in the spectacle, and the subsequent attempt to rebuild and redefine it, is reflected in the last two pieces of the series. The afro-styled figure stands alone against a bleak, Californian day, bulked up in winter layers and clutching a scarf. In contrast, the same scarf billows out behind him as he grins excitedly in the previous piece, a gold star shining from the lapel of his jacket. This motif is the same one that dangles from the earring of the long-haired boy, and is subsequently missing in the last piece. By the end of my trip and thus mirrored in last of the artworks, I truly felt lost and alone. In *Media Semiotics*, Jonathan Bignell states that visual pleasure in film is identifying with an image which stands in for ourselves<sup>27</sup>, however he also states that,

*“Fantasy is where repressed ideas are allowed into consciousness in a distorted form. The fantasy therefore covers over a repressed wish but also exposes it.”*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bignell, *Media Semiotics*, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Bignell, *Media Semiotics*, 187.

Although I found the landscape uninspiring and a shattering of illusions, which echo in both the photographs I had taken and the figures I've used, I decided to re-contextualise the visuals into a new, hyper-reality or fantasy outside of the one I had experienced, albeit one based heavily in a pre-defined mythology I was already familiar with. The Los Angeles I visited was clearly not what I expected, but I could re-imagine what I wanted it to be; in a sense it seemed logical to reassure myself that the fantasy I wanted, derived from American mass media, could still exist.



Figure 9: *Postcards From L.A.*, 2014. Four digital prints on A2 paper, mounted onto chipboard.

## IV. Conclusion

We are surrounded by the constant presence of American mass media, shrouding our ability to separate our identities and define them as we soak in coded imagery designed to craft the now hyper-reality we inhabit. So immersive is this experience that when a breakdown occurs, it can manifest itself in the destruction and loss of identity. This is especially apparent for foreigners, as American culture presents itself as a projected fantasy and produces alienation from mythology deeply embedded from a young age. Delusion leads us to believe in this world of a finely constructed, illusionary reality, and subsequently our intense familiarity and comfort from a life long immersion finds us choosing to stay. In *Cinematic Mode of Production*, Jonathan Beller states that,

*“Machine mediated perception now is inextricable from your psychological, economic, visceral and ideological dispensations.”*<sup>29</sup>

It is possible, however, to realise personal narrative within the spectacle and to communicate through the same methods of manipulation that first entranced us. We are able to relay complex stories of humanity and emotion by coded visuals and recognised tropes, our web of communication strengthened by the ability to recall myths and their intricate construction.

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Beller, *Cinematic Mode of Production*, (UPNE, 12 Jun 2012), 2.

Through the breakdown of my identity during my trip to Los Angeles, spurred by my intimate relation to the spectacle and the realisation of the objectivity of the fantasy of America, I have experienced first hand the importance and complexity of mass media on how we relate to ourselves, the world around us and our ability to communicate.

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