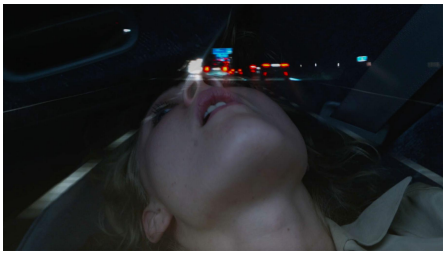
A Film Glossary

In Conversation with Juliet Carpenter

by José B. Segebre

Published on 29.11.2023



Juliet Carpenter, *EGOLANE* (still), 2022, HD video, 15:27 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Juliet Carpenter, *EGOLANE* (still), 2022, HD video, 15:27 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Juliet Carpenter, *EGOLANE* (installation view), 2022, HD video and Mitsubishi Galant V6 1999, 15:27 min. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Ivan Muzin.



Juliet Carpenter, *Dizzy* (still), 2022, HD video, 11:54 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Juliet Carpenter, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* (still), 2023, HD video and recursive editing algorithm, time variable. Courtesy of the artist and Róisín Berg.



Juliet Carpenter, *EGOLANE* (still), 2022, HD video,15:27 min. Courtesy of the artist.

Taking the form of an experimental glossary, José B. Segebre's conversation with the artist Juliet Carpenter jumps from personal memories and notes on their most recent works, to discussions of iconic characters, technology and the representational politics of fiction. Carpenter shares some of the ideas that are central to their practice right now as the pair discuss recent works EGOLANE *(2022),* Dizzy *(2022) and* The Sun Is Not To Be Believed *(2023), which was recently shown as part of the exhibition* Auditions for an Unwritten Opera *at Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and now in* Spring Time is Heart-break: Contemporary Art in Aotearoa *at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhet*ū.

It's easy to become jaded by images moving in unexpected directions and unparalleled velocities online. Anyone who didn't grow up with social media might express dismay or discomfort given the ambivalent role of images in contemporary culture. Are they here to distract us? To inform us? To make us look more closely? To both revitalise and sedate us? What constitutes the pleasure of watching and when is pleasure the basis of subjugation?

These weren't the guiding questions or topics of my conversation with the artist-filmmaker Juliet Carpenter, yet what we discussed resonates with this line of questioning by hinting at the transformative power of film and fiction.

Carpenter is concerned with images and how these shape meaning and tell stories not despite but often through their elusiveness. The image, for example, of someone alone in a room, car or garden might seem to portray a character's inner life, yet the characters elude coherent interpretation. As Carpenter retells below, such images in their work might have given viewers reason to read the works in terms of narrative content or even as documents of the artist's own psychic life.[01]

The following glossary is short and incomplete. It takes words to task, teasing their meanings out through dialogue about and around Carpenter's work. A conversation between the artist and writer serves as the foundation for this experiment. The entries excerpted here speak to characters, interruptions, storytelling, timelessness, music and ageing video technologies.

I believe these terms are essential to Carpenter's moving-image work without being their thematic focus. This is the case, for example, with the artist's reference to the sun in their most recent work, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* (2023). It is less about how this star figures formally in the work and points instead to its function as a contradictory metaphor i.e., that it enlightens and blinds us, that it is both creative and destructive. Such a continuum between creation and destruction has also been literally coded into the work, which changes with every loop as dictated by an algorithm the artist created with their collaborator Róisín Berg. While in its most recent presentation at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in Germany, the work was looped four times, in future presentations, the work could repeat itself as long as it is being displayed, gaining momentum as it loses form.[02]

This repetition with a difference constitutes a generative (and degenerative) tension between creation and disintegration, and speaks to a cultural logic inherent in the artist's work, particularly its relation to contemporary (sub)cultures around images and music: a recycling of images and sounds, of feelings that surface

and resurface, of technologies that age like bodies do. Such logic is also present in Carpenter's earlier works, *EGOLANE* (2022) and *Di zzy* (2022), less formally and more narratively: the recurring image of a lone character, enclosed not trapped, visible but inaccessible.[03] The resulting glossary entries hope to emulate this metabolic logic: inseparable from repetition, anchored in our bodies and the cyclicality of embodied experience, constantly digesting itself anew, and abstracting repetitions and variations.

AGAIN

JOSÉ B. SEGEBRE There are some artists who make something and figure it out. After a novel or a performance about something, they're done and move on to the next thing … I think there are also people who are constantly rewriting and rethinking themselves.

JULIET CARPENTER A friend of mine, whose work I love, just finished a film, maybe eighteen months after producing another one, and the two works are very similar. I heard a complaint from another friend saying, they had just done the same thing twice. My first thought in response to this was, "Yes, exactly!" How else is one supposed to refine their own personal cinematic multiverse of madness if not through repetition? You kind of need a couple of passes to figure it out.

JS Are you interested in that, in repeating yourself, circling around something and seeing *what* and *how* you 'hit' it differently each time?

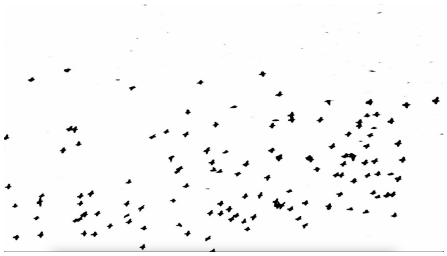
JC I am. If I look at the films I've made since I decided that I was a video artist I would say that there's something recurring. But there definitely comes a point where you've put something through the spin cycle enough times, and you start chewing on something else.



Juliet Carpenter, *Dizzy* (still), 2022, HD video, 11:54 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Juliet Carpenter, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* (still), 2023, HD video and recursive editing algorithm, time variable. Courtesy of the artist and Róisín Berg.



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JS I would not say that your most recent work, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed*, is doing the same thing as *Dizzy* or *EGOLANE* but in a moment of describing them or simplifying them one could say that they all portray a female-presenting character by themselves.

JC They're all alone. There's some sort of darkness or trouble looming.

JS There's this heaviness to them.

JC I did a screening of *EGOLANE* and *Dizzy* when I was in New Zealand recently. It was scary because I haven't been living there for a long time. The Auckland art scene there is the scene that I became an artist in and I still feel attached to it in a way. After the screening we did a Q&A. There was one question that could only be asked in a context like this, where everyone knows each other: "The two women in the films, they seem kind of like you, what's that about? Are they you?"

JS I think that it has something to do with the psychological nature of the work. As a viewer, I was constantly being confronted with the interiority of these characters and the impossibility of ever really knowing them, that I would never really be able to describe their psychic life because it's constantly denied to me. Maybe this aspect is what makes certain viewers relate the film to you as a person.

CHARACTERS

JC To be confronted with the interiority of a character, or oneself, and bump into some kind of opacity is a fruitful experience. I like thinking about characters that aren't fully available to be figured out, the unseen characters, such as the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* or Godot in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters that are well-formed but not visible to the viewer and the other characters. Another type of character I love is the character that emerges at an important point, plot-wise, but whose presence doesn't necessarily advance the story, who often looks frightening or grotesque. I don't know if there is a formal name for this kind of character. As a plot device it's like a weird cousin to a *deus ex machina* (when something unpredictable occurs and resolves everything) and a *diabolus ex machina* (when something unexpected occurs and makes everything worse). This character has no influence over the events of the story but their presence resolves or amplifies something within the psychological landscape of the film. The best example of this kind of character I can think of is The Mystery Man in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*.

I think of the protagonists in *EGOLANE*, *Dizzy*, and *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* as more like this kind of character.

JS It makes me think of Walter Benjamin's dialectical images, especially one that revolves around the figure of the stranger that he sees at the centre of [Bertolt] Brecht's plays.[04] It's the stranger who interrupts a family dinner scene and thus the plot's gradual unfolding. The psychological moment, supposedly, is

that this scene, the interruptive appearance of a stranger, is supposed to prevent the viewer from empathising with the scene or the characters or whatever the plot is doing. When you have this person who's 'foreign' to the bourgeois family dinner scene, you realise that the scene, and thus life as we know it, could also be different. And, as a viewer or audience member, you are supposed to see the scene with the same strangeness cast over it by the stranger's interruption and gaze. You are not empathising with the scene or its other characters; instead, you are embodying the stranger's gaze, becoming complicit with the estrangement.

JC You are alienated yourself.

JS Yeah, exactly, the stranger disrupts that. And now you're also like this character coming into the scene, and astonished or shocked by the scene's interruption itself, and fundamentally no longer identifying with it, having a bit of distance. I wonder if Lynch's characters or the types you mentioned are also like this.

JC They are, yeah. In the case of Lynch, it is this alienation that's often at the centre of the story itself, but in the other scenarios mentioned it's being ferried in momentarily to represent a particular construct or force.

It's funny that you mention Brecht because, regarding character archetypes, a friend had suggested we discuss Mother Courage in this interview. I don't really feel informed enough to talk about the play *Mother Courage and her Children* itself. But the 'silent scream' performed by Helene Weigel in the first production of the play is a great example of a performative device that embodies severe alienation and deep emotive interiority in one moment. It's a gesture I'm very enthralled by and often think about.

One of the first videos I ever made was called *Silent Treatment* (2014). I was interested, at the time, in singing or vocalising that sounds like screaming but still remains musical. In that video, I used an excerpt of the long wailing vocal at the beginning of the

Pink Floyd song “The Great Gig in the Sky.” The video shows an animation of a character hysterically crying and their tears are flying out of their eyes and then into their mouth.



Juliet Carpenter, *Silent Treatment* (still), 2014, HD video, 6:28 min. Courtesy of the artist.

STORYTELLING

JC When it comes to storytelling we are within a moment that's less about form or the *how* of things and much more about *who*. I’m saying this in a very crude, broad way but there’s this idea that one should only tell stories that you have some grounding in personally. This is something that's obviously not tenable for anyone making fiction. I think the impulse to understand a work of art through the artist's biography makes sense sometimes, and at other times not at all.

JS I think that’s the downside of contemporary discussions on the politics of representation and I think it stems from the desire to have a blanket rule about authorship and identity that applies to everyone. As opposed to telling only some that, because of their identity, they have always been in the position to tell stories for others and maybe they shouldn’t anymore. But this shouldn’t prevent everyone from telling stories for others. It might even be freeing to read or watch something where somebody is trying to put themselves in the situation of another person, but it depends on how this is done and also on the context of such representations.

JC Yeah, I agree. It's like, who's been in the position to even be telling a story …

JS It is the desire to have a rule that applies to all and everything so that it seems fair, instead of acknowledging the fact that it isn't fair and it has never been—why not use that as the guiding logic? Why can't the blanket rule point to the imbalance and injustice, instead of pretending a rule will remediate injustice or vanish it for good?

JC Yes. It's challenging to sit with the idea that everything is based on the context from which it emerges, and must therefore be taken on the terms set by that context. But particularly for artists, who maybe live in a swamp of abstraction and weirdness, that kind of rigour is important.

TIMELESS

JC Ageing is something that I certainly think about in relation to video. I love films that really look like the technological moment they were made in, whether or not they're meant to be set in the past, or the future. That their untimeliness gets exposed by the technology used to render them. I think about it more in relation to video art. There's a certain ugliness to video technology in the moment.

JS Yeah, because the recording technology is way more advanced than the actual device or technology reproducing that footage.

JC Film is like a clock; it's always going to expose the moment in which it was made. During the pandemic, a lot of productions were set in the past. You didn't see anything getting made that was like, "Here we are with masks on, we're doing Covid

tests." It's hard to create things that are about the precise, present moment, it's a bit cringe for people to witness.

JS With Covid in particular, I feel the film industry really rebelled against it. As if to say, "We are way more timeless than this affair, let's not even include masks in movies." I thought film would immediately pick this up and that there would be films reflecting the kind of reality we experienced during the pandemic.[05]

JC Exactly. But what's that about? You use the word that I have missed, timelessness. I think cinema is always, like video, battling with this question: Do you want to be timeless? I feel like there's something cool about being moored in time, like having a fucking huge time stamp on everything that you've made, technologically. I don't think that all the work I've made adheres to that, though. In fact, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* is visually referencing a technological moment that is very far in the past but it's edited by an algorithm which is very of this moment.



Juliet Carpenter, *The Sun Is Not To Be Believed* (still), 2023, HD video and recursive editing algorithm, time variable. Courtesy of the artist and Róisín Berg.



Juliet Carpenter, *EGOLANE* (installation view), 2022, HD video and Mitsubishi Galant V6 1999, 15:27 min. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Ivan Muzin.

JS So the edits between the different vignettes in the film are done through an algorithm? Is that why after each sequence a number is superimposed on the previous one?

JC Yes the number represents how many permutations of the original film have played. The algorithm is given the initial video, which is about three minutes long, and plays it four times - each time it applies adjustments to the frame rate and also looks back and forth into the timeline of the film to interpolate images from elsewhere during the current runtime. This work is more like a small piece of software than a film.

It is just four cycles for now, but the dream is that eventually we could have it working so that when it's exhibited it could run indefinitely. I don't know exactly what kind of image this would produce but most likely it would eventually become so layered that it would be entirely black, erasing everything.

Footnotes

01. See: AGAIN

02. See: TIMELESS.

03. See: CHARACTERS.

04. Walter Benjamin, "Was ist das epische Theater (I): Eine Studie Zu Brecht," in *Gesammelte Schriften 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 519–539.

05. See: STORYTELLING.

Biographies



Juliet Carpenter is an artist and filmmaker from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently living and working in Germany. They hold a BFA from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland (2014) and graduated from the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main in 2022, where they studied in the class of Gerard Byrne. Juliet has shown extensively throughout New Zealand, as well as in exhibitions in Australia and Europe. Their film *Dizzy* was presented by CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image at the 70th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen in 2023. Juliet is nominated for the 2024 New Zealand Walters Prize.



José B. Segebre (any pronouns) is a Berlin-based writer and scholar who works and experiments with curatorial and educational formats. José completed a dissertation in aesthetics on the temporality of waiting in contemporary art that explores notions of unfreedom in aesthetic experience and expands Queer, decolonial, feminist and critical thought. José's writings on art circulate in journals and exhibition catalogues. They also write fiction in Spanish and enjoy artistic collaborations. With artist-filmmaker François Pisapia they host *Full Moon Screenings* (2019–), a travelling series of experimental events waxing and waning around food and moving images. José has lectured and organised workshops in art academies and institutions in Europe and Mexico, and is currently teaching a seminar titled "Art and Ideas" at New York University in Berlin.

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