

A Star is Torn

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If drawing is taking a line for a walk, film is taking an image on a road trip.

Roberto Rossellini's 1953 *Journey to Italy* set the model for the road trip movie—a trope long since bastardized into myriad subgenres cutting across all levels of taste and affect (peaking, I dare say, with *Magic Mike XXL*). *Journey to Italy* stars George Sanders and Ingrid Bergman as an English couple motoring through the country shaped like a boot on a sundry upper-class real estate errand. The task at hand doesn't matter. It's not the destination, of course, that gives this deceptively simple film its quiet force, but how it leverages the road trip as a narrative device, throwing the couple's knotty relationship into relief while keeping pace with the formal demands of film as a medium. In a lecture on what he calls "devotional cinema" Nathaniel Dorsky writes, "it has the same rawness and sense of exploration that the couple is experiencing" and in this way "*Journey to Italy* is not a film about a subject, rather it is the subject."¹ This is clear from the opening scene: the camera looks from out the passenger side window of a moving car. Neapolitan hills and wiry Italian trees clip along at what feels like exactly the right miles per hour to dovetail twenty-four frames per second. The next shot frames the car window from the outside, the top edge revealing a slim strip of sky, the bottom edge reflecting the sky in a sliver of car window that's been rolled up an inch or two. The bored couple bounces softly in the front seat, hemmed in from above and below by the edges of landscape whizzing by. The image unmistakably echoes the movement of a film strip. Rossellini reminds us

¹ Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005.



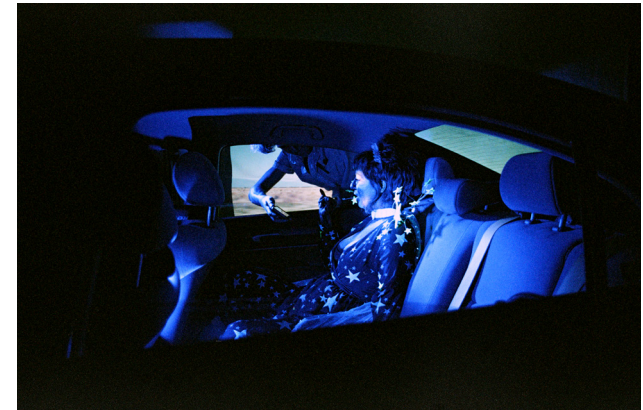
Hyperway
2018
Video still

from the get go that we're not just watching a film, we're watching film. For Dorsky, this unity constitutes devotion. Even Martin Scorsese agreed there's "an overpowering sense of spirituality" in the film. "However one lives one's life" he said in an interview "I know there's a kind of spiritual experience when I watch *Journey to Italy*."² How nice.

That *Hyperway* is a conscious, multifaceted exercise in twisting filmic unity to more wry ends is clear from the get go. The phantasmagorical road trip plays out across three screens, so even if you and I watch it together, we're never quite watching the same movie at the same time. Astronauts debate art and human nature in a Honda Civic, an immortal being named Star Maker (played by me, hi) flails in the throes of an existential crisis, mythic creatures come to life and rip apart the fabric of reality. And through it all there's the issue of the multiverse, the ego-blasting notion that our world is just one of infinite possible worlds where infinite versions of history all play out at once. It hovers over the film and its characters like a pall.

Dorsky is an academic and a devotee of avant-garde cinema. He believes that cinema's unique capacity for unity is characterized by both the filmmaker's diligent awareness of film as a material, and of the movie theater as a vehicle for collective experience. He has faith that, rightly held, the alchemy of film produces fascination by keeping time with the rhythm of life itself. It's telling that Dorsky's devotional cannon is mainly limited to mid-century art house fare. The road trip can be seen as a modernist version of the Hero's Journey. And journeys, having as they do a beginning, a middle, and an end, not only accord with the collective travel vibe of the traditional moviegoing experience (stuck in a chair alongside people you probably don't like) but the singular lifespan of film stock itself. Like us, celluloid strips must eventually die. The (second) Golden Age of Cinema that lasted from roughly the 1950s to the 1970s was the pinpoint where several shifting historical factors briefly, glitteringly, came together. The technology of film as a constantly dying (therefore unabashedly alive) medium was uniquely suited to the expanded possibilities of its content (newly portable cameras sparking new depictions of movement) but also the limits of its distribution during that time, when the public still had to see new movies in a theater with strangers, creating a communal experience. Of course, the unity effect of *Journey to Italy* totally breaks down when I watch it alone, at home, on my laptop. But unity itself is a classical virtue, and maybe an outdated one. I wish Dorsky would get his head out of his ass.

² *Vice Presents: Martin Scorsese on the Films of Roberto Rossellini- Conversations Inside The Criterion Collection.* https://youtu.be/NFEt_EqqUqA



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Production still



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Video stills

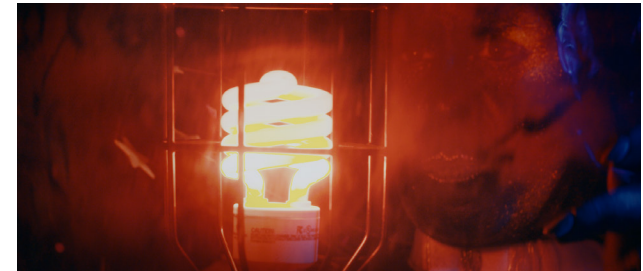
Art films can be taxing because, in sacrificing things like unity, three-act structure, or even narrative, they can expose such conventions as piteous attempts to tame the inscrutability of the universe, to get a grip on forces larger than ourselves by analogizing them to human limits and lifespans. The trick is to pull your head out of your ass and still be able to smile at the world. That's how you survive postmodernism.

The films of an artist like Jack Goldstein are lovely to me because he marries the alchemy of Modern cinematic experience to the mythic blur of popular film, suspending golden age tropes in little looping movies, like soap bubbles of narrative tension. He still smiled at the world. Throughout the 1970s Goldstein divorced the unity of analog film and its content conceptually, long before digital video came along and made this rift a plain fact. Digital video doesn't have a lifespan like ours. It's easier to get more takes, more tries, more alternate endings and just-in-cases, and we know life doesn't work like that. So what Christopher does today, what must be done in the age of celluloid decay, is peel back Dorsky's ideas about the film and its relation to "the metabolism of life," revealing a sweet but ultimately quaint notion. Many of Christopher's films are actually looped digital video files, eschewing even beginnings and endings (Goldstein's films at least have a timestamp to tell you when to stop). In *Hyperway*, monomyth dissolves into metanarratives and rhizomatic plots and overlapping subtexts and honestly I did not know what was going on half the time. "That's good!" Christopher said when I told him as much during shooting, "That's good! If you're confused about what's going on in the story just say it. Say it in character. Star Maker is just as confused as you." Then you step back to have a look at this thing, and an even more lovely end game appears: *Hyperway* rhymes the annular nature looped digital video with both the frightfulness of the multiverse and the cyclical foibles of human nature. The movie is itself a kind of loop. There is a point that we might consider an ending, but only because it looks like the beginning. And here is where Chris' obsession with loops starts to vibe with what theoretical physics might mean for the road trip genre, as summed up by Modest Mouse:

Well, the universe is shaped exactly like the earth / if you go straight long enough you end up where you were

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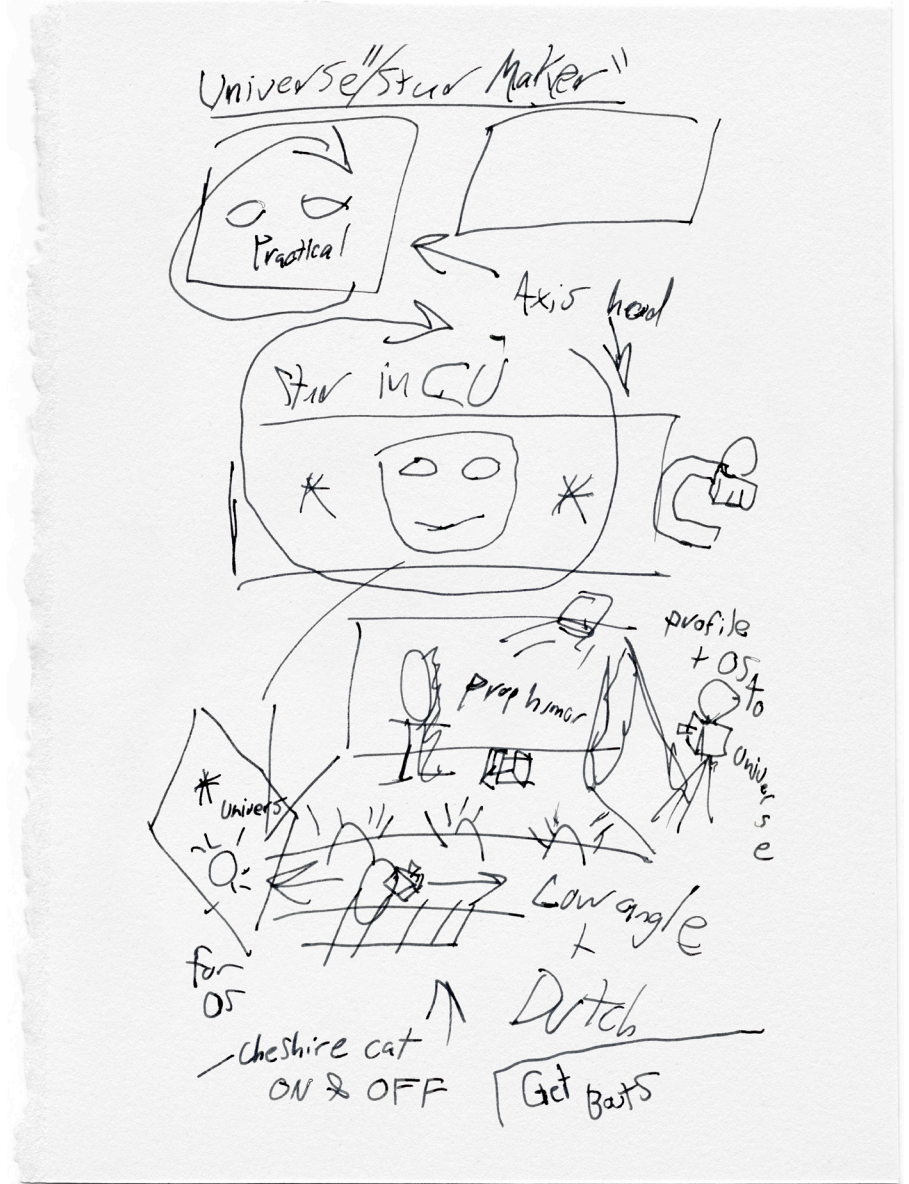
I play Star Maker. I let Christopher take my image on a road trip. He graciously invited me to work with him on the role after seeing me do stand-up comedy, and I'd be lying if I said

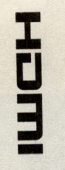
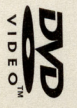
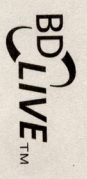


top, *Hyperway*
2018
Video still

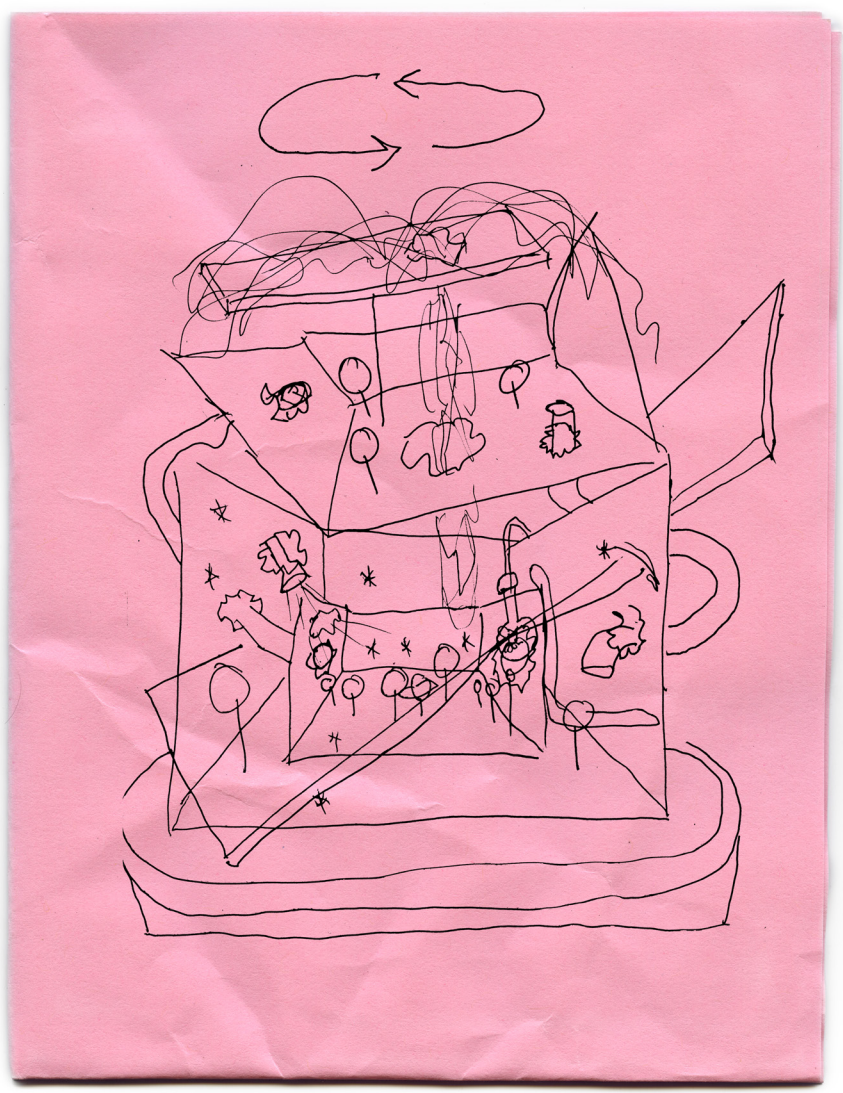


bottom, Production still





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*previous, **Hyperway***
2018
Pre-production sketches

top, Production still

bottom, Video still

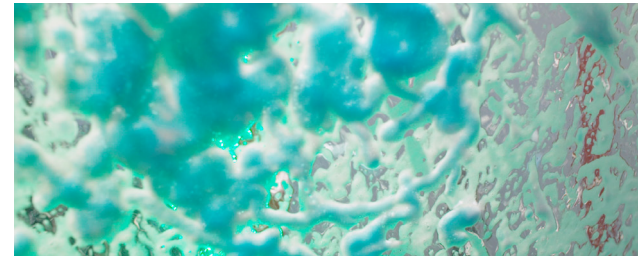
I wasn't half auditioning for him that night. Most of my lines are improvised and pastiched from an eclectic reading list Christopher sent me in advance of the shoot: Daniel Buren's 1979 essay *The Function of the Studio*, short stories by Goethe and Ursula K. Le Guin, clippings from the science magazine *Nautilus*. I didn't internalize the readings as much as I'd hoped, and to be frank I didn't even read them all (sorry Chris!) though I extracted Star Maker's monologue about the rose in *The Little Prince* directly from a *Nautilus* essay by Tasneem Zehra Husain, wherein she explores her own feelings about the multiverse. That a world-renowned physicist cites a children's book in order to make peace with such a philosophically disruptive scientific theory is actually quite comforting, like there's some point beyond the horizon of human understanding where art and science do indeed touch, and it makes perfect sense to have something like faith in it. Then a genre as niche and hopeful as devotional cinema doesn't seem so naïve. Dorsky himself touches on the tragicomic nature of such faith when he says, "we are both appreciators and victims of material existence."³

I see Chris as a kind of Star Maker. But where she frets in circles he attends to the task at hand. He sits at his editing bay, patiently sorting and stitching infinite images of Christina, until at some point he decides to pick up the phone and ask me—this Christina—how I'm doing. I never read *The Little Prince* as a child, and I still hadn't read it when, tears streaking down the galaxy of her face, Star Maker decides that the Prince's petulant little rose is somehow the key to her heart's ache, at once its cause and its cure. Everything that is broken and beautiful about being human becomes clear to this immortal cosmic lady in the image of a floppy, bleeding little plant. She loved humanity yet hated humans, and her character arc is the pain of learning to flip it around. Star Maker is the creator of the universe (this one anyway), and so used to taking pride in the clockwork neatness of her creation, she doesn't allow herself to be moved by the beauty of its cardinal imperfection: us. Call it intergalactic FOMO. Instead of being comforted by the idea that there are infinite possible universes where humanity doesn't totally make a mess of things, she's upset that she's not there to enjoy it—some version of her is, but not this her. Her pickiness is her humanity. Particularity is a modernist value, but one worth holding onto when adventuring among fractured and hypothetical selves. It's also curiously endemic to love. A misanthrope, after all, is just someone who loves humanity but hates humans. Long after shooting wrapped, I found a copy of *The Little Prince* at a used bookstore in

³ Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005.



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Seattle. I was reading it in the corner booth of a French restaurant overlooking the Pacific when I received a text from a former lover and burst into tears all over my steak tartare (the waitstaff were very gracious during the two glasses of Beaujolais that followed). In a *Paris Review* interview, the writer Leslie Jamison revealed to Chris Kraus something about the endurance of particularity, how it keeps us worthy among worlds of possibility and indifference. “Specificity” she said, “pushes back against the reductive blur of myth.”⁴ So I mention the tartare and the Beaujolais and the Pacific ocean, not just to create an image of a woman crying in a restaurant, but to try and show you, me, hurting. Upholding specificity is our collective individual task. We have to aim the blow darts of our experience against the hot air balloons of abstraction, of myth, of them the rules and that’s not how it’s done. The terrifying thing about the multiverse, about digital images, about the divided self, is how each explodes possibility into infinite blow darts of specificity. It’s too much for one mind to hold all that matters, especially when all of it matters.

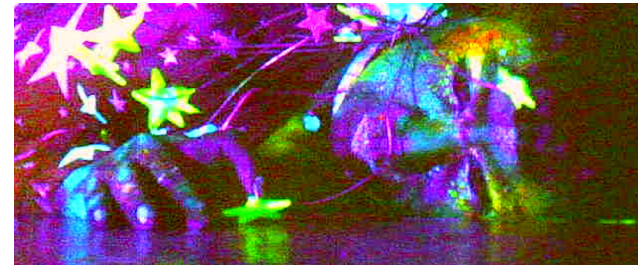
As a critic I know better than to wholly trust an image. But as an actor I take an odd solace in knowing there are other Christina’s floating around YouTube or basic cable or some short-lived streaming platform, making choices I didn’t actually make, but only mimed in service of some director’s specific vision, one that alternately seeks to be utterly like and un-like life itself. As an actor it’s comforting to think that videos and films and photographs (digital or otherwise) are in some small, dimensionally-deprived and aching human way, a chance to make peace with so many other unknowable and totally hypothetical selves. This exercise is nothing short of embarrassing. When Susan Sontag writes in her breakthrough book of essays, “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality”⁵ we nod our heads in agreement. When she writes in her personal diary, exhorting herself not to smile in photos lest she be taken less seriously as a critic, we might nod more sheepishly, perhaps in recognition. I’ll be more specific: I had trouble the first day of shooting. I was confused by Christopher’s process and it came through as anger instead of vulnerability. I understood Star Maker’s frustrations as an artist, trying to get a handle on the unwieldiness of her creation through the desperations of satire and logic (two cardinal elements of stand-up comedy, I would say) but I couldn’t inhabit her character until, under Christopher’s direction, I wrapped her sorrow around a rose of my own. “Try

⁴ Kraus, Chris. “Big-Tent Recovery: An Interview with Leslie Jamison.” *The Paris Review*. March 19, 2018. Accessed October 10, 2018. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/03/19/big-tent-recovery-an-interview-with-leslie-jamison/>.

⁵ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. 1st ed. New York: Picador, 2010. Originally published 1978.



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Production still



Hyperway
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Video stills

to talk about your sadness and confusion at the multiverse in terms of—” he hesitated, knowing I was in the middle of a painful breakup, “in terms of this relationship that you’ve lost.”

We got the take. He said I’m sorry. I said don’t be.

Christopher is a fabulous filmmaker. Or artist. Or artist-filmmaker if you want to get particular, which, by the way, he never quite does, not in the way you’d expect: he’s merely particular in what he chooses to be particular about. It’s how he approaches his movies and how he approaches life. That’s the trick, I think. To road trip through the universe (this one anyway), with a quiver full of gracious blow darts at the ready. I’d trust his aim with my life.



Hyperway
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Production stills



top, Hyperway
2018
Video still

bottom, Production still

opposite, Video stills

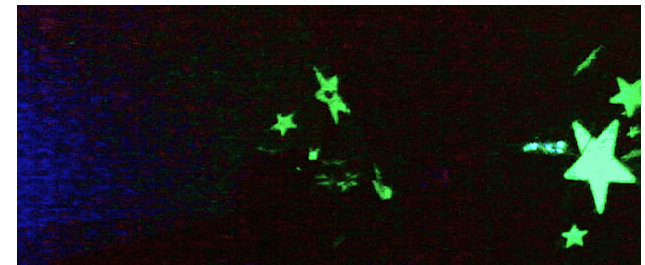


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