

# Eyes Without a Voice

Julian Rosefeldt's  
*Manifesto*

Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.

—John Updike

8

Barthes characterized Greta Garbo's countenance in emblematic terms. For him "the face of Garbo reconciles two iconographic ages, it assures the passage from awe to charm."<sup>1</sup> This had less to do with any powers intrinsic to the harmony of her features than with her unique disposition in the history of film. Garbo's career spanned both the silent and talking film eras, and in her face, moving as it does from the theatrical, over-articulated acting style necessitated by silent film to the subtle freedoms of idiosyncrasy afforded by talkies, we witness the stateliness of iconicity melt into the charm of particularity. In 1930, with nearly ten years of silent roles under her belt, audiences were finally treated to Garbo's thick Swedish accent and low, throaty voice in the movie version of Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*. According to Hollywood apocrypha, moviegoers actually cheered upon hearing her first line: "Give me a whiskey."

In this sense, the face of Garbo compresses a history of affect from antiquity to modernity, from the face as allegory for types and values, to the face as calling card of subjectivity. Berlin-based artist Julian Rosefeldt's immersive film installation *Manifesto* (2015) takes a blender to this timeline.

Thirteen movie-theater sized screens spread out across two rooms at Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles, simultaneously played 13 vignettes of Australian actress Cate Blanchett as various characters—each delineated as a labor or lifestyle archetype in the exhibition notes: "Teacher," "Funeral Speaker," "CEO at a private party," etc. Already, the subjectivity of the actress is at odds with the types she inhabits, as she leverages her considerable talents to deliver lines lifted from over 50 different artist manifestos from across the 20th century. The face of Blanchett pushes through the faux dirt and fake beard of "Homeless Man," screaming into a megaphone about the failures of capitalism (reciting text from the 1960 *Situationist Manifesto*), miming the larger tension of the cinematic installation as a whole. The slick production values of the films play with and against the content of the radical texts in uneven ways. A homeless man screaming about the "development of technology and the dissatisfaction of its possible uses in our senseless social life"<sup>2</sup> is unnerving, confrontational. A poised international star dressed as "Homeless Man" doing the same is engrossing, impressive—the image denuded of its politics by the charms of its very representation. What's a face to do?

I wonder if our iconographic age is too fractured, too duplicitous, to support a proper heir to the face of Garbo (and of course it's a woman's face—we haven't come so far as to completely uncouple the female image from its stock-in-trade as allegory for whatever hegemonic principle needs tarting up for public consumption that week). It might be the pure mask of fictional character Lil Miquela, the CGI online influencer proving there's no job a robot won't steal, up to and including Instagram Thot. With a persona precision-engineered for an optimal mix of relatable and aspirational, the forever-19-year-old poses in a never-ending array of digitally rendered streetwear and



Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto* (2015)  
(video still). Image courtesy of the artist  
and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018.





Image courtesy of @lilmiquela.



11



Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto* (2015)  
(video still). Image courtesy of the artist  
and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018.



luxury label clothing while espousing progressive politics.

I still see something exemplary in the heavy-lidded eyes of laconic indie film starlets, as both avatars of resignation and harbingers of the performative age I'll tentatively call the Greenbergian deskilling of charisma. But those faces are the mood underneath the mood. Global entertainment culture, the kind aped by the aesthetics of *Manifesto's* vignettes, is still in thrall to the charms of particularity, and contemporary starlets get their gravitas by *disappearing* into roles, by fighting off the mask of their own face. The early aughts blessed two icons of cinema for doing just that. Nicole Kidman took home the Oscar for Best Actress in 2003 for her role as the "homely" Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, a year before Charlize Theron did same for playing a prostitute-turned-serial killer in *Monster*. Both actresses were heavily lauded for deigning to buck their own pulchritude with prosthetics and labored makeup routines. One breathy review all but credited the makeup itself for Kidman's performance: "The key was a large prosthetic nose that rendered Kidman virtually unrecognizable.... It must have been liberating not to rely on her looks."<sup>3</sup> The thrill here is feeling how high the threshold is for rendering a star unrecognizable. Nothing solidifies glamour like a glamazon masquerading as a frump.

Rosefeldt's background in architecture informs his film work. Interestingly, he resists the tendency to make characters of the settings. Each of the 13 vignettes in *Manifesto* was shot in Berlin, but, "There are no emblematic buildings that people know and recognize."<sup>4</sup> By flattening both the backgrounds and the characters into archetypes, *Manifesto* allows the architecture of Blanchett's face to undermine the masks of hair and makeup production. The iconic library of Berlin's Brandenburg University of Technology becomes a mere techy-looking backdrop for Blanchett's

Scientist to perform manifestos on Suprematism and Constructivism—there is no pretense to subjectivity for either the characters or the setting, and the wandering Western eye, yearning for identification, is filled with images of Cate, Cate, Cate.... The vignettes, overlapping as they do into a PT Anderson-ish Tower of Babel, are timed to end all at once with closeups of all the Blanchetts snapping into a chorus of robotic voices. And despite the eclecticism of her costumes—frumpy puppeteer! normie schoolteacher! chillsy dance choreographer!—the sheer size of her visage in the aggregate reinforces only itself. Each vignette feels deliberately set up as a battleground for the architecture of the actress' features to tussle with the architecture of each site. The seamless, flattening effect of a cool medium like film is broken apart again and again by Blanchett continually bending the architecture of the text to the varied voices of her personas. As immersive and overwhelming as the installation is, there are moments of wit and even self-aware signs of critique in the interplay of the screens.

When Blanchett's voice coos snippets from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* about "the beauty of speed" over buttery panning shots of graphs, dark wooden desks, computer screens, and other trappings of the New York Stock Exchange, it's clear how the Futurists planted the seed of their own obsolescence. Speed for its own sake is hard to swallow as an avant-garde ideal when it's clear in hindsight how many of us get left behind when speed—and its attendant ideals of efficiency, unbridled growth, and frictionless transference of capital—is the only goal. It's hard to locate the actionable poetics in a phrase like "the suffering of a man is of the same interest to us as the suffering of an electric lamp" when we are dealing with the fallout from giving corporations the same rights as humans. Plus, according to

1. Roland Barthes, "The Face of Garbo," in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957).

2. *Situationist Manifesto*, May 17, 1960, trans. Fabian Thompsett, retrieved from: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/manifesto.html>.

3. R. Stein, "'Hours' of makeup for Kidman," *SF Gate*, December 27, 2002, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Hours-of-makeup-for-Kidman-2743177.php>.

interwar avant-garde apocrypha, Marinetti was a mondo asshole.

There are lighter moments, like when Blanchett, cringingly styled as a punk, snarls into a microphone “who raised the question of sincerity?!” to a room of full of disinterested junkies. The line comes from Mexican poet Manuel Maples Arce’s 1921 *A Strident Prescription*, and there is no better example than punk of how radical movements become stylized postures before heading to their final deaths as fashion statements. The vignette depicting Blanchett with frizzed, sandy colored hair and coke-bottle glasses, saying grace over a family meal (the family played by her real life partner and their children), sets up a more lighthearted tension, as the prayer is actually snippets of Claes Oldenburg’s 1961 *I am for an Art*. With eyes closed and hands clasped, she dutifully recites “I am for Kool-art, 7-UP art, Pepsi-art, Sunshine art, 39 cents art, 15 cents art, Vatrol art, Dro-bomb art...” with a midwestern twang and the pitch-perfect cadence of a devout housewife outlining her blessings. It’s a lively enactment of Pop as riposte to spirituality in art, and the dig is finished off nicely when the camera pans off to reveal the family’s home stuffed with taxidermy. Seeded in all of these performances is the ongoing tension between the politics of representation and the optics of political action. I threw up a little bit in my mouth when I read the installation described as “a call to action” in the press release, as if being installed in an installation is anything but paralysis.

*Manifesto* was created in 2015, a banner year for mass shootings, police brutality, and refugee crises around the world. But it was also the same year the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, 195 countries came together to create the Paris Climate Accord, and fake news had yet to transition from kinky buzzword to political reality, characterized by a chief executive who seeks only to metastasize the poison of his charisma. Like capitalism, celebrity is

solely interested in its own growth.

Accelerationism as a 21st century movement wishes to witness the end of capitalism by speeding up its entropy, making the Futurist fetishization of clunky 20th century machinery feel rather quaint in retrospect (there does exist an Accelerationist Manifesto, conspicuously absent here).

It’s nothing short of chilling to leverage true Hollywood production value in service of high art, and the results are almost invariably apocalyptic. And if you suspect, as I do, that the roots of Modernism go all the way back to Caravaggio, painting his studio models with such acute particularity that they muddled up whatever message they were intended to impart as ciphers of biblical and historical morality, then the face, the modern mask of subjectivity, becomes a curious paradox. Blanchett’s tour de force performance is part of what flattens the politics of the manifestos, whose content here is but a platform for that performance (along, of course, with the overwhelming, multi-channel aspects of the work—making it even more curious that in 2017 the installation itself was flattened into a single channel film). And in 13 faces we witness the urgency of collective action melt into the magnetism of arrested attention.

Give me a whiskey.

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4. Gunseli Yalcinkaya, “Julian Rosefeldt celebrates “anti-architecture” in new movie *Manifesto*,” *Dezeen*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/11/28/teufelsberg-tower-herzog-de-meurons-brandenburg-university-among-anti->

[architecture-julien-rosefeldt-manifesto-movie-installations/](https://www.dezeen.com/2017/11/28/teufelsberg-tower-herzog-de-meurons-brandenburg-university-among-anti-architecture-julien-rosefeldt-manifesto-movie-installations/).