



**NOT  
NORMAL**



# ‘Not Normal’

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## Introduction

I was born surrounded by music and images, my parents being both visual artists and musicians. I was taught to think in pictures or in notes, that's maybe why writing this thesis is hard for me.

On a very early age I discovered the power of television, the first show I watched was Tik-Tak. It's a completely psychedelic toddler show that only shows never ending tripped out kaleidoscope images. But for a toddler this kind of abstraction is perfect, it doesn't tell a story and it has nothing to do with the world they are not yet a part of. It just shows colours and movement, but this kind of abstraction works like magic on the toddlers' minds.

My love for television didn't die after my toddler Tik Tak period, my days were filled with this easy entertainment for years. I would watch before school, after school, and if I was able to convince my mom that I wasn't feeling well I would spend the whole day watching teleshop channels. I even liked the commercials. To be honest there wasn't any-thing about television that I didn't like. When I think about it now it must have been my love for exaggerating that made television this irresistible to me. Everything you see on television is exaggerated, everything is seen under a loop. It has the same qualities as a stage; television takes the everyday life and magnifies it. Making the ordinary extraordinary, it shows us how we like to see the world around us. But it also simplifies it and in that sense television is an abstraction of our everyday life.

A large part of my aesthetics as a visual artist I have because of my moving image addiction. My favourite programs were always cartoons and soap operas, so my watching behaviour was always aimed to entertain, not to learn. Cartoons and soaps are both larger than life. And they actually have a lot in common. They both exaggerate human

characters, and they multiply human experiences. But they stay close enough to reality to make the viewer understand and relate.

Take for example *Spongebob Squarepants*. It's a television show about the underwater life. But the whole setting, the way they live, the way they dress and the way we can relate to the characters makes it possible for us to imagine that they actually live underwater. Just because there is enough recognition there, we have no problem relating to his world. Even the fact that there is an actual sponge living under water is no problem, and when he takes a peek above the surface he enters our world and he is an actual sponge. From just being drawn as a cartoon, he switches to being an actual 3D sponge in our reality.

In soap operas this is different of course, these are much more related to our reality. I believe in a way we go through the same intensity and excitement as the stars of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, but in order for us to be taken by the script and get excitement out of watching the series we need to multiply our everyday feelings times a hundred. Because everything gets exaggerated when it is put on a pedestal (either television or a stage) we also need this exaggeration in order to be entertained and in order to stay interested. In a way we can relate this kind of television shows with the toddler show *Tik Tak*. If you don't understand any language what you see around you is in the end just colours and movement. So you can say that *Tik Tak* is an exaggerated version of the everyday two year old life. Just like *The Bold and the Beautiful* is to us.



Spongebob peeking above water for the first time.



## Chapter one: Mirrors shaped like Televisions

Ever since I was a small child I have been drawn to the exaggeration of the television. Not only the exaggeration I think but also the mirror the television is. The television shows us how we see ourselves through time and also how we would like to be, but never quite are. For me this mirror expressed itself in me seeing myself in these stereotypes and always trying to be a 'character'. One day I would dress like Snow White, and the other day I would feel like dressing like a flight attendant. I would always be aware of the complete image and in a way I would apply the same abstraction on myself, just like the abstraction you see on a television screen. So slowly the world that existed in that small light box would actually blend into my reality!

The influence of this staged life became such a big part of my being that it was hard to separate them from each other, and they managed to blend in perfectly with each other. It filled a gap, it gave me something larger than life. It showed me something unusual, and it showed me all these kind of things that just didn't happen in real life.

For example what happens in a lot of cartoons, the characters provoke each other, they challenge. For example Ben and Jerry; they smash each other in the face with a hammer, or they run over each other with a truck. Even limbs get chopped off. They respond so extreme and mean to each other, but at the end of the day everything is forgotten and the next episode it just starts all over again. We don't realise this when we watch it because it's brought to you with so much humour that we don't see the aggression and the absurd-ity of it. We crave to see this direct and almost primitive responses from them because we would never be able to react this way in real life.

The unusual aspect does not only appear in the behaviour of the characters, but of course also in the way they dress. If we look back on the history of costume we can see that staged costumes or dress always had the power to show us something unusual. And the aim has never changed, even though there is now much more diversity in film, television and theatre. Even in a life like soap like *The Bold and the Beautiful* where we try to imitate our daily life, the costumes are still unusual and placed out of context because they are staged. In our reality we get up in the morning and we sort of by accident wear what we wear, if we are not talking about a special occasion off course. But in a directed sit-com even though the character looks very 'casual' still this outfit has been discussed and thought about by the costume designer, so that doesn't seem so casual to me! And the frame or stage puts the focus on exactly that. It makes us realise how not casual these costumes are, and it gives it the same status as a classical theatre costume.

The amplification of the television works both ways. The 'casual' character with its 'casual' looks makes us in real life look at this ordinary way of dressing in a different way! The most ordinary looks are all of a sudden dramatic and unusual just because that's the way they are portrayed in this staged reality. We want the look, but we also want the character. Anne Hollander gives a good example of exactly this in 'Seeing Through Clothes'; 'The costumes are the drama, the characters are known by what they wear, and any accompanying words support the clothes instead of the other way around. Ballet, which finally emerged from such earlier forms theater could do away with all language and eventually with all mime, but not with costume.'

By dressing like the characters on screen, we can act like them. And it is here that we see the influence television or film has on fashion and real life. We constantly react on how we portray ourselves by

This image is an example of aggression displayed in cartoons. But maybe it wasn't brought with enough humor because the episode got pulled in a few European countries. Apparently the fact that Patrick takes a saw and chops off pieces of Spongebob's head went a bit to far.



From the same animators as Spongebob, the cartoon Ran and Stimpy was famous for a lot of aggression and most of all extremely gross drawings from the characters. They have famous zoom in shot where you see every pore on the characters face, every misplaced hair, you can almost smell their hangovers from across the television.



## Chapter two: Jazz Age Desire

Cinema and television had a huge impact on my life; it added something, and like I said earlier it filled my need for the unusual. Looking back at the history of cinema, radio (and later television) both were used to show people something that outdid their reality.

In the 1920s the era of mass entertainment began with two media - Cinema and Radio. In the western world Radio and Cinema had a symbiotic existence, and what stood out is that the medium was mainly used to emulate those richer and grander than themselves. This had a lot to do with the political situation at that time. With the world in a state of chaos, the politicians did not show interest in the people as they promised. With the constant excuse that they were protecting the people against the thread of revolt and chaos, many leaders in European countries moved to the right; Democracy was limited.

Like mentioned by Francine Stock in 'In Glorious Technicolor'; 'F. Scott Fitzgerald re-marked of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics; put another way, people in countries with access to any degree of luxury might seek glamour, sex, appeal and sophistication if politics offered little comfort or promise of improvement. '

For the people in the 1920s the easiest way to improve their lives was to go to the picture house. Now I use television as a medium to improve my life as well. Back then the behaviour wasn't that different.

Because cinema was growing quickly in popularity it became a bigger and bigger part of people's lives. It was for a lot of people the easiest way to feel relief and to get a glimpse of a better existence. Because of the luxury displayed in

the cinema, real life luxury became within reach. Max Factor Sr, who in 1914 had developed a thin 'invisible grease paint' for film actors, launched his own branded company selling 'Make-Up' revering to the new term they used in cinema .

Here you see the mirror media is to us again, whenever we see ourselves framed or staged we tend to adapt our reality to the one on screen, so there is a constant interaction between the staged life and our own.

But what film makers also realised in the 1920s; the audience needs something larger than their existence. And because film is a medium in which everything can be directed (because nothing is live, and it is not a 3D medium) it is easy to create something that is very close to our reality but still out of reach.

So then this phenomena occurred; suddenly filmmakers were playing with certain lighting and make-up to help the movie stars rise above the real world. For example in the movie 'Flesh and the Devil'.

The movie is about a love triangle between Ulrich, the character that leads the movie, Leo (Ulrich is hopelessly in love with Leo but Leo loves our final character) and Felicitas (played by Greta Garbo). Eventually Leo and Felicitas will fall in love and get married (against all odds) but Felicitas will never give up on her love affair with Leo.

In this movie Felicitas has to be completely irresistible, but how did they achieve this beauty that is out of this world? This completely extraordinary and to the human eyes perfect appearance?

The cinematographer William H. Daniels diffused the light on Garbo's face with special lenses making sure her best features would stand out; the cheekbones, the eyes (lashes in particular). This is not only visible in 'Flesh and the Devil' but he would also in other movies continue to find and to refine a specific look for Greta Garbo. Over the next four decades Daniels would contribute the exact technique to enhance the beauty of the leading ladies. In '58 he managed to

a modern day goddess out of Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Thin Roof*.

In the 1920s we created our goddesses or stars by using the flatness of the screen to direct and create a personality larger than life. The flatness gives us the freedom and the tools to actually shape an image, and direct how we want our role models to look like and behave. We create desire, and not desire between two lovers but we create a desire between the star and the audience. The rest of the cast is there to support and nurture the relationship between the audience and the star.

The manipulation of the stars' face by lights is sort of a wall placed between the star and the audience. It has the same function as an outrageous stage outfit, it allows the performer to connect with the audience but it also protects and shields the real persona of the performer.

What Francine Stock also points out in *'In Glorious Technicolors'* ; *'This wall amplifies and puts the desire-able beauty on a pedestal, its suddenly irresistible to us. This technique got taken to the extreme by not only using lighting as a barrier, but by placing objects like veils in front of the leading character. In *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) where Dietrich fascinates by appearing through the branches of a forest or by hiding partly behind a veil. Throughout history this technique resulted in using various objects for example Bette Davis's hats, Ava Gardner's scarves or Marilyn Monroe's sunglasses. Even those fingers in front of her eyes in *Uma Thurman's Pulp Fiction* dance make a reference to the power of the veil used through history.'*

The creation of this yearning from the audience made the public want more from their movie stars and soon the on screen action wasn't enough anymore. They wanted to know more about the personal lives of the stars. A good example is the love affair that



Here we see how affective William H. Daniels managed to shape Greta Garbo's Image. We see four different magazines that put her on the cover, portraying her exactly the same. Not only her look, but also the way she holds her head is similar.

off screen relationship was so much heavier than the one displayed on the screen, that soon the audience knew about it and read about it in the media. By the time the movie premiered the public was dying to see the couple on screen. Audiences hoped to see the real thing they had been following for months! When the barrier between fantasy and fact becomes blurrier, it gives the audience a sense of ownership over the romance, like they were there right in the midst of it.

The way cinema in this case amplifies the attraction of the leading character and exaggerates the most attractive features is also a form of abstracting and simplifying the persona. This is also only possible because of the flatness of the movie screen. We make a person into an abstraction of our time, an example of what we want to live up to. But we also dehumanise the character in a way. The light, the veil, the sunglasses put a wall between the 'ordinary' people and the 'star' and sometimes we find it hard to even see the human behind these blown up personas. Maybe in the 1920's people still had a lot of admiration for the stars of their time, but nowadays we see harsh criticisms towards our celebrities. And maybe the wall that they place between them and us is necessary to protect them from exactly that.

The realisation that a star could be made by the way you could portray yourself was something I realised quite early, like I said earlier I used to dress up like one of the television characters and in a way use the abstraction of the television and apply it onto myself. Realising the power abstraction can have, the only thing I was missing was a stage or frame to amplify it. This is when my dad bought me a video camera for my birthday. And I started directing my own movies, starring myself.





Uma Thurman in Pulp Fiction and Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's. Both filmmakers made use of 'The Veil' to exaggerate the beauty and their desirability. Uma Thurman with her hands before her eyes and Audrey Hepburn with her huge sunglasses represent in both movies something that is extremely desirable but out of reach.

## Chapter three: Real Life Soap Action

For a long period of time my consumption of media and moving image has been very passive. The television would just be on and I would be sucked into it, I would consume almost anything it would give to me. Me as a watcher would not have a lot of power over what was handed to me, and I would just give in.

Because my parents are both artists there was never a lot of money when I was growing up. So there definitely was no money for a computer. I remember my friends at school telling me about video games, and internet. And I would just play along like I knew all about it, little did they know that for me it was just absurd what they were saying. What were they doing with this game called „Sims“? And why were they talking about people, actions and even pets that did not exist? My imagination ran wild, about what it could be and how you could let those characters do whatever you wanted. The passive way you consume media or entertainment that the television was offering suddenly changed, and you could actually be interactive and direct your own entertainment. And more importantly you could create your own image, you could create your persona. You could actually make the characters yourself and project the way you see yourself and other people on the computer screen.

When you are watching a soap opera you get sucked into the story because it is parallel to our lives and culture. What they go through in one episode is what we go through in a week times a hundred, but because there is always recognition we stay tuned because, in a way, the story line is about ourselves. Still everything is directed in Soap Opera's so in we have no power over what happens, we just sit and watch.

This all changed for me playing 'The Sims'. You could actually make a simplified ver-sion of yourself, maybe with a better haircut and better clothes. You could create that girl in school that you could not stand, and off course the boy that you secretly have a crush on. Start the game and you are free to do whatever you want with them. All your secret desires, your agonies, your frustrations with the real world you could actually 'solve' or act upon. Something that seems impossible to do in real life.

Studies have shown that most people that play The Sims tent to reflect their own life up-on the game. For most players the most logical thing to do while playing the game is rec-reating your own life. For example children from broken homes, find the romantic rela-tionship of their Sims more important. Because they have expe-rienced the troubles a di-vice can cause from their parents so they want to avoid or solve these problems in their virtual reality. Another example is that children from lower income families tent to let their Sim focus more on their career, also a problem that they have expe-rienced in real life and want to 'solve' while playing the game.

The projecting of your own reality onto another world is not some-thing that only oc-curred with the digital age. The idea for making The Sims came from the idea of a doll House. For centuries humans have had a doll house to project their values and idea's of live upon. Maybe this wasn't as realistic as the way you can simulate human life on a computer screen, but I believe the intention must have been the same.

I remember having my Sim fall in love for the first time and I really believe I felt the same thing when I actually fell in



Of course when we get a total carte blanche in an alternative reality we don't always stay close to our real life. It is also an opportunity to finally realise hopes and dreams that would be impossible in real life. Here a view examples of the sim version of Brad Pitt. For most people this is the closest they can get to their idol.

love in the real world. Off course not with the same intensity, but I believe those feelings came from the same place for me.

The Sims was probably my first experimentation with building an abstraction of myself. The dressing up when I was younger was always based on a different character, so I would see myself as a blank canvas and project a completely different character on myself. But with the Sims there was room to actually build around the way you see yourself and the way you relate yourself to others. The best thing even was, you could not do it once but you could experiment with so many different aspects of your being. You could actually take different sides of your personality and amplify them. You could build all these alter-ego's and even have them interact with each other! It also was a great way to experiment with it, because there was nothing permanent about it. Even in the game itself, you could just decide not to save the game. So even in the non existing reality of this game there is nothing permanent, no actions have consequences. You get a complete carte blanche to reinvent yourself, certain aspects of yourself, exploit them and magnify your self image.

## Chapter four: Chocking with the new

I was about 13 years old when I had my first performance on stage with my band. Off course there had been many performances before, but that was in front of my family or other people that were close to me. My first actual performance with my band was booked on a Sunday, we were in a line up with three other bands. And we got free soft drinks at the bar. I very well remember the discussions I had with my band members before the actual performance. The main point of discussion: What should we wear. We would always think of one thing that would make us stand out. Usually we would all wear the same colour, the same kind of make-up or some other binding factor. But even though we would try to be in tune with each other by the way we dress, I would always be aware of my individual presence on stage. My first 'Veil' would be a pair of huge glasses, it was a thick black frame probably from around 1980 and it had no lenses. It was a completely useless object framing my face, and I would only wear it on stage. It's function was getting me into character. It was meant to separate me, the artist, from the audience. It was the first attempt of abstracting myself and presenting this for an audience. I would be what they would see on stage. So I'd better make a strong statement. Through-out the years my stage performance developed from those huge glasses into something that is now completely intertwined with my personality. But still the way I dress has a huge impact on my performance, because it gets me into character. It's not just the clothes, but the moment that you're in the dressingroom 'transforming' yourself, becoming the alter-ego.

Stage performances by musicians or actors can fill the same gap television does, it shows something else. The big difference however is that in television or cinema the reaction when for example Alexis Colby from Dynasty enters a room is directed. When she appears, her audience are her co-actors and their reaction is directed so there is no 'real' suspense.

This is completely different from the function a gala or evening dress has for an important event. The moment you enter the room you want people to react to you in a certain way, this is when you make your mark. This is how you measure yourself to others and you want their reaction to be one that pleases you.

Like mentioned by Anne Hollanders in 'seeing through clothes'; 'In society, where dress has always had a degree of unacknowledged theatrical and dramatic importance, the performers are usually in competition, not cooperation. Consequently a good deal of anxiety is mixed with the theatrical satisfaction of a social occasion in gala dress. To see and be seen, measuring and being measured on the same standard, is very demanding.'

And now imagine this in front of thousands of people, this is the pressure a big performer must feel entering the stage.

The audience has to be persuaded on the spot and that takes a lot of charisma and a big personality to do that. Creating an alter-ego is often a solution for being able to handle this pressure. An artist must be able to convey a message that is impact full, but in order to reach a huge amount of people you need to simplify your message.

A stage may amplify everything you do, but it doesn't make you a giant. So your gestures have to be big, simple, and easy to read. Thinking about yourself in that way, reinventing yourself and staying



Alexis Colby From the series Dynasty making one of her famous entree's. The impression that she gives when entering a room sets the whole mood for the scene. Here you see the way she dresses and the way she behaves have a simbiotic existence, they support eachother.



David Bowie is an example of an artist that had a successful relationship with his fans, and had a clear vision and message that he wanted to convey by using his fame and persona. I wonder if that's why he managed to always be seen as the Avantgarde and stay relevant for a long period of time. Maybe because he had a lot of control over his image, or maybe he also lived in a different time where the audience had more respect and admiration for their idol.

Nowadays it seems that our admiration for celebrities has changed. Of course we still adore them on certain levels. But because internet had brought us the opportunity to re-act upon their actions, I feel like the role of a celebrity has slightly changed. Sometimes I almost feel like we create celebrities that are not necessarily very talented or have, like David Bowie, the urge to shock us with the new. It could also be that we 'lost' our admiration because nowadays with social media and reality tv we can see everything of a superstar or celebrity. We see them doing completely normal things, living their lives just like us. We lost the 'Veil' that was successfully invented in the Jazz Age, and we replaced it for reality tv. We don't see celebrities nowadays as something out of this world, or something 'alien'. We just see them as a shell, just a flat picture that we can have an opinion about.

The Episode '#Rehash' from the 18th episode of the satirist cartoon South Park in my opinion perfectly illustrates the way we see celebrities these days and the way we consume media. The episode starts with Kyle entering his younger brother Ike's bedroom to ask him to play a video game with him. He is not interested because he is not into actually playing video games anymore. He is watching other people play video games while they're commenting on it. Kyle feels the generation gap, and he walks out feeling confused and old. However his friend Cartman ends up participating in this trend and

cannot be easy. But the purpose is clear, showing the audience something extraordinary and continuously shocking people with the new.

What David Bowie did with transforming and constantly reinventing himself, played a huge role in the changing social standard of his time. He took on a role to not only protect himself for the crowd, but also to convey a message and to rise above humanity. There is always a human need to see something staged that is very close to our reality but still is out of reach. Being out of reach is being ahead of people and of your time. This means constantly reinventing yourself, and never be something expected. In the documentary 'Bowie; the man who changed the world' there is a scene where they film Bow-ie's fans waiting in front of the venue in anticipation for his concert. But Bowie's gift to reinvent himself would cause tremendous problems for his fans at this point. They would turn up to the concert in last years persona's of the star and they would end up looking rather foolish. You would see a Ziggy, a Thin White Duke, but then Bowie would enter the stage as Major Tom. While other artists would try and try to change their image, but would find it to be difficult because of the reaction from their fans. Bowie did not have that problem and would always persuade his fans to believe his new image and eventually made them embrace and even become this persona. The desire between the star and the audience that uncured in the 1920s cinema, is something that Bowie seemed to use to convince his fans of anything. And it is why we still, even after his death, don't have enough of him.



The different 'Veils' of Bowie from 1971 till 1979.

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What this illustrates is that nowadays we have seen and done everything, so there is nothing that's still new to us. What results is an audience that is bored more often, and starts to comment and criticise on the artists. Because we only see a very directed and shaped image of the big celebrities of nowadays we forget that there is an actual person

behind the abstract version that is invented of themselves. And we comment and criticise on them shamelessly. In this episode of South Park it gets taken as far as that people that are best at commenting are the new celebrities. Not the people that are being commented on.

‘An artist is a conversation piece, nothing more. Like a vase or a kitschy side table; Just something for people to comment on. The old ways are dying, we’re not making money of records, we’re making money of tweets... And who makes the content? Today commentary is the content.’



.#REHASH' is not the only episode where South Park challenges the way we see and place celebrities in our society. In the episode 'Britney's New Look' where it so happens that the harsh criticism and unfiltered comments by people and media eventually lead to her death

## Conclusion

Television, cinema, video games and later on my experiences on stage have shaped me in so many ways. From watching Tik-Tak as a toddler to actually being on stage myself has shaped, formed and made me basically. My addiction for television was based on my need for seeing something larger than life. I needed something that stimulated my imagination and took me someplace else. The screen or stage simplifies, takes away details and it makes the world flat. But it is a reality in which everything is possible.

And the fact that everything is possible, made me want to be a part of it. All the years of watching Tell-Sell endlessly has eventually resulted in me taking the step to be both artist and spectator. The love I feel for exaggeration on screen has directly translated into the way I am in front of a crowd. Not only exaggerating is something I want to translate into my practice as an artist. But it is about creating something with simplicity and impact. Something that can reach a huge crowd because it is easy to read, but still challenges the spectators.

The desire that an artist creates between themselves and the audience is something I aim for and whatever I create must either be the object of desire or serve and nurture this relationship. Just like the co-actors in my favourite soap or the sunglasses of Marilyn Monroe.

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