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Architecture on the Couch

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Abstract

Architecture on the Couch

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Nicole Huber, Department of Architecture

This thesis explores architecture as an assemblage of realities. The rise in virtual and cybernetic technologies rapidly increases the convergence of multiple realities, revealing different ways of perceiving the environment. This shift in spatial perception presents the opportunity to re-imagine architecture beyond established dualisms and narratives of history. Perceptions of reality are entangled with internal bias, constantly molding and reconfiguring the architectural experience. How can architecture tap into psychodynamics to better understand effects of the built environment?

Utilizing digital media, this project experiments with converging realities and speculates possibilities for architecture which prioritizes emotion and perception. Working from psychoanalytic, cybernetic, and assemblage theories, a series of videos demonstrate the ways un-realities bleed into and become reality itself.

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MANIFESTO

Architecture transforms life.
Life is void without architecture.
A space but not a place.
A theater without a set.

Architecture transports audience and actor.
Their identities confused; their potentials multiplied.
Both existing here and there.

Architecture may refuse to act out.
Unfit for its role, it transports neither actor nor audience.
The subject is located in a sea of sealant, scaffolding, fiberglass batt.
Absence of architecture, of acting, of transport.

Cinema is architecture for acting out.
A Bad Actor makes trouble. Disrupts. Adds Drama.
A good actor if the intent is tension, if the intent is thrill.

Architecture requires presence.
Buildings that instill impressions on life.
Cinema feels presence immediately and in multiple ways – here, there, then, now.
Transporting between spaces and times, my memory, your motion.

Presence requires consciousness through awareness, or in the extreme, through shock and estrangement.
Cinema has the potential to manipulate feeling. To manufacture spatial awareness. To transform
Perceptions, identities, senses of time and of space. Of set and of setting. Of architecture.

The following thesis emerged during a period of intense restlessness, anxiety, and uncertainty given the social isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such an event takes command over media, infiltrating into the mind. Although attempting to ignore waves of dread and doubt regarding the importance of personal academic and creative work at a time of widespread social and political struggle, the persistence of anxieties and feelings of loneliness and guilt became the emotional lens through which to analyze and interpret the work.

Due to the sporadic – at times free associative – nature of this project's development, the text appears fragmentary, resisting illusory conceptions of 'wholeness' and 'mastery' in favor of perpetual questioning, interpretation, and a desire to connect to disparate streams of consciousness.

The result is a thesis that is personal. However, themes, symbols, or imaginaries may resemble other psychic realities, and may be interpreted differently. Ultimately, interpretations of my own subconscious are inherently biased; but, just as Freud acted as his own analyst for the sake of example, I provide possible interpretations correlating to personal anxieties and desires.

Introduction

Psychodynamics and Perception

Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis modern popular culture. His *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, provides a framework for psychoanalysts to decode the subconscious experiences of a patient, leading to a better understanding of the unconscious desires influencing political behavior.

Freudian psychoanalysis is often signified by the infamous couch. A site of free-association, the couch provides a non-medical bed for patients to relax and release the repressed traumas and desires of their inner psyche.

Applying psychoanalysis to architecture provides insight into spatial perception, preference, and criticism. As stated by Sigmund Freud, "Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychological apparatus. No other derivation is probable."¹ In other words, architecture is experienced through projections of the internal psyche. The implication for architecture is the importance of addressing mental health and wellbeing in tandem with environmental, formal and programmatic goals.

Thus, this thesis adopts psychoanalysis as a methodology to interpret dreams, memories, and fictions of architectural space. These spaces reveal the influence of conscious and unconscious experience in every day life on perception and experience.

Due to the conflict of interest in performing the analysis of ones own psyche, I also discussed possible interpretations with a trained psychologist practicing emotion-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Cybernetic Urbanism

It is important to note that Freud's writings on psychoanalysis and neurosis occurred at a moment of substantial urban change in Vienna and around the world. The turn of the century is characterized by rapid industrialisation and feelings of uncertainty toward the transformation of cities. Architects debated the effects of widening boulevards, congestion, and lack of public space on the mental health of citizens who may experience alienation, isolation, or agoraphobia as a result.

We are currently experiencing a similar, albeit temporary, paradigm shift in cities due to Covid-19. Effects of the pandemic and associated isolation on mental health have been clearly documented.²

Additionally, as evidenced over the past year in a number of political events, community organizing happens through social media and online forums. The design of digital spaces affect perception and bias as much as first-hand (IRL) experience. These movements display not just the power of organizing online, but also the desire to organize, to communicate emotion and trauma in order to establish power and agency in the city.

As these multiple ways of being converge and enter into co-presence, the responsibility of Architecture and Planning is in recognizing the varied perceptions of space and their struggle for power. Architecture must critique the dominant power structures that generate physical, social, and psychological harm to develop strategies that prioritize health and well-being.

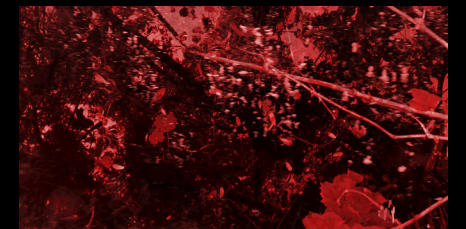
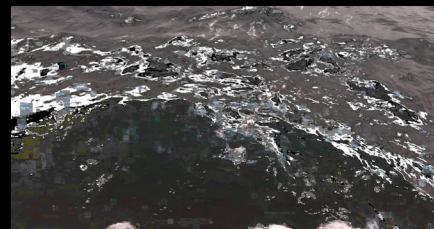
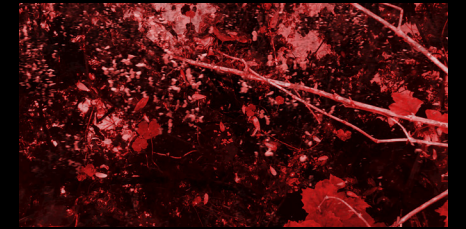
med · i · ta · tion

noun. profound and extended contemplation or reflection in order to achieve focused attention or an otherwise altered state of consciousness and to gain insight into oneself and the world.³

Meditation

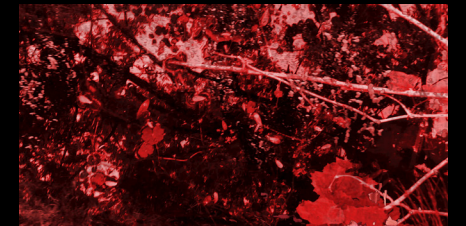
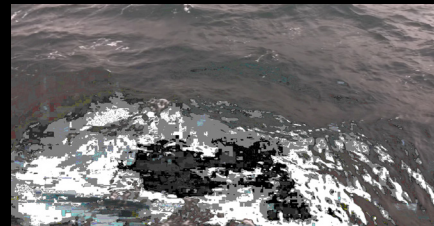
...in to a count of ten

and out to a count of ten...

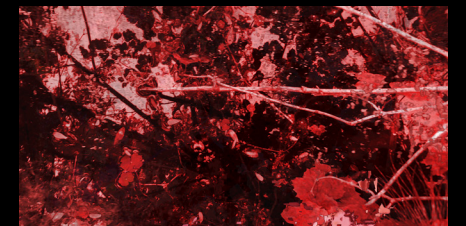
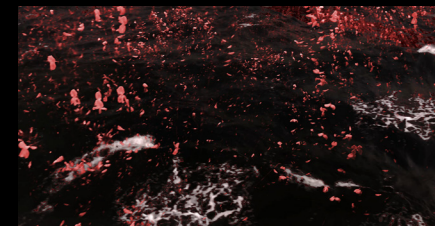


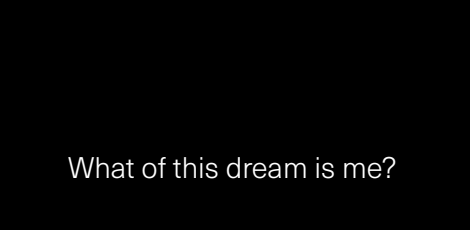
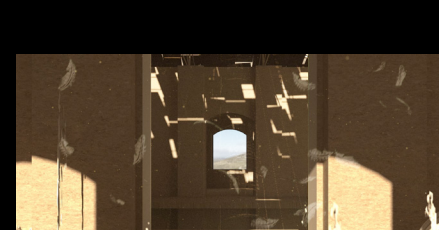
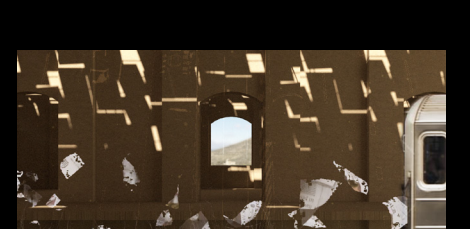
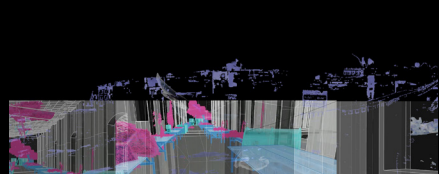
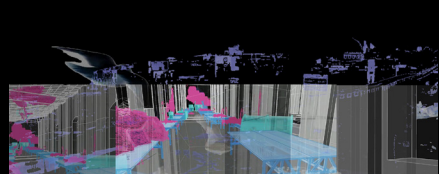
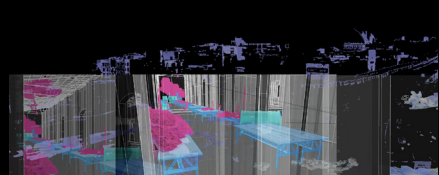
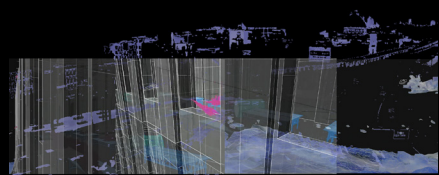
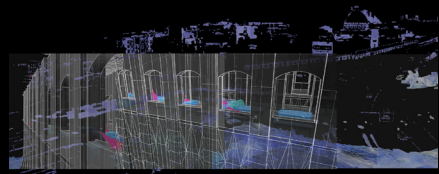
D: So, Brennan, how has the last week been?

B: Well, its been like most other weeks, working in isolation, dialoguing design decisions between me and myself... without that collaborative component, I'm finding myself surrendering to the emotional experience of the process, rather than trying to explain or deisgn those emotions away.

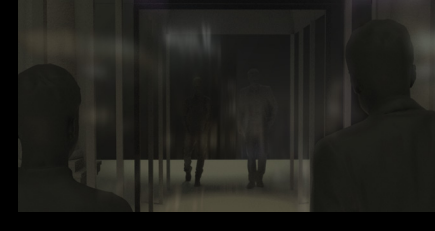
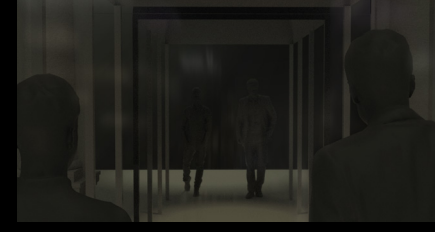
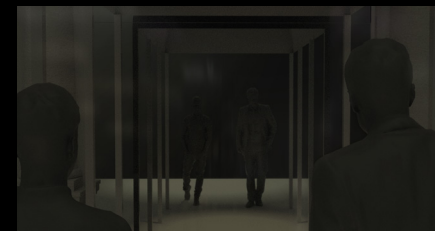
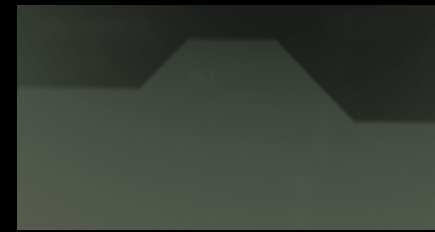
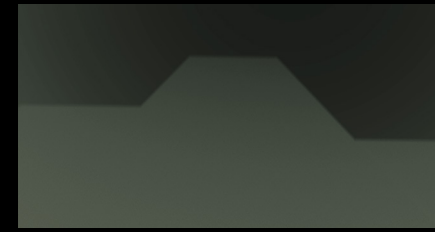


D: It sounds like you're trying to work with yourself in a more expansive way. I think a question to ask is: "What's the most authentic way to express what my experience has been?" And, "What of those expressions or experiences is me? What of this dream, if youre analyzing a dream, is me? What am I not fulfilling?"





What of this dream is me?



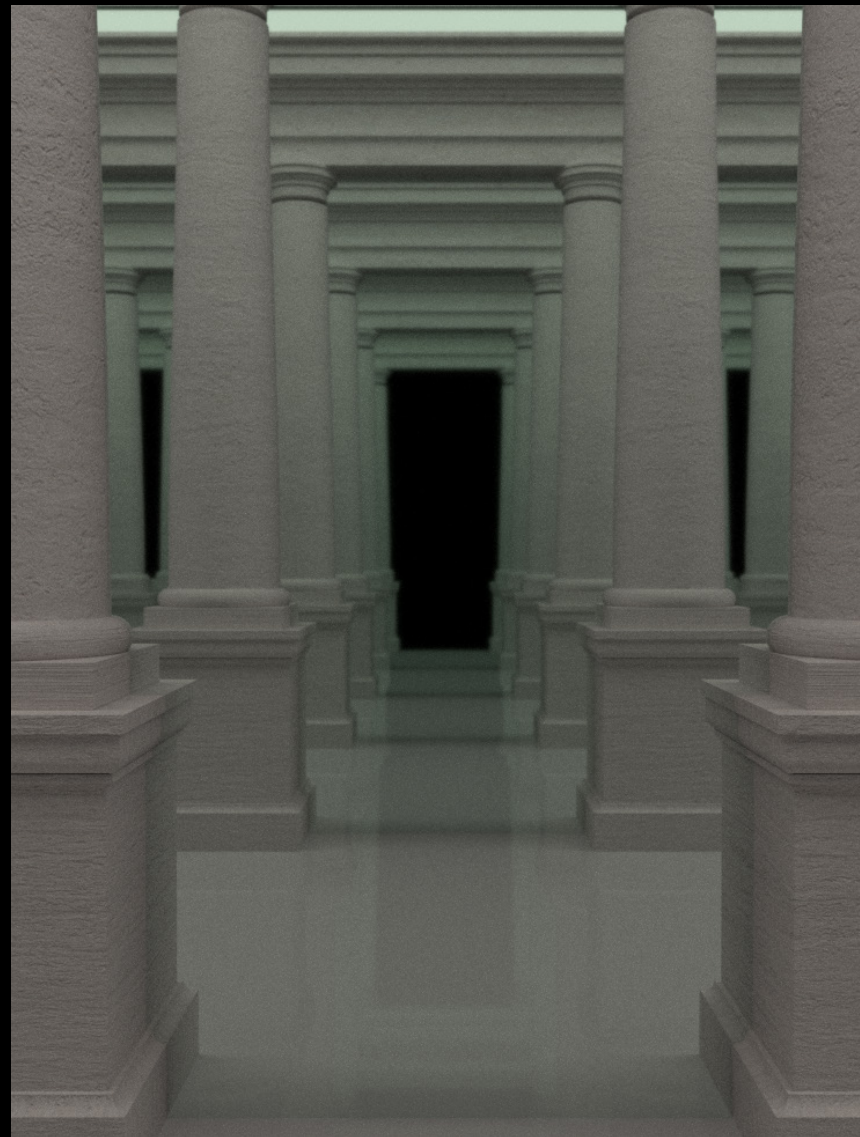
Where are we going, Jonathan?



Jacques Lacan identifies the mirror stage as first occurring in early childhood development, observable between the ages of six and eighteen months when a child observes and becomes fascinated by their mirror image. Lacan argues that during the mirror stage, the child perceives a gap between the image of their body and the lack of coordination and capabilities. Thus, the mirror stage is a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) between the ego's sense of individuality, and its dependency on others and the symbolic order (language) in forming conceptions of self.⁵

Whereas Freud emphasizes distinct stages of childhood maturation, Lacan rejects the biological observability of such phenomena, arguing instead for an understanding of stages as timeless structures appearing in adulthood sporadically. The work of the psychoanalyst is reconstructing these stages as they apply to adult patients.

Mirror Stage



To Lacan, the mirror stage is not only experienced in childhood, rather it is a permanent confrontation with subjectivity, occurring throughout adulthood. A recognition of the body as whole and autonomous is a misrecognition of actual existence and identity, which depends on systems of the symbolic order.⁶

The image on the right depicts a spatial memory beginning with disorientation and spectral contemplation. What follows is the conflict between conceptions of self autonomy and the awareness of dependency on others

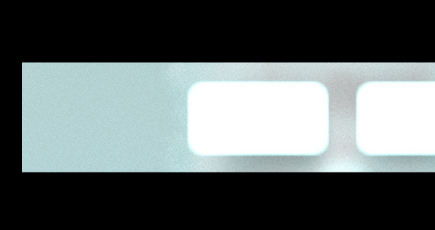
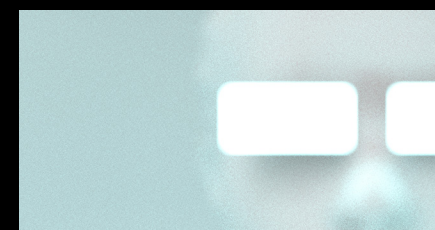
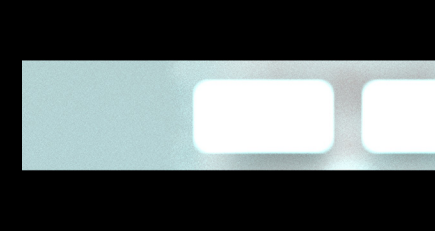
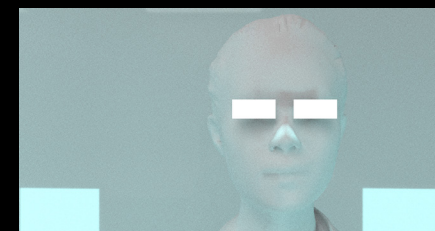
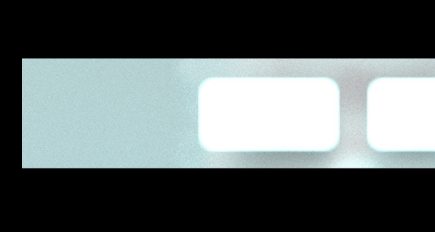
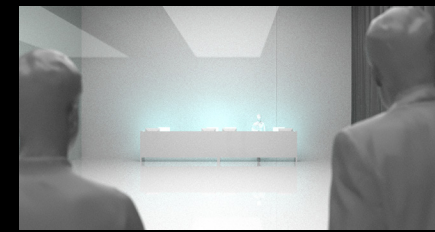
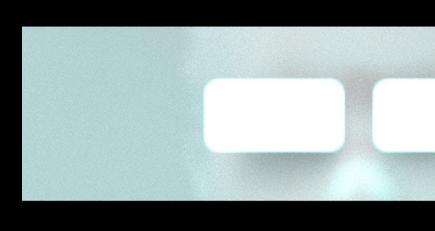
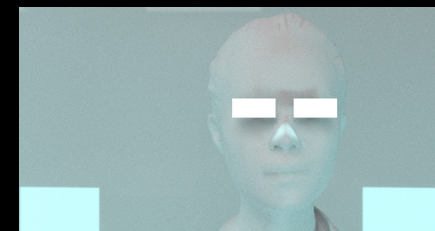
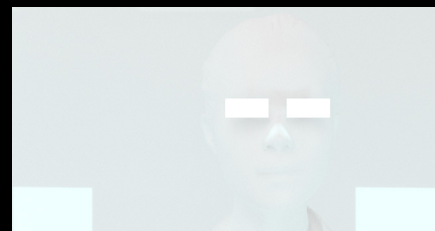
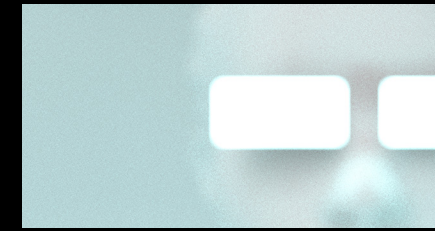
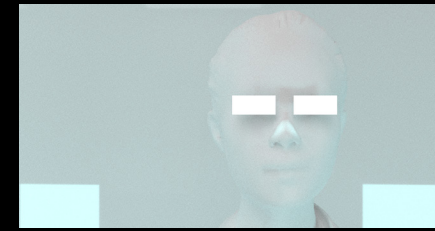
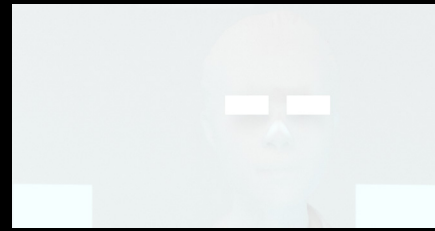
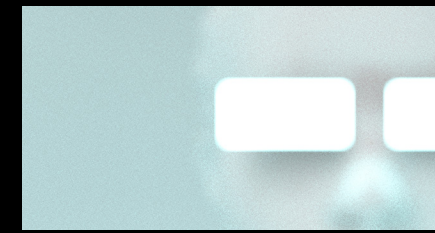
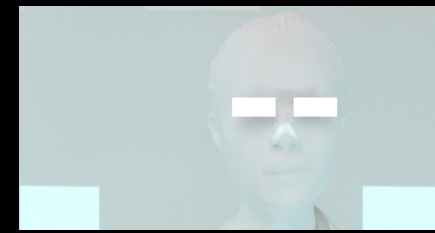


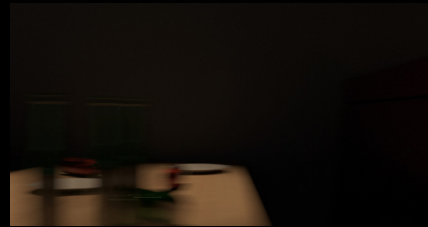
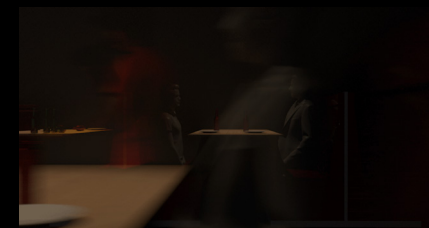
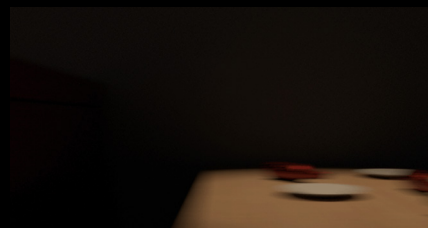
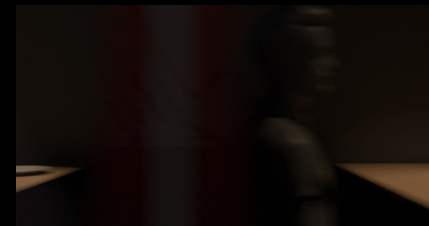
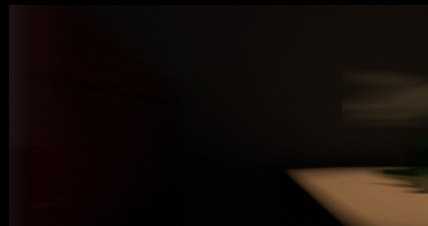
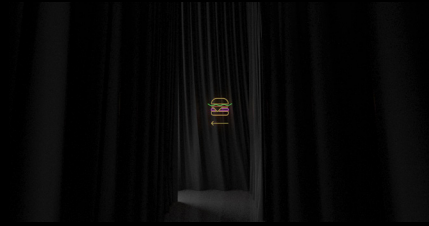
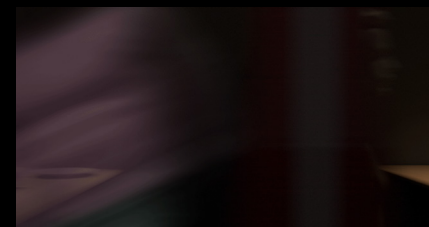
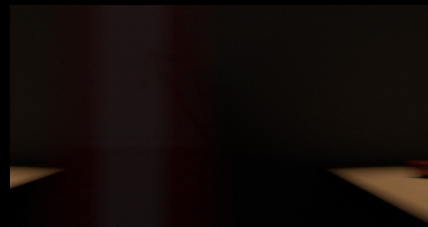
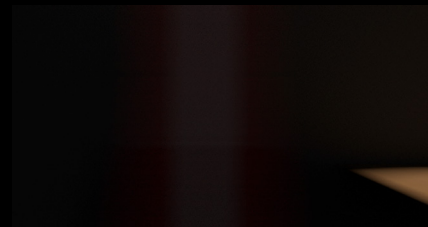
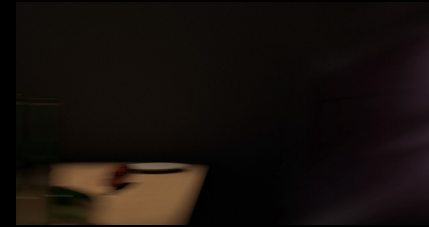
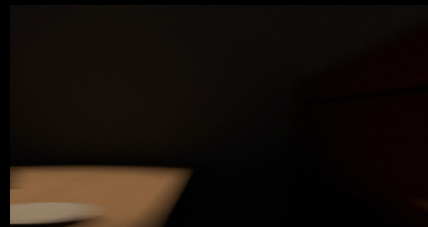
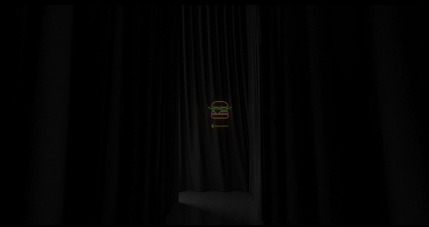
Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey relates Lacan's mirror stage to the pleasure in looking and the fascination with the human form in cinema. Mulvey claims that in addition to satisfying a "primordial wish for pleasurable looking," the cinema also develops a narcissistic scopophilia, combining the ego-formation of the mirror-stage, the misrecognition and alienation of the child's sense of self, and a fascination with looking.

In comparing these forms of scopophilia, Mulvey describes scopophilic pleasure as deriving sexual stimulation from the objectification of another person through sight. In contrast, narcissistic scopophilia and its relation to ego formation, or ego libido, derives from the "identification with the image seen."⁷ The contradictions of these two forms of scopic pleasure and their exposure on screen reveals not just the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women on screen, but also how the act of looking becomes part of the spectacle itself. The manipulation of time and the manipulation of space through narrative, editing, and perspective, codifies a cinematic world that privileges the dominant, patriarchal male gaze. In this way, Mulvey makes the argument that conventional narrative cinema pushes the audience to identify with the apparatus of the patriarchy.

The exploration beyond patriarchal and dominant systems necessitates the use of non-conventional methods of film and media production.

What of this dream is me? What of this dream is *not* me?





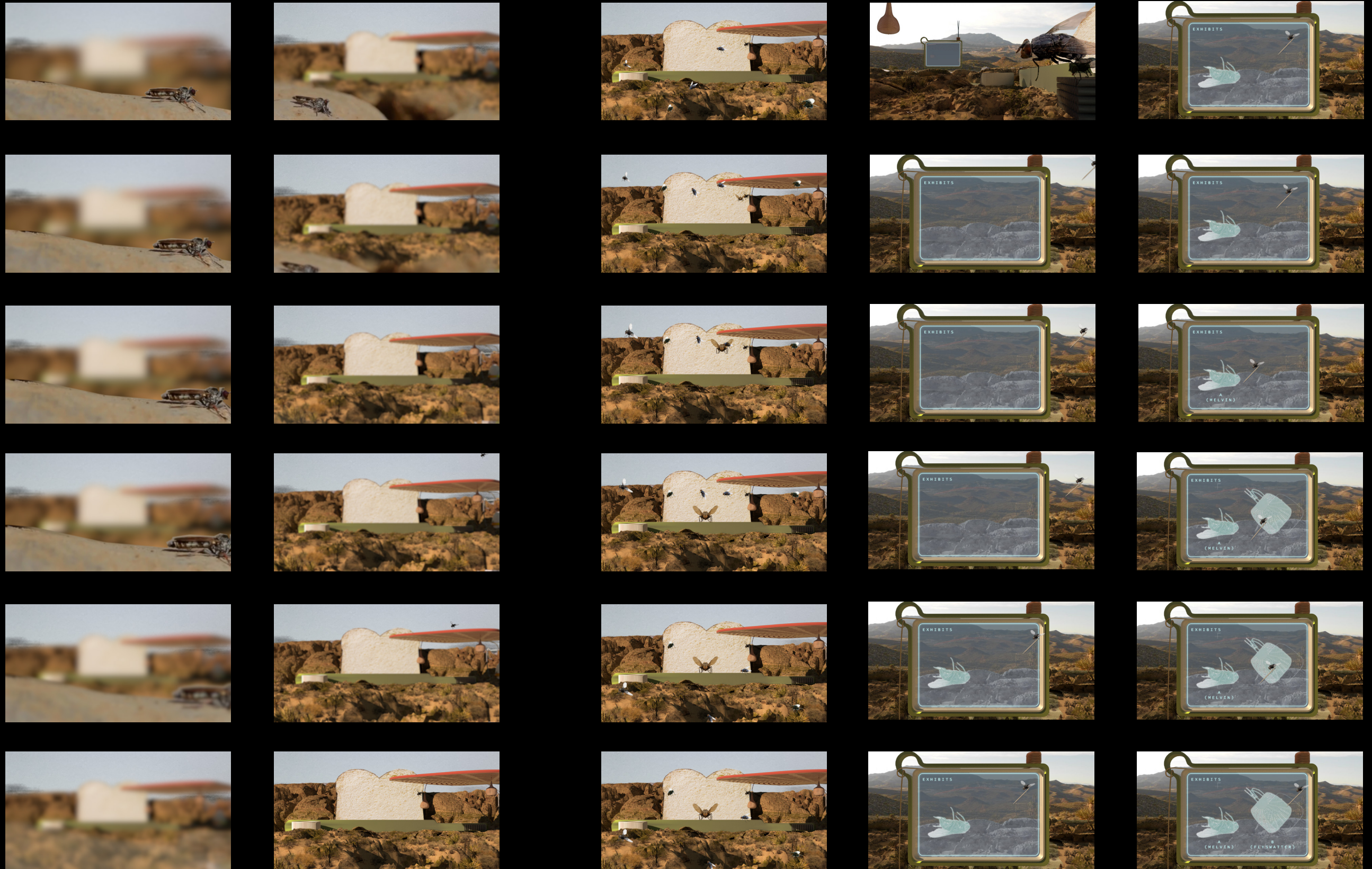
In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud describes strategies of the mind to censor repressed memories. These strategies obscure the dream-thoughts, radically transforming them into unintelligible sequences constituting the dream content. Freud identifies several strategies known as “dream-work”.

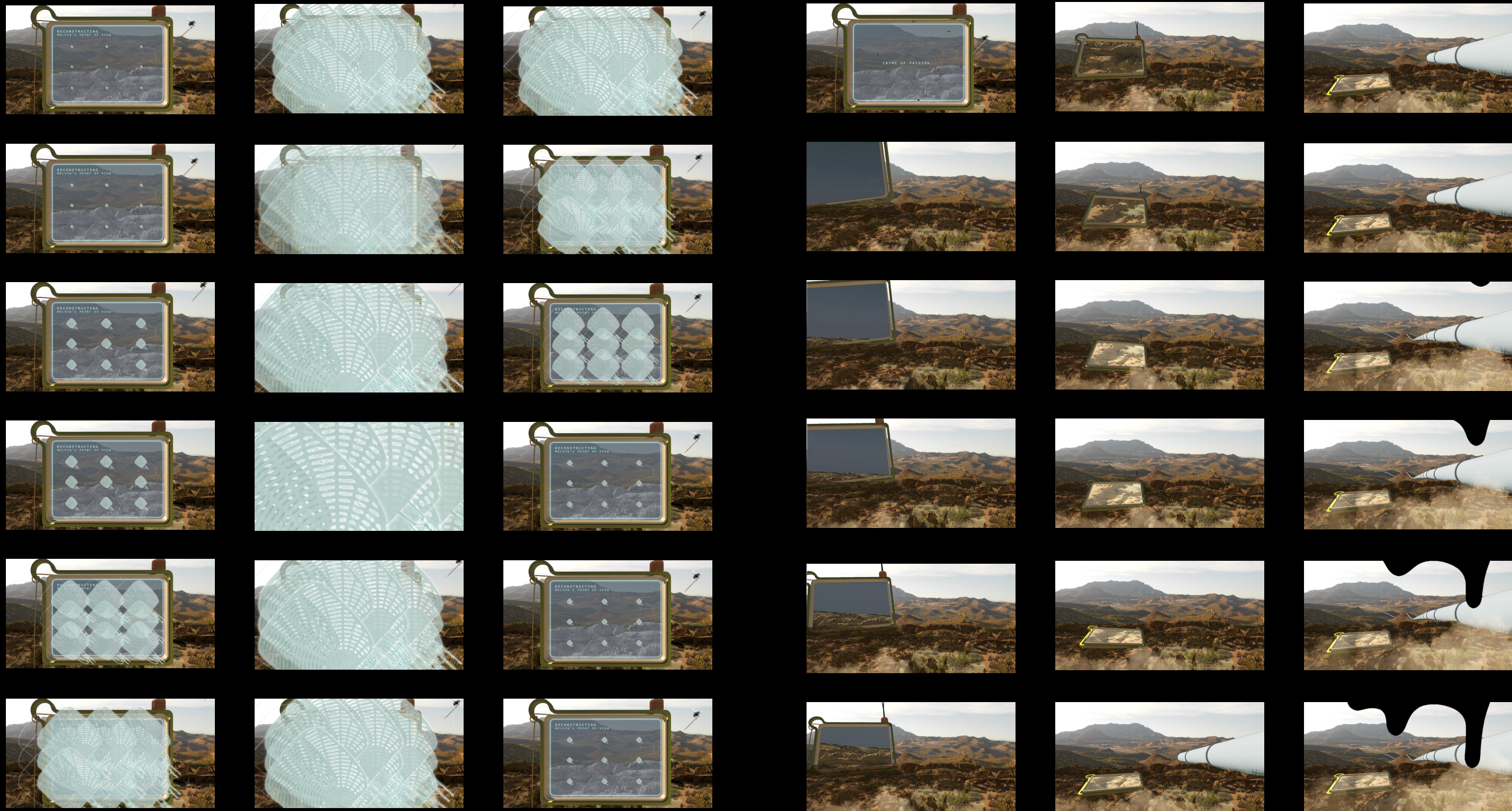
Psychoanalysis works to unravel the internal obfuscation of dream-work to uncover the repressed emotions of the dream thoughts and work toward resolving them in actual life.⁸ Design follows a similar path, presenting ideas which must be questioned and analyzed to address the proper issues.

If the dream is capable of displacing and combining desires and traumas, what of this dream is *not* me? What don't I remember?



Is this no longer *my* dream?







Biologically speaking, metamorphosis is defined as a change in form from the larval stage to an adult. The processes, characteristics, and stages vary among animals.

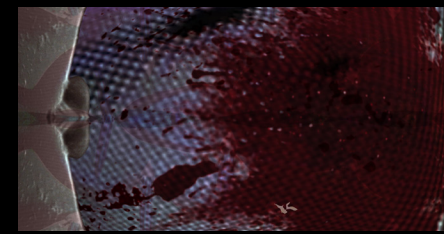
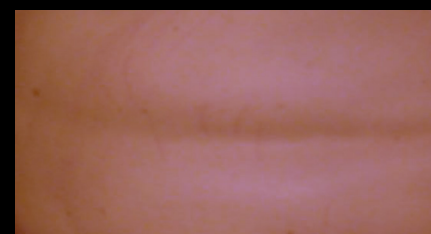
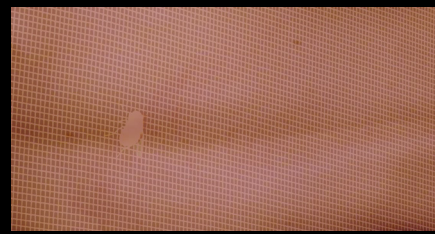
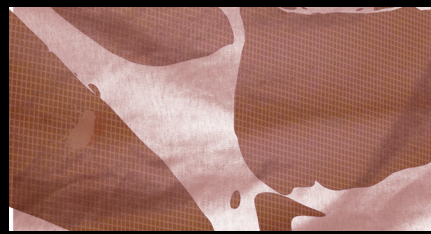
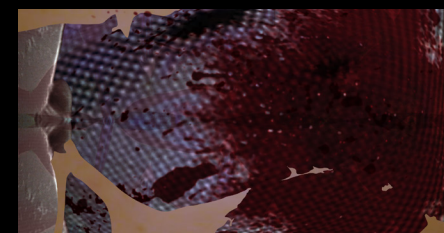
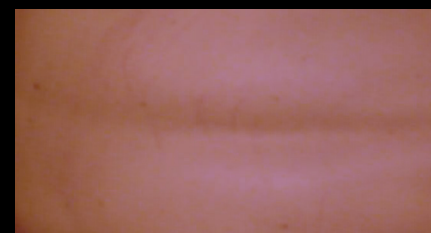
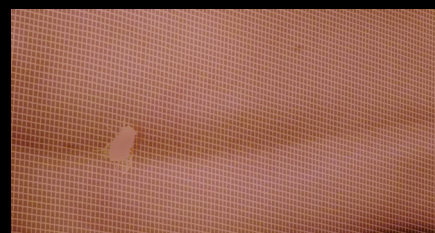
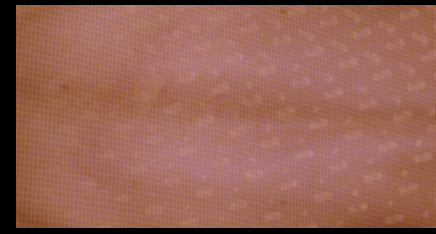
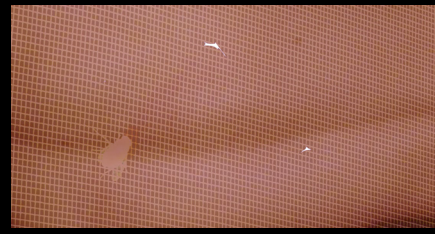
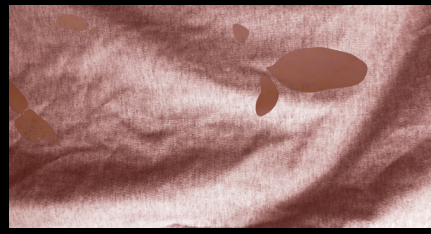
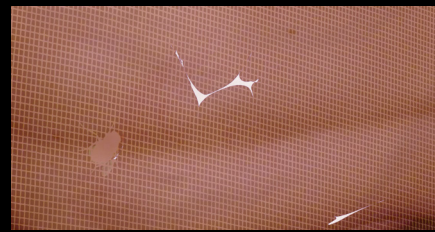
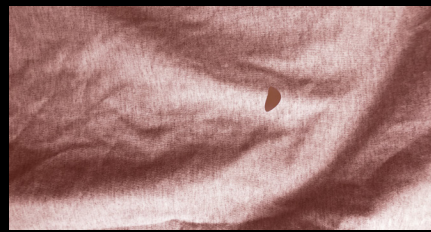
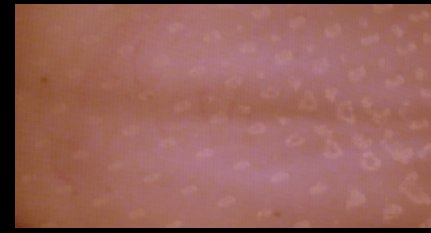
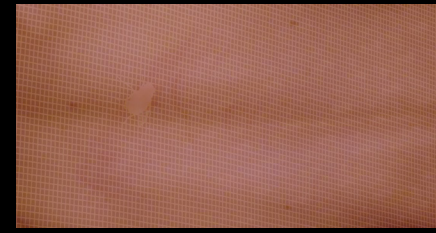
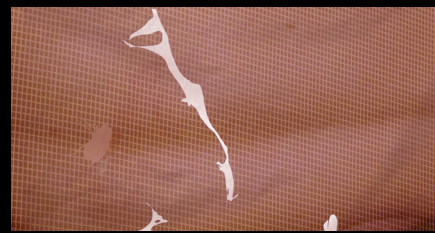
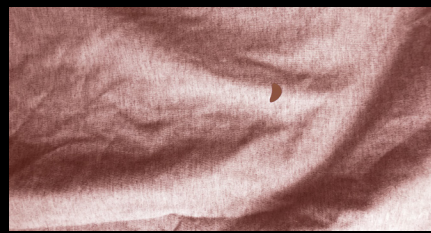
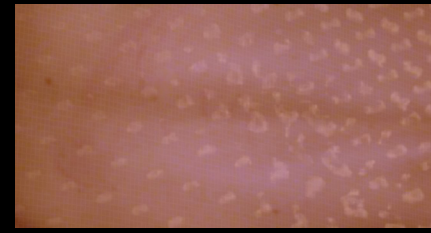
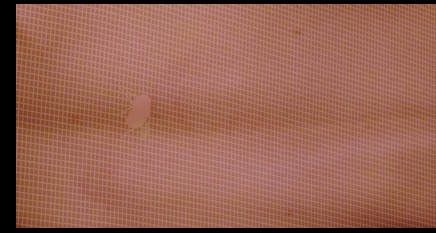
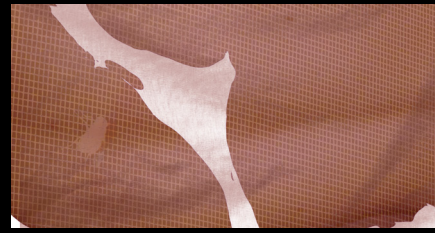
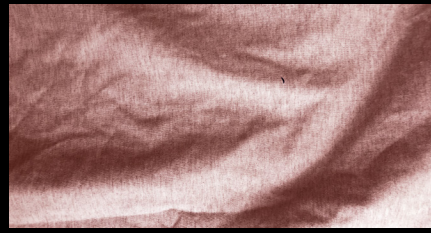
Animals undergoing an incomplete (hemimetabolous) metamorphosis hatch from an egg in nymph form, resembling the adult but smaller. Conversely, animals undergoing complete (holometabolous) metamorphosis exhibit distinct larval and pupal stages. The four distinct life cycle stages of these insects is: egg, larva, pupa, and imago.

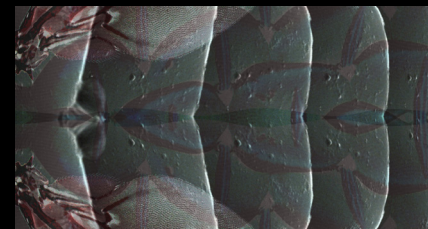
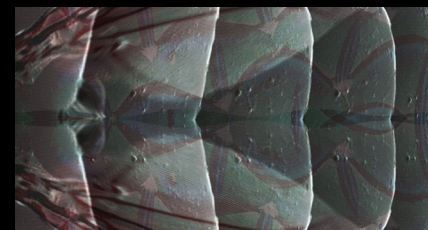
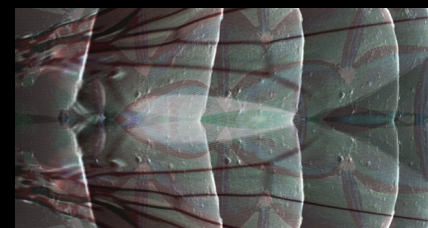
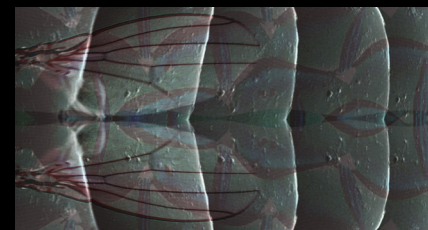
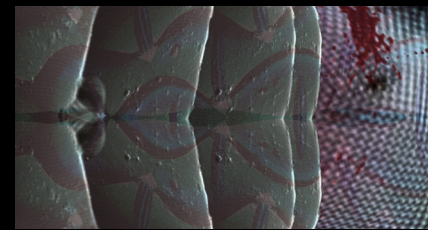
The larval stage is further subdivided into multiple sections called instars. At the end of each instar, the developing insect molts, allowing for growth. Leading up to the final instar, the animal fasts and their exterior hardens to generate the puparium, or pupal chamber. The final instar is a transition to the pupal stage, the moment at which the insect's larval structures disintegrate and adult structures such as wings form. The imago is the adult (sexually mature) form, the final stage of metamorphosis.⁹

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the term "imago" emphasizes the subjective determination, or feelings, associated with visual representation - the jubilation of the child's self-identification. To Carl Jung, imagos are developed through experience and identifications with the collective unconscious, informing the subject's relationships to other people and indicating maturity.

Adjacent image depicts the emerging imago, from *Insects, their way and means of living*, R. E. Snodgrass. 1930.

Metamorphosis





To challenge existing systems of power which serve a few human actors, architecture must consider the multitude of spatial perceptions, voiced and unvoiced, affected by its actions.

At an individual level, this means a connection and familiarization to one's subconscious. At a social level, the relationship between science and technology, according to Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, means, "embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts,"¹⁰ a sentiment that echoes the collective unconscious of Jung.

Architecture must recognize various realities and how they interact. Critiquing desires for power and effects on social well-being, Architecture must acknowledge its privileging of particular groups, dismantling the systems of oppression in which architecture plays a part.

Haraway also states: "Who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival."¹¹ Becoming bug multiplies ones point of view, surrendering an idea of self and embracing a transformation of the mind, body, and perception. Although such a metamorphosis may be seen as becoming useless and insignificant,¹² on the contrary, the transformation is indicative of a resistance to authoratative control, necessary for establishing self awareness and relating to others.

Conclusion

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Last, I would be remiss if I did not mention the support and inspiration I have gleaned from friends along the way. Thank you.

Endnotes

- 1 Abell, John. *Freud for Architects*. Taylor and Francis, 4-6, 2020.
- 2 In January 2019, 1 in 10 U.S. adults reported anxiety or depression, in January 2021, 4 in 10. Data from NHIS Early Release Program and U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey. See: [kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/](https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/)
- 3 "Meditation." *Dictionary.APA.org*. American Psychological Association, 2020. Web. June 2021.
- 4 Ward, Alie. "Sports and Performance Psychology with Sari Shepphird." *Ologies*, January 15, 2018. Apple Podcasts App.
- 5 Hendrix, John S. *Architecture and psychoanalysis: Peter Eisenman and Jacques Lacan*. New York: Peter Lang, 81 2006.
- 6 Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Taylor and Francis, 85, 2006.
- 7 Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Fall 1975): 6-18
- 8 Freud, Sigmund, and Strachey, James. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Basic Books, 277-279, 1955.
- 9 "Metamorphosis." *Animal Sciences*, edited by Allan B. Cobb, Macmillan Reference USA, 2010. Gale In Context. Accessed 23 June 2021
- 10 Haraway, Donna J.. "A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Manifestly Haraway*, University of Minnesota Press, 67, 2016.
- 11 Haraway *Ibid*.
- 12 Consider Franz Kafka's portrayal of Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*. "Verminous" and uninterested in work, Gregor abandons his duty as family provider, instead finding joy resting upon the ceiling.

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