INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses my video installation Running Men as an example of how my appropriative engagements with screen images can create a space of meditative and indeed mediated reflection on the precarious cinematic body. Forming part of an ongoing body of practice-led research, I will address the two distinct but connected sites and activities of body/image engagement that this work exemplifies. I will describe the conceptual and contextual approaches to practice that the work developed from, as well as the particular visual/affectual potential this work has as a spatial screen-installation. Finally I will outline how both of these sites/activities explore and express the complicated power structures at play in specific screen representations of the male body.

This work evolved very slowly in fits and starts over the course of a protracted period of time – around 7 years. So my discussion of it today draws on observations made about the practice at various different points in time, observations that have become a
key part of developing a methodically reflective practice which helps me consider new ways of viewing work as it evolves over time.

As a whole, I have predominately thought of Running Men, built as it is using the cinematic trope of suspense, as reflective of my own affectual experience of anxiety, that of often being overwhelmed by my obsession with the ubiquity of screen-based culture. Not only has the work, in execution and installation allowed me to parse, express and explore my personal psychological experiences, it has also allowed me to externalize and recognize how my particular approach to practice-led research can function in general to create new experiential forms of knowledge.

**METHODOLOGY**

*(SLIDE 3 – Digital Bricolage)*

In general, I refer to this methodology of making using the term *digital-bricolage*. This idea combines the older idea of bricolage – as a poetic way of ‘making do’ (de Certeau 1984, xv) in constructing new meanings from existing culture – with more recent Postproduction practices that digitally remap, remake or reimagine the arrangement of cultural forms in a more critically nuanced manner. This connective process links together concepts and forms in order to develop a greater critical awareness and understanding of their symbolic potential. It is an ongoing process of poetic, analytical, and combinatory play, that enables a more refined examination of the social, political and cultural contexts of the screen culture that I work with.

**PROCESS/MAKING**

*(SLIDE 4 – Running Men detail video)*

It was this process of making an arbitrary selection from North by Northwest (Hitchcock 1959) that eventually developed into the more conceptually and formally considered Running Men work. Using these postproduction practices, I found/selected, edited and rotoscoped footage of memorable scenes of other male actors that I identified with or wanted to identify with in one way or another; beyond Cary Grant, there was also Harrison Ford, Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks, and Daniel Craig. Each
character was selected because of the kind of vicarious cinematic experience I had when watching the source films. Using a very simple looping strategy, I explored the affectual potential of this particular experience, turning each of these character's cinematic moments into endless running scenes that effectively trapped these actors in a void of anticipation and fear. It was only much later that I realized this also referenced a kind of Nietschzean idea of eternal recurrence.

*(SLIDE 5 – After Effects work-in-progress screenshot)*

In theory, the process of cutting, looping and ‘painting’ out the background is relatively uncomplicated. However, in reality the actual process of constructing an effective loop and convincingly rotoscoping the figure is labourious and time-consuming. Not only do sections of clothing, and even whole limbs need to be ‘puppeteered’ into place, but motion blur, camera movement, and even film grain all have to be accounted for, stabilized, and masked out; resulting in the need for an obsessive amount of attention to be doled out frame-by-frame. Rather than dismissing these details entirely as a matter of technique or craft exclusively, I have come to understand the importance of these time-consuming and technical approaches as integral to the practice. They become sites for a kind of more critically distanced exploration and analysis, as well as a meditative space for me – a space of forced withdrawal. I think of this process as ‘communing’ with the image – a space where the often-repetitive technical and material operations of the practice are fore-grounded. Importantly, along with constructing a space to make sense of my personal vicarious cinematic experience, some of this thinking can also consider the kind of *intersubjective* responses that other viewers of the film and of my work might also have.

As I suggested earlier the Cary Grant portion of this work was originally the only part of this work; an initial arbitrary selection of footage made as a response to the visceral thrill of watching it.

*(SLIDE 6 – Running Cary video)*

And in the earliest version of the work, I edited out the menacing plane from the
original and inserted my own ambiguous text instead to endlessly chase Grant’s character. This didn’t really work or seemed somehow incomplete as a work, and over time I realised that the work was not simplified enough, and that my anxious habit of over-complicating work was symptomatic of the larger sense of general anxiety that is a very real and often all pervasive psychological experience in my everyday life. This led me to look more closely at how masculine identity was represented in the kind of Hollywood films I was obsessive about, and began my collection of running men. In turn these characters became surrogates for the various aspects of my own anxieties about identity and masculinity. They become allegorical projections of how I often feel about my subjective social experiences linked together to create a kind of self-portrait as trapped, anxious, precarious, or even potentially paranoid.

*(SLIDE 7 – Five Running Men film stills)*

As cinematic bodies, the particular actors selected represent various but still narrow conceptions of masculinity. On one hand the films use the low-angle tracking shot to paint the characters in a (if not) heroic, than at least a dynamic light. On the other hand however, these are bodies in numerous kinds of peril. Not only do each of them run away from some kind of perilous and now unseen scenario but I think of them as representing confused and disconcerting understandings of identity altogether, both in terms of the narrative of the source films, but also between the screen identities and the actor’s real lives. For each channel of the work as I see it, there is a strange kind of identity crisis at play.

*(SLIDE 8 – Cary Grant two shot)*

First and foremost Cary Grant’s character’s narrative arc in *North by Northwest* is kick-started by a case of mistaken identity – mistaken for a man who doesn’t even exist. For me here there is a particularly delightful alignment here with Grant’s famous quote “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant – even I want to be Cary Grant” (quoted in
Beauchamp and Bachrach, 2010 para. 30).

**(SLIDE 9 – Harrison Ford two shot)**

Consider also Harrison Ford, the famous actor, and Indiana Jones, his character (Spielberg 1981) – on the one hand, Ford was/is an action-star and Jones a globe-trotting-adventurer, but on the other hand Ford is a renowned curmudgeon and Jones leads another life as a leather-patched-tweed-wearing professor. As such, I am interested in, and inspired by, cinema’s ability to endow heroic qualities alongside the studiously mundane.

**(SLIDE 10 – Tom Cruise two shot)**

I’m also oddly fascinated by Tom Cruise’s rich-playboy character in *Vanilla Sky* (Crowe 2002). Here is a character who cannot tell reality from his dreams, and as it turns out has used his wealth to scientifically and cryogenically cheat death. This is a character appropriately played by Tom Cruise, multi-millionaire Scientologist and he of the anti-psychologist rant and infamous couch-jump.

**(SLIDE 11 – Tom Hanks two shot)**

Then there is Forrest Gump (Zemeckis 1994) a character of limited cognitive ability (played by an actor of superlative acting ability) who expresses his frustration and heartbreak in life with an extended period of laborious running (read: process) and yet still fails to articulate his particular brand of ennui.

**(SLIDE 12 – James Bond Connery/Craig two shot)**

Then there is James Bond, a pinnacle of cinematic style, guile, and fortitude (Mendes 2013). A secret agent ‘identity’ of half-a-dozen or more guises, whose age, costume, and psychical prowess all vary wildly according to the time, place, peer and situation.

So as part of these works, I was really grappling with the idea that these variously contrived fictions very much inform my experience of the world. I had to consider how, as a fan of Hollywood film, the gaps between my lived and vicarious experience inform and affect my approaches to creatively engaging with popular culture. As I developed this work I began to see more clearly how the practice
expressed my protracted attempts at negotiating the world in general, and I recognised that much of this was also about how I relate to representations of masculinity and identity in pop culture. Each character, each narrative or era that they represent maps out a historical trajectory of the violent, perilous male body, a body in flight, and so then, my treatment of these fragments is evidence of their complicated legacy upon my own psychology, as DW Winnicott might describe my dilemma – this is “the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related” (quoted in Hills 2002, 104).

This in turn led me to think about how the work might function affectively, beyond my own self-consciousness, and function as a way for others to experientially understand how we can relate to screen bodies. So the final stage in the development of this work resided in how it could operate as a video installation.

INSTALLATION
When planning the installation of the work I was interested in playing with the phenomenological dimension of the loop, and how repetition in conjunction with an ambient soundtrack could promote a mesmerising or meditative experience that sits in opposition to the foreboding quality of the ‘trapped’ scenario. This approach to installing the work went through many iterations, and it wasn’t until the final installation of the work installed in the Carriageworks space at the Biennale of Sydney that I felt the videos were able to capture the kind of affectual experience that I wanted the work to have.

(SLIDE 13 - Running Men Biennale of Sydney installation video loop)
In the completion and installation of these rhythmically looping fragments, I found that I was able to lose myself in each scene and increasingly able to relax and escape my own confusion with the world. This repetitive and relaxing state can for me begin to
mirror and expand the kind of contemplative space I have discussed as crucial to the editing process. Because while the rhythmic qualities of each loop might initially reproduce the kind of anxiousness that the fleeing characters can represent, there is also a stability in the loop. It’s a repetitively contemplative space that can expand and contract a sense of time. I am interested in how the extremely short durations of each clip – ranging from 1.5 to 3.5 seconds – can also draw out different kinds of temporal and visual engagements for a viewer, perhaps much longer relatively than a longer video might. Surprisingly – given their brevity – the clips can ‘offer’ different lengths of experience and absorption to the viewer. Much like my own vicarious experience of viewing these filmic moments then re-editing them, this installation became a way of using the elasticity of time as a way of generating affect.

With this in mind, the installation was intended to create the opportunity for viewers to move around and amongst each screen. This installation strategy – providing space to individually and personally engage with each screen – was also intended as a way to service the varied traffic flows of the large Carriageworks space. Moving from and towards the other more enclosed cinematic projection rooms of the exhibition, viewers could exercise a sense of control or agency in their screen interaction. They could walk up to a single figure to study their facial expression – endless moments of panic, stoicism, or confusion. As well as engaging with the single screens there was a number of angles from which a viewer could take in the entire running tableau. They could find and create various compositions of their own; making one screen eclipse another, or even moving around to make use of the parallax effect to make one figure chase another. Viewers could effectively become digital-bricoleurs, framing up their own new cinematic compositions and scenes.

Overall, just as I have discussed with regard to the making processes, the installation of the work explores and expresses a tension between two experiences – of being ‘lost in’
or overwhelmed by, and attempting to ‘control’ or understand affective cultural engagements. This is an apt duality that not only describes my experiences of engaging with and consuming popular culture, and of the meditative spaces of making the work, but also the installation potentials as well. In Running Men I wanted to ‘open up’ this puzzling experience to the viewer – to explore the spatial/bodily/phenomenological experience of screens and video. The work addresses the idea of time, creating these reflective spaces in practice as well as exhibition, addressing and metaphorically understanding affective screen experience. In these spaces is an opportunity to re-navigate and even re-configure how we can engage with a sense of overwhelmingness or endlessness in screen culture. How we can think of anxiety as a shared social-experience. For both myself and the viewer, the work is an example of the way that: making as a way of thinking; temporal experience; and spatial screen interaction can do this, and in doing so, can reflect on the constructed-ness and complicated sense of precarity at play in the representation of the screen body.
Reference List


