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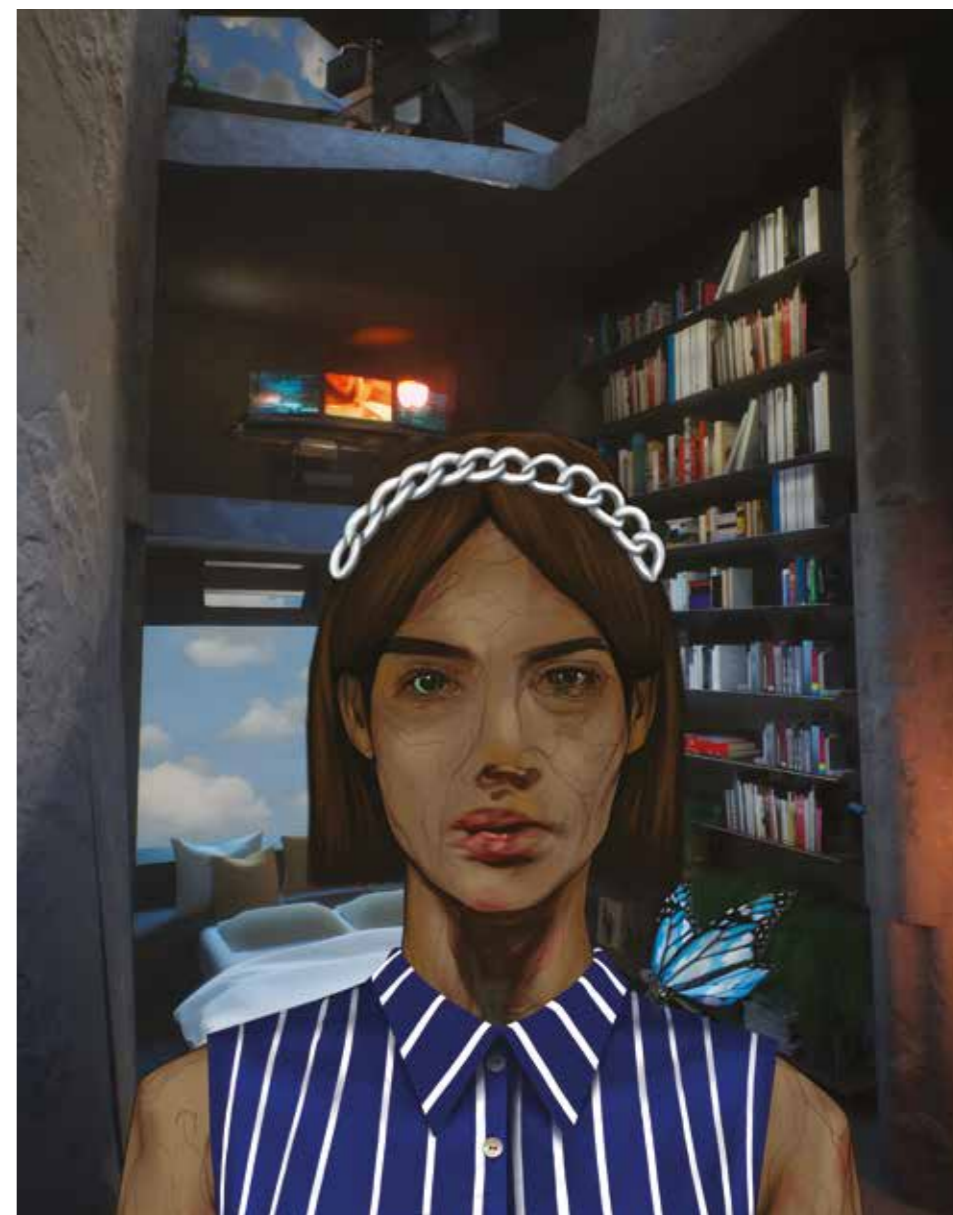
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INSIDE THE COVER

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CÈCILE
B. EVANS

“Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place.”
– *Ash Wednesday*, T.S. Eliot (1930)

“Je veux tout le quartier à l'Élysée
La révolution ne sera pas télévisée.”
– *Spleen*, Dinos (2018)

Note to the readers: as I sit typing away in the midst of a sweltering landlocked Central European summer, my thoughts drift across the ocean to Cécile B. Evans (CBE), temporarily editing from a human-sized geode, nestled amidst the sprawling fields of Virginia, USA. To borrow CBE's words, “the film doesn't exist yet, it's like a collage of clips and 20,000 different timelines at the moment.” Welcome to this glimpse into ongoing conversations about the script of a film-to-be, an opus titled *Reality or Not*. Please indulge us in an exercise into the realm of subjectivity in producing alternatives and realities.

The first sentence of the script reads “REALITY OR NOT / An artist's film by Cécile B. Evans / Based on, a few things”. Spoiler alert: The opening scene unfurls, introducing us to our first protagonist, aptly known as “the narrator”. The voice of Alexandra Stewart, the English language narrator from Chris Marker's cinematic masterpiece, *Sans Soleil* (1983), fills the air with her mellifluous tones. “I had a funny feeling that reality was here,” she narrates as we gaze up at a *Cowboy Bebop* cerulean sky, a canvas unburdened by earthly woes. Just as our senses become one with the tranquil scene, a reality TV intro abruptly intrudes: “... Previously on *Reality or Not*... what do you do when your dreams become a reality? This is a story about a group of realitary students picked to dream a new life. Find out what happens when kids stop being property and start their own reality.”

In the script, we encounter a diverse ensemble of characters, each meticulously crafted to contribute their unique strands to the narrative, deepening its exploration of reality, storyline manipulation, and the intricate dance between fact and fiction. In order of appearance, it stages “the narrator”, embodying the complexities of authority and envy in a leftist ideological context, “the presenter”, symbolizing sanitized institutional voices and the struggle to digest unconventional narratives, and the “Realitarians”, high-school students disrupting norms through idleness—the characters form a rich ensemble of perspectives. “A woman stranded in Target”—a moment ripped from a viral video of stranded shoppers organizing themselves—reflects resilience amid chaos, while CBE portrays “the producer”, intentionally embodying the tension between radical intent and complicity with the system. The producer feeds the Realitarians historical references, like the Paris Commune, to inspire the adolescents and stimulate content for the reality show. The only reactions they generate are realistic gestures that collapse all possibilities for a clean edit. An appearance early on of a clip featuring “Candice Dillard”, an iconic cast member from the *Real Housewives* franchises, breaks the fourth wall of the show and challenges the scripted nature of some realities, while Dillard's castmate “Gizelle” illustrates the manipulation of narratives within the genre. A later appearance by “Denise Richards”, the actor turned *Real Housewives* star, brings a sense of authenticity through her refusal to engage in scripted storylines. “Boadixea”—very loosely based on the idea of a statue of the prehistoric pre-Brit-

ain Celtic tribal leader Boadicea who in the lore of history tried to fight off imperialism—raises the frustration of being a static symbol. “ML”, a hacker hailing from Algiers (because they are reputedly the best), but also clairvoyant and former *Real Housewife* coming from another future, engages in an attempt to take down the IMF, receiving help from “the butterfly” while the “Voice of Ulrike Meinhof”, a controversial figure in European left-wing history, connects to radical ideologies and resistance. Lastly, the “Collective of Renders” introduces an element of unpredictability, challenging conventional influencer roles and questioning the concept of time itself, deepening the film's exploration of reality, narrative subversion, and the enigmatic interplay between truth and fiction.

In a table read of the script held at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris, CBE addressed performers: “Can we give up a cruel optimism there is towards dominating ideals of how reality should be shaped and imagine stickier, more complex situations that aren't 'likeable'?” They go on to cite examples from the plot: “That it could be a reality TV star that takes down the IMF, or that it could be a group of non-human digital entities that revolutionize time, or the impracticality of a group of kids making an airport (which has all of these things around security) an insecure, free place—what does that mean for reality? How can these serve as a counterpoint to the forces that have otherwise shaped reality?”

I believe it is important to underscore that the script, while drawing from various aspects of French culture, also sheds light on the intricate socio-political intersections within contemporary fragments of French societies. With the dedicated support of the young people who play the Realitarians' teacher, CBE worked closely over the 2022-2023 academic year with a group of students in the art class at Lycée Suger in La Plaine Saint-Denis, where CBE resides and works in the near periphery of Paris.

The script's connection to France is, however, not solely anchored in local ties or educational collaboration. CBE's dramaturgy of reality TV inevitably touches French culture: the set of the popular series *Secret Story*. This show was a touchstone for teenagers and a staple of Friday night television for a decade. The “Maison des Secrets” stood atop the Montjoie studio roof in Saint-Denis, also near where CBE lives, built in the early '90s on the remnants of the AB Production studios. However, since the show's conclusion in 2017, it has been left seemingly deserted. An anecdote encapsulates the sentiment: one May day in 2023, Yasmeen el Hamdani, a friend of mine who lives opposite the studios, witnessed a plume of black smoke. She snapped a photo and tweeted, “Breaking news: the Maison des Secrets is on fire!!” The tweet garnered over 350k views, and the subsequent media coverage treated it as a significant event. “Secret Story: the Maison des Secrets Engulfed in a Devastating Blaze!” It felt like witnessing the end of an era. The thing is, the story is completely made up, Yasmeen never witnessed the reality TV set go in flames, it is all fiction or so-called ‘fake news.’ In a way, thanks to a specific angle on an image, she added a layer of reality by manipulating it, and maybe, claimed back her scape.

In February 2023, France was embroiled in protests against pension reforms. A nationwide and inter-generational mobilization confronted the government. While scrolling endlessly on my Instagram feed, a photo caught my eye. On a university building's curved corridor, someone had scrawled in red ink on a white background, “Welcome to the Commune of Tolbiac.” Indeed, the Tolbiac

Campus of Panthéon-Sorbonne University in Paris was in the throes of a strike, with students occupying it day and night. The historical references and language used immediately made me think back to the script's opening scenes where the producer invites the candidates to take inspiration from the Paris Commune model.

As someone who did not grow up in France, my understanding of history revolves around symbolic moments in discourse. The Paris Commune has always seemed like an untouchable symbol of the French left. It was a revolutionary and socialist government that ruled/occupied Paris for 72 days (which is the exact duration of the fictional show *Reality or Not* in the script), from March 18 to May 28, 1871. The importance of the Paris Commune in the collective imaginaries of contemporary French leftist movements remains a powerful and enduring symbol, often evoked by leftist groups as a symbol of grassroots democracy, workers' empowerment, and resistance against oppression. It serves as a reminder of the possibility of achieving a more equitable and just society through collective action. The Commune's legacy continues to influence discussions on social and economic justice in France and beyond. Butttt, there is a healthy skepticism to cultivate around this momentum, because it is of course not undisputable, nothing is.

I recall a message from CBE earlier this year: “I'm doing a bunch of research to verify this, but one prominent historian of the Paris Commune suggested that the Communards were initially hesitant about their insurrection (NB: the Mokrani Revolt of March 1871). There's a common belief that there was complicity, that the Algerians were inspired to rise against French colonizers, but, essentially, the Communards questioned: ‘Why is the French military in Paris when they should be fighting the Algerians?’. Another historian added the context that just before the Paris Commune, there was an Algiers Commune, composed entirely of ‘leftist’ French colonizers in the occupied city. This resonated with me after hearing a passage from Angela Y. Davis, which I'll share next. It encapsulates the paradox when freedom and equality become symbols rather than lived realities.” Here are Davis' words, part of a panel discussion on solidarity hosted by Haymarket Books: “I began to think about where freedom might be located in the world, and because I had become really interested in French literature, I decided that France was the venue of freedom: liberté, égalité, fraternité—right? So I traveled to France, and one of the first things that happened to me on my very first trip was that some women from Martinique warned me that I might be mistaken as Algerian by the French police and that generated an interest in what was happening in Algeria and I eventually participated in some of the demonstrations that were being organized on behalf of the Algerian revolution and so later I realized that although I didn't find freedom in the North, I didn't find freedom in Europe but I did find international solidarity.”

The film's diverse settings, ranging from live-action footage of a scale model of the aforementioned *Secret Story* chalet to CGI-rendered worlds suspended in Magritte's cloudscape, vividly represent the multifaceted nature of contemporary experiences and realities. The manipulation of time, including references to historical events like the Paris Commune, challenges the linear progression of history, asserting that versions of the past continually influence our present narratives. In essence, the script's central questions revolve around the notion that contemporary society finds itself entangled in a complex web of constructed narratives and simulations. It encourages

viewers to scrutinize the authenticity of their own realities and advocates for the pursuit of agency and autonomy within this hyperreal world. Through its innovative narrative techniques and philosophical foundations, the film invites contemplation about the nature of reality and the power dynamics governing our perceptions. Through characters like the producer, obsessed with storytelling, and the digital rendering of Boadixea, it underscores how media narratives significantly influence our understanding of the world.

The script effectively employs a myriad of cinematic techniques. At its core is a profound exploration of temporal disruptions, where time is portrayed as both a central theme and a malleable construct within the narrative. The Realitarians, a group of students who defy conventional notions of reality and subjectivity, serve as the film's conceptual fulcrum. Encouraged to be irreverent toward history, they disrupt linear time, challenging fixed notions of time and freedom, leading to intriguing discussions about the film's treatment of time as a fluid and mutable concept.

The film also deftly delves into the realm of youth culture and the intriguing concept of “coziness” within a chaotic world. It navigates the idea of youthful possibilities and fantasies persisting amidst modern challenges, adding layers of complexity to the intrigue. Another central concept is the notion of “proxies” and the film's unflinching critique of centralization and control. This theme highlights the characters' utilization of others as means to their ends and underscores the tension between such centralized approaches and more fragmented, independent alternatives. Visual montages and symbolism are woven throughout the script, incorporating historical footage and contemporary events. This kaleidoscope of images reinforces that reality is a multifaceted construct inevitably shaped by diverse and occasionally conflicting sources. Voice-overs, particularly those of characters like the “Voice of Ulrike Meinhof”, enrich the narrative with subjective perspectives, inviting viewers to explore different viewpoints and interpretations of reality. This technique emphasizes the complexity of modern existence, where multiple narratives coexist. Drawing from Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, the film suggests that contemporary society is increasingly engulfed by hyperrealities—constructed versions of reality that have eclipsed the original. The Realitarians' transformation into settlers in their own terms symbolizes this idea as they endeavor to reclaim agency in a world saturated with the pressure to produce coherent stories.

The script ends with a dance sequence that, both as a narrative device and symbol of freedom, plays a pivotal role. It captures the characters' yearning for self-expression in a world dominated by constructed narratives, further enriching the film's thematic depth. The score includes recurring Enya covers—an Irish singer, songwriter, and musician known for her ethereal music. The homage to Enya's music, long consigned to the New Age section of streaming services, isn't incidental. *Reality or Not* reminds us to look again at things commonly considered by the standards of self-proclaimed liberal institutions as “bad taste.” This form of gatekeeping erases the potential to find revolution within them. This brings me to the end of this text: here's hoping that we always rekindle or invent the hollow flames of everything that suffocates revolutionary possibilities, and that in pedagogy we trace out paths towards factitious, real and fractured breakthroughs, which reminds me of something: Long live Aya Nakamura, Queen of France!