

Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf

Différance in Rob Cantor's performance "Shia LaBeouf" Live

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fig 1. Still from "Shia LaBeouf" Live - Rob Cantor.

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Summary

"*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live* (2014) is an online performance and viral video created by musician Rob Cantor. As Cantor himself puts it in the video's description: "It tells the true story of an actual cannibal." In the performance, the story of a Hollywood superstar/actual cannibal, who is referred to with the same name as existing celebrity Shia LaBeouf, is told. This encounter with a spectator addressed as "you" is narrated by Cantor. The performance ends with a cameo by the celebrity, who is, during the earlier part of the performance, only referred to in the narration or in visual signs, but not present on the filmed stage. In this thesis, I will attempt to answer the main research question: In which three ways does the perspective offered on the role Shia LaBeouf in Rob Cantor's performance "*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live*, differ and defer to constitute a self-reflexive, critical view on the theme of celebrity? The performance presents three roles: that of the Hollywood superstar, that of the actual cannibal, and that of Shia LaBeouf performing Charles Foster Kane. I will use Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, and Philip Auslander's practical application of it to performance, to determine which roles are presented in the performance and how they interact. Then I will look at what connotations each role adds to the performance, taking into account Maaïke Bleeker's work on audience address to see if these create a critical comment on the concept of celebrity as understood by Chris Rojek. I will conclude that the performance, through the use of the intermedial reference of the *citizen kane* slow clap, is self-reflexively critical, though not critical of the overall concept of celebrity.

1. Introduction

Introduction of the research topic

"*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live* is an online performance and viral video created by musician Rob Cantor.¹ In this video, the story is related to the audience in radio drama-style narration by Cantor, supported by an elaborate musical composition performed by two choirs, dancers, some with oversized Shia LaBeouf masks, acrobats, an orchestra and a band. In the performance, "you" (the spectator) is addressed as though they are walking in the woods without a working phone, where they proceed to have an encounter with the murderous "actual cannibal" and "Hollywood superstar" Shia LaBeouf. The spectator then has an epic fight for their life, which is a "normal Tuesday night" for LaBeouf. They have to gnaw off their leg in order to survive after it has been caught in a bear trap and subsequently have to do a lot of running and Jiu Jitsu fighting on the stump. After stabbing LaBeouf in the kidneys, the spectator eventually kills LaBeouf by chopping off his head with an axe. When the musical has concluded, the camera suddenly turns to reveal the actor/celebrity Shia LaBeouf sitting in the audience, apparently having watched the performance along with the spectator without their knowledge. LaBeouf starts a slow clap and then stands up, in an almost frame by frame citation of a scene in the Orson Welles's movie *citizen kane*.²

The original song, which this performance is based on, was first posted on Soundcloud in 2012. It became a meme, with accompanying cartoon-interpretations and remixes on YouTube as well as animated GIFs posted online by fans.³ Limor Shifman, in the article "An Anatomy of a YouTube meme,"⁴ distinguishes a meme from a viral video by explaining the central role that replicating the format by the audience plays in a meme, whereas a viral video is merely a video that has spread exponentially, yet unaltered, through social media. For my

¹ Rob Cantor, "'Shia LaBeouf' Live - Rob Cantor," YouTube video, 3:28, posted October 21, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015, at <http://youtu.be/o0u4M6vppCI>

² *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles (1941; New York: Warner Bros., 1947), iTunes download.

³ digipen79, et. al., "Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf | Know Your Meme," last modified November 2014, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/actual-cannibal-shia-labeouf>.

⁴ Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube meme," *New Media & Society* 14 (2011): 187-203.

thesis I will use this generally accepted distinction/definition.⁵ Cantor reacted to the surge in popularity the original upload experienced every year at the end of October around Halloween, by creating and uploading this performance-version with an added verse and a cameo by LaBeouf. The video was first posted on the 21st of October 2014, after which it went viral.⁶

Research question and subquestions

This thesis grew out of an interest in finding out what it was I'd watched for over two hours on repeat after I'd first discovered this performance, and from the hunch that something innovative might be going on artistically/critically. To go beyond these untestable subjective feelings, I pose the following research questions.

My main research question will be:

In which three ways does the perspective offered on the role Shia LaBeouf in Rob Cantor's performance "*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live*, differ and defer to constitute a self-reflexive, critical view on the theme of celebrity?

My main subquestions will be:

What different versions of the role Shia LaBeouf are presented in Cantor's performance?

What deferred connotations do these roles have, and how do those connotations differ from each other?

How do the contrasting versions of the role Shia LaBeouf in the performance comment on the theme of celebrity?

Theoretical framework

Jacques Derrida, in the chapter "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*,⁷ describes the concept *différance* as a symbolic misspelling of the (French) word *différence*.⁸ This word has a dual meaning in English, referring to both *defer* and *differ*.⁹ He states that words do not have

⁵ Shifman, 189-191.

⁶ digipen79, et. al.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Différance", in *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass trans., 53-60, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁸ Derrida, 4, 23.

⁹ Derrida, 7-9.

an ordinary meaning, but rather get their meaning in relation and opposition to other differing words (which he calls spacing *différance*),¹⁰ and through the deferred meaning a word has gathered over time (temporised *différance*).¹¹ Derrida's text on *différance* is useful in analysing this performance, and is central to many other methods of performance analysis and textual analysis, so I will rely first and foremost on this text.

Philip Auslander, in "'Just be yourself': Logocentrism and difference in performance,"¹² discusses Derrida's concept as a way to look at how an actor generates meaning through performance.¹³ He explains that our perception of an actor's performance is formed by connotations of the role, by connotations of the actor's self and by the difference between the actor and the role.¹⁴ Auslander's work on the concept is more practically applicable to performance than Derrida's, though he focuses on acting styles rather than on textual elements,¹⁵ which makes it less applicable to this case study, because the classical training of the performers or their acting style is not central to the experience of the performance.

Maaïke Bleeker, in *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, analyses different modes of audience address.¹⁶ She defines internal focalisation as a detail in the performance directing the audience's attention, which is linked to absorption, and external focalisation as the viewpoint from which the audience is invited to watch, which is linked to theatricality.¹⁷ I will use Bleeker's theory of focalisation to analyse spectatorial address in Cantor's performance. Her work on the person seeing and the thing seen as being interconnected will be of vital importance to my analysis, because it takes into account how audience address shapes the audience's experience and therefore (the reception of) the play.¹⁸ Her insights are

¹⁰ Derrida, 9-10.

¹¹ Derrida, 8.

¹² Philip Auslander, "'Just Be Yourself': Logocentrism and difference in performance theory", in *Acting (Re)considered: a theoretical and practical guide*, Phillip B. Zarrilli red., 53-60, (London en New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Auslander, 54.

¹⁴ Auslander, 54.

¹⁵ Auslander, 54-58.

¹⁶ Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the theatre: the locus of looking*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁷ Bleeker, 27-31.

¹⁸ Bleeker, 9-10.

especially important for a case study such as this one, which loses much of its meaning when the person seeing and interpreting is not familiar with LaBeouf, internet culture or the role of celebrity in mass media.

Methodology

I will attempt to answer the research questions by doing a qualitative textual analysis of the three roles Cantor presents on Shia LaBeouf. I will use the concept of *différance* to see if these create a critical comment on the concept celebrity as understood by Chris Rojek in *Celebrity*.¹⁹ Using *différance*, we can look at the historical connotations of Shia LaBeouf and how the different uses of it in Cantor's performance contrast. We can then analyse in which ways these uses constitute meaning, and how they can be interpreted as critical of the theme of celebrity presented in the performance. I will keep in mind that the use of the word "you" influences our understanding of the performance, since the spectator is, in the performance, positioned as though they are in the woods with the murderous LaBeouf, which differs greatly from how they are addressed in real life by LaBeouf from the cover of a magazine, through an interview or on Twitter. I will use Maaïke Bleeker's concepts of internal and external focalisation to take this audience positioning into account, and will use these concepts to practically apply Derrida's and Auslander's definition of *différance* to this specific performance analysis.

Practically, this means I will start by identifying the two distinct roles presented on Shia LaBeouf in the opening musical number. "Hollywood superstar" is used as an adjective that's interchangeable with "actual cannibal", so they're both presented as equally realistic roles within the performance's framework.²⁰ I will analyse the deferred connotations of the citation of *citizen kane* at the end, as the third role shaping the performance. I will analyse how these three roles differ from each other and how they influence our perception of 'the role Shia LaBeouf', and if the relation between the roles can be said to be critical of the concept of celebrity. I suspect that by making the term "Hollywood superstar" equal to that of "actual cannibal", the first becomes as absurd as the latter. The final reveal of having watched the

¹⁹ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2001), 10.

²⁰ Cantor.

performance along with the person that it discusses, reflects back on the story, casting a new glance on the already vast array of associations it evokes.

The name/word "Shia LaBeouf" refers to many different things with very specific and distinct meanings and connotations. This happens to such an extent that it can be seen as a rather flexible and interchangeable umbrella term for a great many different things, from the title of a performance, to the name for a broadly defined main character in the performance, to a celebrity I follow on Twitter. In this thesis I will, where necessary, put additional clarification behind the name between brackets. For example: LaBeouf (the actor) or LaBeouf (actual cannibal). This seems prudent in the interest of clarity and precision.

In order to accurately deduce the deferred meaning of 'Shia LaBeouf' so I can later use it for analysis, I will need information on the actor and the performance itself. The most comprehensive source on internet discussing memes/viral videos is knowyourmeme.com, a Wiki-style archive curated by a paid editorial staff of meme-experts.²¹ I will therefore use both their entry on this performance and the entry on another internet phenomenon LaBeouf was central to. Their entry "Actual Cannibal Shia LaBeouf" on Cantor's performance is useful background information on the meme and viral video,²² while their entry "Shia Labeouf's Plagiarism Controversy" shines a light on the media portrayal of LaBoeuf relevant to the deferred meaning of the actor/celebrity-role.²³ When necessary I will use online articles from magazines and tabloids for background information. To make sense of the citation of *citizen kane* in the performance, I will refer to the movie, but I will also use Laura Mulvey's book *Citizen Kane*.²⁴ While the Oedipal analysis that Mulvey makes of the scene Cantor quotes is of little use,²⁵ her descriptions of the personality of Kane throughout the book as controlling and power-hungry are thorough and useful for analysing the quotation.

²¹ Know Your Meme, "About Know Your Meme," accessed April 4, 2015, <http://knowyourmeme.com/about>.

²² digipen79, et. al.

²³ Molly Horan, et. al., "Shia Labeouf's Plagiarism Controversy | Know Your Meme" last modified March-April 2014, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/shia-labeoufs-plagiarism-controversy>

²⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

²⁵ Mulvey, 69-73.

Outline

Having introduced my case study and theoretical framework here, I will go onto discuss the first part of the theoretical framework in chapter two: the concept of différance as discussed by Derrida and Auslander, and will then continue to elaborate on Bleeker's work on visibility/focalisation. In the third chapter I will discuss the concepts used in the analysis, focussing mainly on the concept of celebrity as discussed by Rojek in the context of the social role as defined by Erving Goffman in the chapter "Performances" in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.²⁶ The fourth chapter will consist of the analysis, determining the differences between the roles presented in the performance and their possible deferred meanings and the interplay between those. The thesis will conclude with a fifth chapter answering the main research question, drawing from the information gathered in the earlier chapters. It will close with a personal afterthought.

²⁶ Erving Goffman, "Performances" in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956).

2. Différance and audience address

Différance according to Derrida and Auslander

Jacques Derrida describes *différance* as a conscious and symbolic misspelled homophone of the word *différence*.²⁷ This word has a dual meaning in French, referring to both the English translation "deferring" and to the translation "differing".²⁸ Derrida states that words do not have an originary meaning, but get their meaning relation to other differing, opposing words (spacing *différance*) and through the deferred meaning the word has gathered over time/ throughout history (temporised *différance*).²⁹ The two forms of *différance*, spacing and temporised, influence each other and should be seen in relation.³⁰ An example of spacing *différance* is how we know the concept cat because it differs from other animals such as a dog (or a mouse or a canary), just as we understand the concept animal in opposition to plant, etcetera. There is no original "cat" concept floating around on an 'deeper' level of language from which all cats gather their meaning/recognisability as cats, but rather, we know it's a cat because it is not a dog and vice versa. Temporised *différance* refers to the fact that the cat-concept has not been used in a vacuum, but has gathered connotations over the history of its use, in opposition to other then current concepts and because of the culturally specific situations in which it has been used. This history in turn informs the opposition to dog in its present use, and in this way the concept fluidly takes shape and gathers meaning to those using it, both from its past and the oppositions in the then present, and in opposition to other concepts that are each influenced by and oppose the concept from a history of deferred meaning.³¹

Philip Auslander applies Derrida's concept to the actor and the role they portray. He argues that the meaning of an actor's role is shaped the same way as the meaning of a word is shaped.³² He 'translates' *différance* from linguistic theory to theatre practice as follows:

²⁷ Derrida, 4, 23.

²⁸ Derrida, 7-9.

²⁹ Derrida, 8.

³⁰ Derrida, 12.

³¹ Derrida, 12.

³² Auslander, 53.

We arrive at our perception of a performance by implicitly comparing it with other interpretations of the same role (or with the way we feel the role should be played), or with our recollection of the same actor in other roles, or with our knowledge of the stylistic school to which the actor belongs or the actor's private life, etc.³³

Auslander's work on *différance* is practically useful for analysing roles in the context of this, and any other, performance, but can in this case also benefit from incorporating Derrida's original definition of *différance*. Auslander uses *différance* primarily in relation to actors within three theatrical traditions: that of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Grotowski.³⁴ Taking Derrida's original definition of *différance* alongside Auslander's application of it, enables the use of the concept in the context of actors and roles outside of the three frames Auslander discusses. Both Derrida's original concept and Auslander's redefinition are especially relevant to performances like "*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live* and other contemporary videos and performances like it, because these performances seem to revel in their own contextualisation and being inter-text. Meaning is no longer generated on the basis of the logocentric ideal. Instead it is constituted in a complicated network of differing concepts and deferred connotations all interacting with each other, theatrical traditions be damned.

Visuality in the theatre

Bleeker's concept of *visuality* offers a way to operationalise *différance* for analysis, while taking into account the role audience address/positioning plays in the construction of a story and its meaning.³⁵ Like *différance*, *visuality* is not a static concept, but rather something that happens,³⁶ where seeing is an action.³⁷ Bleeker defines *visuality* as the relationship between the one seeing and the thing being seen in a specific cultural-historical context.³⁸ When

³³ Auslander, 54.

³⁴ Auslander, 54.

³⁵ Bleeker, 9.

³⁶ Bleeker, 2.

³⁷ Bleeker, 17-18.

³⁸ Bleeker, 1-2.

discussing the post-modern nature of plays that could benefit from her approach to audience address, Bleeker highlights confusing ambiguous experiences as well as self-critical reflections,³⁹ which makes the theory not only applicable to my case study, but also suitable for answering the main question of whether or not this performance is self-reflexively critical. Différance and visuality both make a point of content being shaped by the cultural/historical context they are part of, and focalisation offers us the opportunity to take into account the personally subjective spectator's experience, because it concerns looking at how audience positioning/address mediates between subject seeing and subject seen.⁴⁰

To further specify audience positioning for analysis, Bleeker uses the concepts internal and external focalisation. Internal focalisation is the person, visual cue or object that invites the spectator to abandon their position of sitting in the chair watching,⁴¹ to step inside of the performance they're seeing.⁴² In the chapter "Step Inside!", Bleeker analyses a moment in William Forsythe's performance *Artifact* (1984) where a character beckons the audience to identify with her and to come and interpret the performance.⁴³ The moment of stepping inside is linked to absorption in the piece the spectator/seer is experiencing. Absorption happens when the spectator loses themselves, as it were, in the performance.⁴⁴ Bleeker explains external focalisation by discussing how during the second act of *Artifact* the sudden crashing down of a safety curtain makes the audience aware again of their position as spectators, by suddenly making them become aware of their own physicality and position of viewer/seer in the chair.⁴⁵ This mode of address, where the audience's own positions as spectators becomes visible so they are no longer being absorbed in the play, is referred to as theatricality.⁴⁶ Bleeker explains visuality as something that is shaped by the spectator's own personal

³⁹ Bleeker, 8.

⁴⁰ Bleeker, 9-10.

⁴¹ Bleeker, 27.

⁴² Bleeker, 19-40.

⁴³ Bleeker, 26-27.

⁴⁴ Bleeker, 22.

⁴⁵ Bleeker, 31.

⁴⁶ Bleeker, 21-22.

experiences by comparing it to perspective,⁴⁷ and focuses her research on focalisation as mediating between the seer and the seen.⁴⁸ Meaning, in Bleeker's argument, is thus always shaped by how a viewer/seer is addressed.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Bleeker, 9-10.

⁴⁸ Bleeker, 2.

⁴⁹ Bleeker, 22.

3. Celebrity, celeactors and the self.

Chris Rojek, in the book *Celebrity* (2002), discusses the distinction between celebrity as a well known glamorous person and as a well known notorious person,⁵⁰ specifically focussing on killers as celebrities in the fourth chapter on celebrity and transgression.⁵¹ He defines celebrity from its Latin root *celebrem*, which has connotations with both fame and being thronged. This word is connected to *celere* from which the English word celerity stems, emphasising the fleeting nature of celebrity. Rojek concludes that the definition is accurately summed up in the definition of the French word *célèbre* "well known in public", which also carries the same connotations.⁵² Celebrity can be ascribed (through succession as with royalty), achieved (sports stars or famous actors) and attributed (people with no discernible talent or important message that are none the less well known in public).⁵³ Besides the two 'modes' of fame, glamour and notoriety, and the three ways in which one can be famous, Rojek also proposes a term for another kind of fame that is not exactly the same as celebrity: the celetoid. He defines the celetoid as the mayfly of the celebrities, someone briefly famous for something that seemed interesting or relevant at the time, like the firefighter who saves a kitten or the extra-marital lover of an influential figure.⁵⁴ A specific subcategory of celetoid is most relevant to my analysis: that of the celeactor. "The celeactor is a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalised feature of popular culture. Like celetoids, celeactors are adjuncts of the mass media. They cater to the public appetite for a character type that sums up the times."⁵⁵ Rojek names the characters from the television cartoon *the Simpsons* as important examples in this category,⁵⁶ and elaborates on the influence some fictional characters, such as those in long-running soaps, can have on culture

⁵⁰ Rojek, 27-44.

⁵¹ Rojek, 124-155.

⁵² Rojek, 10.

⁵³ Rojek 17.

⁵⁴ Rojek, 19.

⁵⁵ Rojek, 22.

⁵⁶ Rojek, 23.

and how their of course also fictional deaths have a tangible impact on society.⁵⁷ A character such as “actual cannibal Shia LaBeouf” fits neatly into this category. We can observe that this character, through the meme and the popularity of the eventual ‘live’ performance, has become an institutionalised feature of popular culture. Central to any and all discussion of celebrity or celetooids/celeactors is the role the public and mass media play.⁵⁸ They are essentially what ‘make’ the celebrity, be it because of adoration or revilement. The chapter on killers as celebrities and the notoriety of fame,⁵⁹ is relevant to my analysis because it is discusses famous art and artists in relation to transgression. Rojek names, among others, Marcel Duchamp and his R. Mutt urinal as the artistic version of notorious celebrity through art.⁶⁰ LaBeouf (actual cannibal) is not transgressive in the usual way, for he is clearly a fabrication. He should therefore be defined as a celeactor rather than celebrity, though LaBeouf (the person) has gained some notoriety for influencing media with mildly transgressive re-enactments of Marina Abramovic’s work and a related plagiarism controversy.⁶¹ This interplay between actual notorious celebrity associated with LaBeouf (the person/celebrity) and the fabricated ridiculous notoriety of LaBeouf (the actual cannibal/celeactor), will be relevant in my analysis.

Rojek refers to Erving Goffman’s definition of roles,⁶² which leads me to conclude that Goffman is still relevant in current discourse. He refers to Goffman in determining certain aspects of celebrity. When applicable I will therefore refer back to Goffman himself. For the purposes of answering the research questions, it is important to look at Goffman’s definition of role and presentation. Rojek explains, using social psychologist George Herbert Mead, that there is a split between the *I* referred to as “veridical self”, the ‘true’ self behind the front of the celebrity, and the *Me* referring to the self as seen by others.⁶³ This idea, that celebrities are a cultural fabrication, a face that is presented to society at large, is closely linked to Goffman’s

⁵⁷ Rojek, 24-26.

⁵⁸ Rojek, 27-40.

⁵⁹ Rojek, 124-154.

⁶⁰ Rojek, 152.

⁶¹ Horan, et al.

⁶² Rojek, 37.

⁶³ Rojek 11-12.

writing on personal front. Personal front is whatever society sees of a person, their looks, manner, clothes etc., which all influence presentation to form an impression of the person 'behind' the face.⁶⁴ It is also linked to mystification: the fact that a person hides the performance and the effort it takes to keep the performance up.⁶⁵ Rojek describes how with celebrities this disconnect between the veridical self and the face can become extreme, either in the case of actors losing their 'self' to a role,⁶⁶ or a celebrity not being able to live with the pressure felt because of the split between the face and veridical self.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Goffman, 44-46.

⁶⁵ Goffman, 13-17.

⁶⁶ Rojek, 25-26.

⁶⁷ Rojek, 12.

4. Unraveling deferred and differing meaning

With the theoretical framework that will be used for this analysis clearly defined, we can continue on to determine which roles are discussed in the performance, what connotations they have, and how they interact. In order to accurately deconstruct this performance, I will start by identifying the three main roles presented in the performance. Throughout the narrated musical part of the performance, there are two 'labels' added to the name Shia LaBeouf: "Hollywood superstar Shia LaBeouf" and "actual cannibal Shia LaBeouf". These are the only two descriptions added to his name, with the other adjectives or defining characteristics, such as "murderer" and "superstar," falling neatly inside these two. LaBeouf's actions, such as "killing for sports" are expressions of his "actual cannibal" role. In the last part of the video, when the music has ended and the camera turns, we see LaBeouf (the actor) himself for the first time, doing an almost frame by frame imitation of a scene from *citizen kane*. Though there is no text defining LaBeouf as Charles Foster Kane, it is clearly a citation of a scene originally depicting Kane, so this is a LaBeouf's third role presented in the performance. This time the role is acted out by LaBeouf instead of being mentioned in narration by Cantor.⁶⁸ One could argue that there are more 'versions' of (the role) Shia LaBeouf present in the piece, especially if one were to analyse the visual symbolism and scenography, but in the end all of these visual elements can be seen as an illustration of the three roles explicitly referred to and shown in the video.

Hollywood superstar

The video opens with the image of the narrator, Rob Cantor, starting his story by addressing the spectator: "You're walking in the woods, there's no one around and your phone is dead. Out of the corner of your eye you spot him: Shia LaBeouf".⁶⁹ The entire musical section of the video follows a similar structure with Cantor, supported by background singers, musical arrangements and increasingly elaborate interpretative dance and rhythmic acrobatics,

⁶⁸ Cantor.

⁶⁹ Cantor.

addressing the spectator in the second person and narrating their encounter with LaBeouf. In the narration, LaBeouf continues to follow the spectator. They can't get back to their car and notice LaBeouf has blood on his face. LaBeouf is at this point referred to as a "Hollywood superstar".⁷⁰

Leaving the "actual cannibal Shia LaBeouf"-lyric that follows shortly after the mention of "Hollywood superstar" for now, I can determine what the deferred connotation of "Hollywood superstar" is. These connotations are not shaped in the performance, for there is no additional information on this role offered in the performance other than the mention of LaBeouf's stardom. The spectator therefore has to rely on background knowledge on the actor/celebrity. Not everyone will be familiar with LaBeouf. I only vaguely knew of him the first time I saw this performance. Many people will be familiar with him, though, because he is a famous movie star and popular target of the tabloid press.⁷¹ Every spectator who has access to the online video, also has access to all of the deferred meanings associated with LaBeouf, because they have access to Google. And if the spectator does not know LaBeouf, Cantor's mention of him as a "Hollywood superstar" might inspire the spectator, as it did me, to do a search on him. Googling LaBeouf, I came across a few distinct connotations shaping his role as a celebrity, both in the glamorous and notorious sense. There are many more stories about LaBeouf that form the public's perception of him than those I chose to discuss here, especially if we look back further in his career. But the following deferred connotations are the most recent and prominent,⁷² as well as the most relevant to my case. I have limited myself to stories from 2012 to 2014, because this is the period Cantor's original song and the resulting video performance were most widely viewed, so these are the stories that would have shaped the audience's perception of the performance when they watched it or listened to the original song at the height of its popularity.

LaBeouf is first and foremost famous for his acting, starting from a young age with acting for television, and now in Hollywood blockbusters. He's frequently heckled, but has also

⁷⁰ Cantor.

⁷¹ Julia Wang, "Shia LaBeouf : People.com," last modified March 12, 2015, accessed April 4, 2015. http://www.people.com/people/shia_labeouf

⁷² Wang.

received critical acclaim for his acting work.⁷³ His personal life, including his romantic relationships and his appearance, are widely discussed.⁷⁴ LaBeouf is also known for his work as a performance artist. It started with a video posted by LaBeouf, which received backlash for being plagiarised from the cartoon *Justin M. Damiano* by artist Daniel Clowes'. This snowballed when LaBeouf responded with an apology crowdsourced from the website Yahoo Answers, which was followed up with a series of apologetic actions (including a skywriter message addressed to Clowes) resulting in a cease-and-desist letter from the cartoonist's lawyer addressed to LaBeouf, that LaBeouf then posted on Twitter. The situation led to LaBeouf announcing his retirement from public life on Twitter. A few months later he appeared at a red carpet with a brown paper bag with eyeholes over his head with the text "I am not famous anymore" written on the front. It ended with #IAMSORRY, an exhibit mimicking Marina Abramovic's 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*, where the audience was invited to use objects on LaBeouf and read abusive tweets to him. "I am not famous anymore" and the related plagiarism controversy were seen by mass and social media as attention seeking and manipulative.⁷⁵ LaBeouf's performance series can therefore be seen as transgressive art as discussed in the earlier chapter of this thesis on Rojek's definition of transgressive celebrity, if only because of the outrage over the work on social media and the backlash LaBeouf received for staging it, if not necessarily for its artistic merit.⁷⁶ A less notorious/transgressive performance was his durational running performance #Metamarathon around the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where he jogged at least one-hundred-and-forty-four laps around the museum with fans.⁷⁷

⁷³ Wang.

⁷⁴ Maggie Lange, "Shia LaBeouf Dons Magical Purple Leggings," last modified September 8, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015.
<http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/shia-labeouf-dons-magical-purple-leggings.html>

⁷⁵ Horan, et al.

⁷⁶ Horan, et al.

⁷⁷ Corinne Heller. "NEWS/ Shia LaBeouf Back in Purple Leggings, Runs #Metamarathon Around Amsterdam Art Museum—See Pics!," last modified September 25, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015.
<http://uk.eonline.com/news/582866/shia-labeouf-back-in-purple-leggings-runs-metamarathon-around-amsterdam-art-museum-see-pics>

Actual cannibal

The first time "actual cannibal Shia LaBeouf" is mentioned in the performance, is almost straight after the first mention of "Hollywood superstar," a superstar who is then called a "murderer").⁷⁸ The performance closely interweaves the role of the murderous cannibal-celebrator with LaBeouf's role of Hollywood superstar-actor/celebrity, narrating him as a killing superstar, or a famous murderer. The role of the cannibal is defined in the performance. There is no real-life basis for it, nor is there a related role played by LaBeouf in any movie inspiring it. This role is therefore not about the celebrity, but rather it is a celebrator, which was earlier in this thesis defined by Rojek as a fictional character with significant impact on popular culture. This celebrator, in this particular case, happens to share the same name as an existing celebrity, drawing on the celebrity's popularity and deferred connotations as well. While some spectators might have personal connotations associated with cannibalism, and while there are more general historical connotations to the word, these do not seem to inform the perception of the cannibal-role. In the context of "actual cannibal Shia LaBeouf" they are irrelevant, because the connotations of the celebrator are informed solely by the performance's story and are discussed throughout the narration and musical verses.

The role was inspired by Cantor's amusement at the, to his mind, mysterious and scary sound of LaBeouf's name when whispered.⁷⁹ LaBeouf (the celebrator) is, in the narration by Cantor, presented as a vicious killer who lives in a cottage in the woods where he sharpens axes, kills for sport, eats all the bodies, etc. This role is supported and illustrated by visual elements, for example red streamers reminiscent of blood spouting from a neck when the cannibal is decapitated or a dancer biting his partner's leg when cannibalism is referred to in the narration.⁸⁰ An important part of the role of the cannibal discussed in both the narration and in the structure of the video, separate from his connotation as a vicious cannibalistic killer, is his invincibility. The narration describes the spectator's struggle to escape LaBeouf. It seems to conclude with "You've beaten Shia LaBeouf," after the spectator is described to stab LaBeouf in the kidneys, only to continue with "Wait, he isn't dead, Shia surprise!".⁸¹ This is the

⁷⁸ Cantor.

⁷⁹ digipen79, et al.

⁸⁰ Cantor.

⁸¹ Ibid.

beginning of a verse that was added to the original Soundcloud-song for the purposes of this 'live' performance.⁸² It comes as a surprise to the people already familiar with the original song, though it also came as a surprise to me even though I had no knowledge of the original. Because of the musical phrase, the short silence and the seemingly toned down finish and dimmed lights with quieting narration and zoom-in on Cantor's face,⁸³ I suspect that many spectators did not expect the last verse, and also falsely believed the performance to have finished during that one second of silence. After yet more narrated fighting between the spectator and LaBeouf in the last verse after this false ending, the narration concludes with "You're finally safe from Shia LaBeouf." Twice, the spectator is told that they are safe and that LaBeouf is beaten, and twice LaBeouf comes back.⁸⁴ The spectator cannot escape LaBeouf in the context of the performance.

Charles Foster Kane

Finally, LaBeouf returns in his third role described/depicted in this performance. The last forty-six seconds of the performance are no longer narrated by Cantor, but eerily silent except for LaBeouf's clapping. The song has ended on a big finale with glitter, a background dropping to reveal the name Shia LaBeouf in all capitals and the last narrated sentence. Then the camera turns to reveal the auditorium of the theatre that the camera has so far only shown the stage of, while a single audience member is heard applauding in the otherwise empty theatre. As the camera pans, it becomes clear that this audience member is LaBeouf (actor/celebrity), acting out a scene from *citizen kane*. This is the first time the spectator sees the person the performance has so far only referred to in name and visual signs and they see him not as himself or presenting his own celebrity "face", but acting out/citing the role of Kane.⁸⁵ This part of the performance was inspired by the GIF of the *citizen kane* slow clap.⁸⁶ In an email to the

⁸² digipen79, et al.

⁸³ Cantor.

⁸⁴ Cantor.

⁸⁵ Cantor.

⁸⁶ amanda b., et. al. "Slow Clap | Know Your Meme," last modified March 2014, accessed April 5, 2015. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/slow-clap>

author on March 9, 2015, Cantor wrote that the *citizen kane* homage was a suggestion made by LaBeouf when Cantor asked him for input:

I pitched him a few ideas as to how he might participate, and one of them was to be revealed at the end as the lone audience member, giving the performance a one-man standing ovation. He sent me [this link](#),⁸⁷ and said 'Something like this?' I loved the idea, though I can't speak to what his particular inspiration was.

Irina O. Rajewsky in "Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,"⁸⁸ poses that with an intertextual reference in which a work or part of a work is used in another work, the meaning of the original work constitutes meaning in the context of the work it is referenced in.⁸⁹ This intermedial referencing of the *citizen kane* sequence, brings with it the meaning of the scene in its original context, and the meaning of the scene in its slow clap/GIF context. Taking Mulvey's analysis of the original scene, we could say that Kane is defined as a successful newspaper-tycoon but a failed politician, lusting for power.⁹⁰ He is controlling to such an extent that he drives his girlfriend mad to the point of suicide in order to escape his grip.⁹¹ We can also note that in the original clip, Kane is in a box with other audience members,⁹² whereas LaBeouf is alone in the auditorium,⁹³ though starting from the cut after the pan, LaBeouf's actions and timing are identical to those of Kane in the original movie.⁹⁴ The slow clap clip/GIF consists of the applause fragment from the original scene being sarcastically posted after a piece of media/art that the viewer found particularly bad. It is a comment on the quality of the thing that precedes it, a reaction expressing disdain for the work it comments on.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ bluraygirlfan, "Citizen Kane clapping" YouTube video, 0:27, posted June 6, 2013, accessed April 6, 2015, at https://youtu.be/4_e-CNh-gc8

⁸⁸ Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intrermédialités* 6 (2005): 43-64.

⁸⁹ Rajewsky, 53.

⁹⁰ Mulvey, 70.

⁹¹ Mulvey, 87.

⁹² Welles.

⁹³ Cantor.

⁹⁴ amanda b., et. al.

⁹⁵ amanda b., et. al.

Interplay of meaning

Looking at the analysed different roles and their separate connotations, we can discuss how they differ and correspond. We can conclude that the role of the actual cannibal is created in the performance, whereas the Hollywood superstar is related to a role also performed in real life. Following Rojek's theory, we can conclude that the real-life celebrity is as much a constructed face as the cannibal is, the difference being that there is a veridical self behind the celebrity's face and there is nothing 'behind' the fictional cannibal's face since he is an (other) artist's creation. There is some overlap between the superstar- and cannibal-role with regards to notoriety and glamour, even though one role is a celebrity and the other a celeactor. In the performance and in real life, so both for the celebrity and the celeactor, there is a certain amount of glamour associated with LaBeouf, with the celebrity visiting red carpet events and being discussed admiringly in the press, and the celeactor being defined as a superstar as well as a cannibal. Both are notorious, with the celebrity receiving backlash for his controversial performances and his acting work, and the celeactor being a flesh-eating murderer. While the celeactor does not add genuine new meaning to the celebrity/actor LaBeouf since it is a separate role that is only true and relevant in the context of the performance, the celebrity does add meaning to the cannibal. Cantor has managed to create a celeactor that is extremely famous, with his performance being the first search result when searching for Shia LaBeouf on YouTube and with the video being viewed over fourteen-and-a-half-million times so far.⁹⁶ LaBeouf's portrayal of Kane differs from the first two in that it is the portrayal of the fictional character by the existing actor, instead of the mention of an existing celebrity or the creation of a celeactor by another artist. Like the celeactor and the celebrity, Kane's character in the original movie knows moments of glamorous triumph,⁹⁷ and of notorious infamy.⁹⁸ Furthermore, media manipulation, which LaBeouf has been accused of, is a central theme in *citizen kane*, with Kane's politics being presented as an extension of his newspapers throughout the film,⁹⁹ and his ambition to manipulate the masses into buying his paper and

⁹⁶ Cantor.

⁹⁷ Mulvey, 73.

⁹⁸ Mulvey, 49-50.

⁹⁹ Mulvey, 70.

eliminating the competition.¹⁰⁰ If we take into account the other deferred meaning of *citizen kane*, the criticism associated with the slow clap/GIF of the scene, we can conclude that LaBeouf is commenting on the performance that came before it with sarcasm and disdain. He is expressing contempt for a performance that uses his name to tell the story of an actual cannibal.

Audience address

During the performance, through the narration, the spectator is addressed in the second person, in the present continuous.¹⁰¹ This can be seen as internal focalisation creating absorption, for Cantor invites the spectator to imagine herself as or to identify with the role of LaBeouf's victim. Though there is no invitation to "step inside" as discussed by Bleeker, because Cantor doesn't invite in a friendly manner but rather starts by directly addressing the spectator as "you", we can say that the entire narration and the camera's perspective are aimed at positioning the spectator as a "you" opposed to the "him" of the LaBeouf. The video starts with a close-up of Cantor in front of a black background, enabling the spectator to focus completely on his story, before revealing that he is performing on a stage along with other 'live' performers.¹⁰² It is important to note that the setting also creates theatricality: the video deliberately shows the stage on which the performers are performing. The fact that this video is filmed on a stage in a theatre could have been obscured by choosing different camera angles (as is the case with the opening shot). The style of the video is reminiscent of a performance registration rather than a music video, which the "Live" in the title is also indicative of, suggesting that the spectator is watching a recording of a musical, with the most advantageous camera angles chosen to show the performance, but never obscuring the fact that this is a registration of a performance. When the camera turns to show the *citizen kane* citation, the spectator's perspective is expanded. They are no longer watching a registration from an ideally positioned point in the invisible auditorium within the video's frame, but the camera turns to show the auditorium the camera is positioned in. This could be interpreted as

¹⁰⁰ Mulvey, 67.

¹⁰¹ Cantor.

¹⁰² Cantor.

the spectator turning their head to see who's clapping, as though the sound has suddenly made them aware of the presence of another audience member in the same space. It becomes visible that LaBeouf is sitting right behind the camera/spectator, applauding, before the video cuts to a more close-up view of LaBeouf, showing more explicitly who the other spectator in the auditorium is, and to facilitate the *citizen kane* citation. Just as with the direct address in the narration, the spectator is placed close to LaBeouf through the camera's perspective, in direct relation/opposition to him.

5. Conclusion

Drawing conclusions from the interplay of meaning

We have so far concluded that celebrity, be it of the glamorous or notorious kind, is a central theme of the performance, for it is a connotation associated with all three of LaBeouf's roles presented in the performance. I can conclude that the performance is self-reflexively critical. Because of the critical deferred connotations of the slow clap/GIF that have LaBeouf commenting disdainfully on the song, Cantor has added a sequence to his performance that is critical of the part of the performance that precedes it. So through the *citizen kane* sequence, the performance looks back on itself critically. The fact that the performance reflects back on itself with criticism and sarcasm, does not mean that it is critical of the entire concept of celebrity as defined by Rojek.

As we have done in the earlier chapter when we looked at the interplay between the different roles, we can look back to Rojek, to conclude that the connotations the spectator has when they hear the name Shia LaBeouf, are not connected to the person behind the name per se. There is a split between the veridical self and the face, and the public/spectator can only ever know the face. And while the connotations associated with the face of the celebrity in part inform the role of the celector, the same cannot be said the other way around. The fictitiousness and associated ridiculousness of the cannibal do not necessarily inform the audience's interpretation of the celebrity LaBeouf, even if LaBeouf himself has at times been thought of as ridiculous and his "face" according to Rojek can be seen as a construct, though I would point out that the prominence of the celector and LaBoeuf's collaboration in this performance connect LaBeouf (the celebrity) more closely to its celector counterpart. As I showed in the analysis: the celector is shaped by the celebrity, but the celector does not inform the celebrity, no matter how close the two are linked in internet culture or through connotation, because the celector will only ever truly exist inside the performance. I think the role of LaBeouf celector/actual cannibal can be said to make fun of some aspects of celebrity to some extent through this association and I think it is important to note that mass and social media have played a very big role in the creation of both the celebrity and of the celector. And

the two are connected because they are referred to by the same name, but just because the celebrity and the celector can be invoked by saying the same name in a different tone or context, does not make this performance critical of general concept of celebrity as defined by Rojek.

In my analysis I have shown how the specific deferred and differing roles of Shia LaBeouf that are relevant in understanding this performance's interplay to form meaning in the story and inform our understanding of the overarching umbrella-role Shia LaBeouf. I must conclude that it is largely the connotations of the celebrity that constitute part of the meaning of the celector or at least shape our perception of him. I can also conclude that the role presented in the *citizen kane* citation adds a critical note to the performance, but this not is not critical of the concept of celebrity, even if these connotations construct a new role with a different meaning that can be evoked by the same name as the celebrity and even if the two are closely linked in name, in connotation, and in practice within the context of internet culture.

Possible further research

While I cannot definitively conclude that the meaning of the role Shia LaBeouf in the performance "*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live* constitutes self-reflexive cultural criticism on the concept of celebrity, the analysis has opened up a lot of new areas of interest and possible further research. There are aspects, especially visual aspects, of the performance that I did not elaborate on in this thesis, though they would be very interesting topics of research. It would, for example, have been interesting to connect Rojek's/Goffman's concept of face/front to the giant masks in the performance. I also wonder, because the perspective offered on the role Shia LaBeouf is self-reflexive, if it might be critical by default, albeit on a very small scale. By showing us the constructed nature of the celector, and relating the role so directly to that of the celebrity, does the celector not point the spectator to the constructed nature of celebrity and is this not inherently critical of celebrity culture? That to show the mechanism behind it, is to undermine it? This is not something I can substantiate, but it might be an interesting starting point for further research. I would have also liked to spend more time on how performance shapes reality instead of the other way around. For now I have looked at meaning

in the performance, but I'd have liked to look further at how the performance has influenced the life of the celebrity. Looking at the role of Kane when performed by LaBeouf in this piece, we could say that both roles have a complicated relationship with the media. Kane's position as a media mogul trying to control those around him is central to the movie, and this is not entirely dissimilar from the plagiarism controversy and the reactions on LaBeouf's being a performance artist. I wonder if I could make the point that there is a parallel between the citation of *citizen kane* and the chosen style of narration as an intermedial reference to *War of the Worlds*, and that it would therefore be interesting to look at this performance through the lens of Orson Welles or vice versa at Welles through the lens of this performance and the internet culture it is part of. But that too is a question for another day or another person.

6. Afterthought: You're never really safe from Shia LaBeouf

I have yet to meet a person whose day wasn't bettered by being introduced to "*Shia LaBeouf*" *Live*. I'd like to thank Rob Cantor for creating this brilliant performance and I'd also like to thank him for taking the time to answer some questions. It was incredibly interesting to conclude that his work as an artist and musician, and a brilliant artist and musician at that, and my poor attempt at theatre design during art school, seem to come from the same place or the same kind of inspiration. It has strengthened me in the feeling that I should've listened less to my art school teachers and that I should have dared to dream more. I will try to be braver in future. It was also particularly lovely to see that while I don't know if Cantor started out with any kind of socio-critical intentions, it doesn't mean that the criticism isn't there. While I cannot prove it at this point, I remain convinced that there is a lot of critical potential in the video. To me, the mark of a truly great performance is that after more than seven-thousand words on three-and-a-half minutes and after watching it countless of times, there are even more questions left to be answered than there were to begin with. And I have yet to grow tired of re-watching it.

(7361 words)

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This is a revision of the original version I handed in. The thesis was handed in on 07/04/2015, but I made some spelling corrections and small cosmetic changes on 03/05/2015 to finalise the text. I also added a cover image.