

We're All Scrolling Through the World's Fair

Max Ranieri

Many films in recent years have employed the computer screen as a site of action. So-called “screenlife” films such as *Unfriended* (2014), *Searching* (2018), and *Host* (2020) take place entirely within the boundaries of the computer screen. Jane Schoenbrun’s 2021 film *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* incorporates screenlife techniques alongside a conventional third-person narrative. The film follows Casey, a young person living in suburban isolation, as they create and consume horror fiction videos for the World’s Fair Challenge, a collective interactive game in which participants take the challenge and then report their “symptoms.”

As *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* progresses, the frames around screens tighten, with the effect that the outside world drops away. What remains is the stream of content. Consecutive social media posts have physical proximity, but may be tonally, thematically, and even chronologically distant from each other. It falls on the user/viewer to decide how to make sense of the continuous series of juxtapositions that they encounter on the social feed.

For this essay, in order to engage with the act of scrolling through the social feed, I designed and developed a social media microblogging interface, which I titled “Content Trough” in reference to the fact that such feeds often encourage rapid, indiscriminate consumption. By presenting ambiguous clips from *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* alongside materials that informed my own reading of the film, I have attempted to make my interpretive experience accessible to the viewer without explicitly stating one definitive interpretation. Accordingly, this particular feed is populated with posts that gather, at various distances, around the idea of queer and trans identity in horror media. The video is a screen recording, captured as I scrolled through the webpage. I found it curiously difficult to perform these screen gestures, uncertain of whether my engagement looked convincingly organic.

With its non-linear progression through time and affect, the social feed creates potential for queer readings. Although this mode of gathering information is not inherently queer—many social users log on to be confronted with ideas and images that are utterly “straight”—I wanted to explore whether it was possible for the social feed to promote a sideways growth of meaning. In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton characterizes “growing sideways” as

“what recent cognitive science recognizes as the brain’s growth (throughout a person’s lifetime) through the brain’s capacity to make neural networks through connection and extension” (2009, 11). Although Stockton’s account of sideways growth mainly concerns the deferral of children’s queer desires, she also makes note of the pathologization of transgender children by adults who cannot or will not recognize children’s self-knowledge (2009, 7-8). Jules Gill-Peterson has extended Stockton’s analysis to address the ways that transgender children have been made “ghostly” in the medical archive (2018, 11) and “forced to find almost unintelligible, shadowy outlets” for their identities (2018, 155).

Stockton also draws a connection between growing sideways and “Jacques Derrida’s notion of delay as the inescapable effect of our reading along a chain of words (in a sentence, for example), where meaning is delayed, deferred, exactly because we read in sequence, go forward in a sentence, not yet knowing what words are ahead of us, while we must take the words we have passed with us as we go, making meaning wide and hung in suspense” (2009, 4).

The accumulation of meaning in the social feed is not necessarily building toward any particular outcome—the feed possesses no narrative throughline for the user to follow. Instead, posts pile upon each other, at once totally independent of their surrounding context and inseparable from it. One post can scarcely be interpreted before another is in view, perhaps altering the meaning of all that came before and all that will follow. Walter Benjamin deploys Georges Duhamel to describe the effect of film on audiences: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (1969, 239). Often, I feel as though all my thoughts have been replaced by tweets.

It is within this context that *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* finds Casey. Fearful of a parent or guardian that is only rarely heard and never seen onscreen, Casey retreats into the screen world of horror fiction. Casey may be read as a non-binary character—their name is gender-neutral and they do not explicitly refer to themselves using gendered language—who is unable to embody that self-knowledge in their offline life. Under this reading, the screen becomes a site wherein their gender identity finds expression, but not embodiment. In vlogs of ambiguous authenticity, they describe feeling out of place and out of control in their own body. Their only audience for these videos is JLB, a much older man who chats with Casey from what appears to be a child’s bedroom in a large suburban home. Out of sight of most adults, Casey is also growing sideways, their identity deferred (they insist that JLB “doesn’t even know [their] real

name”) until one is ascribed to them by JLB. This essay works backward from JLB’s ascription in an attempt to counter its finality.

Click [***](#) to view the video essay.

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