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THET669E

Midterm Paper

Devito Types: Masculinity, Goblin Mode, and Stock Motion Animation

My first encounter with Danny Devito was watching the 1996 film adaptation of Roald Dahl's "Matilda." In the film he plays Mr. Wormwood - a sleazy conman who neglects his child and has a fierce anti-intellectual streak. I have since seen the actor in other films, where he is not always sleazy, occasionally a conman, and displays a range of intellect and feelings about what it means to be "smart." Through all of these characters (which in my opinion he plays expertly) he maintains a certain quality of self – a "Devito-ness" that can be seen out in the wild if you look closely enough to make the connection.

In my exploration in Unity software and creating stock motion performance, I found myself drawn to the character of the "The Boss" for what I will describe as its ability to take on elements of aforementioned "Devito-ness." Devito-ness has a lot to do with posture, center of gravity, and physical shape/size, but it also is encapsulated in a certain attitude. It's brash, it's mischievous, it's a little bit goblin-esque. There is something masculine about it, even as it does not uniformly fit within our contemporary ideas of masculinity[1]. Through my animations of the "The Boss" as he traverses a Devito filled recreation of *Dante's Inferno*, as well as my consequent exploration of those movements with my own physical body, I discovered that a certain quality of self, or at least, an aura of some kind[2], permeates through movement – whether that movement is made in digital or physical space. This

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[1] According to knowyourmeme.com, "dudes rock" is a phrase that is used to celebrate men doing juvenile but wholesome tasks together. This author would go so far as to define it as "masculinity loving itself," as it captures a wider array of contemporary views on masculinity, into which Danny Devito falls.

[2] Benjamin, Walter. 1963. "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Edited by Hannah Arendt. In *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books. 1969.

quality of self has as much to do with our technical limitations (our software, our bones), as it does with our societal ones (our gender, our bones).

Dante's Inferno served as a structure for "Devito's Inferno," but it was not a project about sin. Instead, a neutral (well, pink and purple) Devito Type descends through layers of other Devito Types, each layer with distinct motion using the same body. A gluttonous Devito feasts like a zombie eating brains, a lustful Devito multiplies and gyrates, and our Neutral Devito repeats a series of movements - cast a spell, drop kick, spin, get up, fall through the layer to the next. When done in the piece, the drop kick and spin are executed with a Devito filled grace. On my body, this movement made me fear for my physical safety.

I found that the key to embodying the Devito was in the center of gravity. Though not necessarily gendered, there was a pelvic first approach I needed to adopt to feel the masculinity of this digital body. This led me to think about our perceptions of gender and the pelvis over all. In a recent series of viral tweets, user Rivelino created a scientifically questionable body language analysis that looked at different celebrity couples and determined who was the more "dominant" partner in the pair. They used such metrics as "pussy facing the world" or "cock shame" when discussing pelvic position[3]. When a woman was "pussy facing the world" it expressed dominance, which the incels deemed a masculine trait. Could the secret of the Devito-ness be hidden in the hips? Or is this just our cultural understanding of what it means when one is, so to speak, "pussy facing the world?"

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[3] https://twitter.com/alpharivelino/status/1630107873240928257

In his 1935 Essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin

defines "aura" as a work of art's unique cultural context in time and space[4]. Though he argues that aura

is lost when a piece of art is lost through its mechanical reproduction, I found aura to be at the heart of

understanding both my digital and physical explorations of Devito Types. Insomuch that Danny

Devito himself is a cultural icon, with a culturally understood way of being in the world, we

understand Danny Devito through cultural signifiers of gender, race, and cultural stereotypes. Devito

is a white cis gender man of Italian American heritage, and his performance of masculinity is created

within those boundaries. He's also short. His literal bones interact with his social categories to create

an aura that is all at once familiar and transversive. These social categories permeate his body of work to

such a degree that they transmute neatly into a digital piece that, aside from the images and context I

created for it, has little to do with Danny Devito at all. Danny is the aura, my piece is merely the

mechanical reproduction of an aura and an archetype.

My aura is different from that of Danny Devito. I belong to several intimate publics[5], most of

which I discovered online through mechanical reproduction of art in the form of memes. Memes are

art that are meaningless without their mechanical reproduction. Their context and cultural significance

lies in their ability to proliferate rapidly within intimate publics. Danny Devito himself has been

memed on multiple occasions, and understandably so. His Goblin Mode aura and physicality are

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[4] Benjamin, Walter. 1963. "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Edited by Hannah Arendt. In *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books. 1969.
[5] Berlant describes Intimate Public as a social intimacies between strangers who generally like and vibe with the same stuff. So much so that they create an identity around it. Academic Mind Kate Ladenheim believes that gesture is a part of what unites intimate publics. Here's a citation: Berlant, Lauren. 2008. "Introduction: Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity." In *The Female Complaint*, 1-32. Durham: Duke University Press.

appealing to a generation that spans from "rawr xd random"[6] to "gen z dadaism."[7] As two congruent societies move through and around each other - that of online and that of Away From Keyboard[8], a meme can act as a physical gesture. A picture of a cat that says "I can haz cheezburger"[9] has cultural meaning and is understood by those in the know, but may be meaningless to others. Sending a meme to a person is a gesture that has no translation in AFK. It is a gesture that means "I see me in this. I see you in this. Let's be us in this together."

I think there are aspects of me that yearn for Devito-ness. As a trans masc person, I am constantly navigating masculinity as it is prescribed to me, withheld from me, and invented by me. The real life Danny Devito's brand of masculinity is a dialectic of chaos and tradition. In digital form, I can strap myself into a Devito Type and move through variations and movements without fear. Devito certainly has his privileges in the cis white male sense, but in the digital form, my bones and my fear of breaking them hold no consequence. I can contain a multitude of sins within me and still return to my sense of self as I cast spells, dropkick, and fall to a deeper sense of understanding. At the end of my piece, as our Devit-hero finds the layers of hell completed, he himself does not complete his actions. He continues alone through an endless digital abyss, telling a story with his body even when the context of that story has fallen away. At the end of the day, all we are left with is our aura and our ability to replicate that to stake a claim of self within a brave digital world.

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[6] Knowyourmeme.com defines this as a nominal placeholder for a certain type of millennial humor that was ever present in the live journal and myspace era of online.

[7] Columnist Elise Sanders wrote a great article about how Gen Z humor is similar to Dadaism for The Whitman Wire on March 5th 2020. You should give it a read if you're curious.

[8] Meaning "Away From Keyboard" as outlined by Legacy Russel in her 2010 manifesto "Glitch Feminism." She describes it as preferable over making distinctions between life that is lived outside of online vs. life lived online as a real vs. unreal dichotomy.

[9] https://cheezburger.com/875511040/original-cat-meme-that-started-cheezburger