

# **THIS WILL BE MY LEGACY**

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## **Abstract**

*This Will Be My Legacy* is a short fiction film following Martha, a lonely and directionless young woman who is a contestant in a competition promising to send the winners to colonize Mars. The contestants must accept that, should they embark on the mission, they will likely die on Mars due to there being no available technology that would allow for their return. Despite this, Martha connects to the company's self-help inspired rhetoric of humanity's progress and personal greatness.

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## Introduction

As I complete my thesis film, I am aware that the minute hand of the doomsday clock now is closer to midnight than it ever has been. Scrolling through Facebook this morning, I see that multiple friends have posted a link to the same article warning that human beings have only ten years remaining to reverse the catastrophic effects of climate change (if that). I don't read the article, but hours later I am still worrying about the headline as various disaster scenarios play out in my mind. Returning to Facebook, I scroll past posts advertising "life coaching" workshops and various motivational or self-improvement offerings sandwiched between reports on Syria and Donald Trump. The perpetual anxiety caused by accelerated access to information, 'bad news' and 'fake news' along with pervasive cultural messaging that we, as individuals, have the power to shape our own subjective realities, provided the thematic inspiration for my thesis project, *This Will Be My Legacy*.

My work as a filmmaker has been characterized by an exploration of this collision as well as topics such as female isolation, fraud, and women's interactions with technology. With this film, as in my previous work, I was intent on depicting a female protagonist who challenges popular concepts of acceptable or desirable behaviour in women (and, in particular, in women who are deemed worthy of cinematic representation). Though there are a wide variety of female representations in cinema and popular culture, the values of 'likeability' or 'relatability' continue to weigh more heavily on female characters. When anti-heroines of the Walter White variety do appear, they tend to be accompanied by a backstory to contextualize and justify their bad behaviour.

The character of Martha is destructive. She is both un-nurturing and a financial burden to those around her. She is not beautiful, and provides no pleasure or excitement to any other character. I was interested in depicting a character that, it could be argued, in the context of a system that cruelly evaluates people on the basis of economic or social value, takes more than she contributes. Further, I wanted to do this without making her overtly comedic or grotesque. To do so could be construed as an apology for foregrounding such a woman.

The spectacle and outcome of the recent American election resurrects questions around the relationship between the media and public – in particular questions of trust and charlatanism. What drives people to believe one source of information over another? In *This Will Be My Legacy*, I am engaging with these themes while foregrounding a difficult female protagonist who does not serve as an aspirational model.

# Development of the Story

## Background

In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, first published in 1961, Daniel Boorstin made the argument that post-war America was experiencing an "age of contrivance" defined by the emergence of illusion and falsehood as driving forces in cultural perception. Boorstin argued that the American public's insatiable demand for novelty had subverted the media: instead of the news being reported, it was now being invented. Boorstin's 'Pseudo- Event' was a staged event that was lent a sense authenticity by virtue of being reported on; an endless feedback loop of bullshit. Boorstin extended this theory to the human Pseudo-Event (he described a celebrity as someone 'known for his well-knownness') whose identity was being sculpted out of thin air.

In his words:

We have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life... Of course, America has provided the landscape and has given us the resources and the opportunity for this feat of national self-hypnosis. But each of us individually provides the market and the demand for the illusions which flood our experience. We want and we believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagant expectations. We expect too much of the world... Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1961. Pp. 109-115.

Boorstin's argument, culturally conservative as it may be, continues to resonate in the age of 24-hour cable news and the reality TV star. It also speaks to the emergence of the self-help guru of the 90's (figures like Tony Robbins and Oprah Winfrey), and, more recently, the celebrity entrepreneur of Silicon Valley, doling out truisms from the stage of Ted Talk. In her 2016 documentary *Enlighten Us*, Jenny Carchman follows disgraced motivational speaker James Arthur Ray as he attempts to spin the story of his incarceration following the deaths of three of clients in a sweat lodge into a marketable narrative: the redemption story. Carchman interviews surviving clients of Ray's who had spent \$10,000 to attend the ill-fated retreat. Though the experience had been traumatizing, it was not enough to altogether deter them from continuing to spend money on self-improvement courses. A particularly illuminating section of the film is when Ray discusses his journey to becoming a motivational speaker: he had always wanted to be one. In order to make a living preaching the secrets of a successful life, Ray's perceived success as a peddler of success seems to be the only credential needed. In her book, *Bright-sided*, Barbara Ehrenreich takes aim at the 'mass delusion' of 'positive thinking,' that has come to be characteristic of American culture and a weapon of late capitalism. More than an irritant to the cynical, Ehrenreich identifies the 'positive thinking' peddled by the likes of Ray and Robbins as big business, having a "symbiotic relationship with American capitalism... The consumer culture encourages individuals to want more – cars, larger homes, television sets, cell phones, gadgets of all kinds – and positive thinking is ready at hand to tell them they deserve more and can have it if they really want it and are willing to make the effort to get it... the flip side of positivity is thus a

harsh insistence on personal responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> In this model, we have the power to change our lives, to heal ourselves, and to become rich. If we fail to do so, it is a result of our own personal shortcoming. Our problems are not structural or political. Certainly they are not the result of a racist, capitalist, colonialist, patriarchy. Most motivational speakers actively advise *against* community involvement, instructing acolytes to eliminate the toxin of ‘negativity’ by avoiding the news and removing ‘negative’ people from their lives.<sup>3</sup>

## **Mars One**

I began forming the concept for *This Will Be My Legacy* in late 2015 while conducting research for a project focused on Ted Talks. I was interested in the Ted Talk as a theatrical form in line with Boorstin’s definition of the Pseudo-Event. The signifiers of the Ted Talk have become so widely familiar (the red letters, the black stage, the hands-free microphone, the origin story, and even the physical stance and gestures of the speakers) that merely evoking them has a certain power to lend credibility to the presenter. This research led me to a Tedx Talk given by Bas Lansdorp, the CEO of Mars One, an international non-profit proposing to send the first human beings to Mars.<sup>4</sup> At this point, Lansdorp and Mars One, rather than the Ted Talk in general, became the focus of my project. Lansdorp and his project seemed to me to be the quintessential expression of what troubled me about the content and messaging the Ted Talk: a valorization of the individual, and an uncritical embrace of capitalism and colonialism under the guise of

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<sup>2</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright-Sided: How the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*. Picador, 2009. Pg. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> TEDx Talks. “Getting humanity to Mars: Bas Lansdorp at TEDxDelft.” Online video clip. YouTube, November 5, 2012.



progress and personal growth.

Due to the tremendous cost and a general reordering of priorities, government programs such as NASA have largely curtailed the kinds of initiatives that send human beings into space. Lansdorp and Mars One view this as an opening for a private company to initiate their own mission. Though Lansdorp insists that the technology required to send humans to Mars has already been invented, he acknowledges that there is as yet no way to ensure their return. Mars One has a simple solution: don't bring them back. Instead, they will send their astronauts, four at a time, to live out the rest of their lives on Mars, founding a permanent human colony whose population will increase with each successive one-way trip. The mission is to be populated by civilian volunteers from all over the world. Early on, Lansdorp boasted that Mars One was expecting millions of applicants eager for the opportunity to make history. Using the profitability of the Olympic Games as a comparison, he proposed to fund this mission using advertising revenue generated from a reality TV style competition show, culminating in the 24/7 broadcast of the mission itself. In the intervening years since the project was announced, the deadline for the first launch has been pushed back multiple times. Further, it has been alleged by scientists from institutions like NASA and MIT that much of the technology required to enable the mission has yet to be invented, and that the budget and timeline are unrealistic.<sup>5</sup> Though Mars One had boasted of a contract with aerospace company Lockheed Martin to supply robotics and a partnership with international reality TV giant Endemol (the company behind worldwide franchises Big Brother and The Biggest Loser,

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<sup>5</sup> Netburn, Deborah. "Is Mars One ready to colonize the Red Planet? MIT engineers say no." *LA Times*. October 14, 2014.

among others), those deals have reportedly disintegrated.<sup>6</sup>

Mars One is not the first private entity to enter the aerospace arena. Elon Musk's SpaceX was founded in 2002, and cites the establishment of a Martian colony as a key part of its agenda. However, both the content of Mars One's proposal and the medium through which it was delivered struck me as representative of a contemporary reading of Boorstin's Pseudo-Event for the era of 'positive thinking', in particular as it could be applied to the individualistic ethos of Silicon Valley, and the cult of the celebrity-entrepreneur. Lansdorp, whose background is in wind energy, told *Matter's* Elmo Keep that his areas of expertise are "entrepreneurship, public speaking, [and] start-ups."<sup>7</sup> Like many Silicon Valley and tech industry enterprises (for example the ride-sharing service Uber), Mars One is seeking to occupy a space that has historically been held or regulated by the public sector. It also makes use of the rhetoric of unstoppable human progress and the language of positivity reminiscent of the kinds of motivational speakers who once frequently appeared on Oprah, and are now ever-present on the Ted Talk circuit.

A particularly illustrative piece of theatre occurs during Lansdorp's Tedx Talk when he asks the audience what they believe to be the most "exciting thing happening in the world today." He pauses, allowing a moment of consideration. Then, in a tone of regret, he provides his own answer: "a couple of wars and an economic crisis." Stating that he believes "that the civilization needs something positive to be enthusiastic about," Lansdorp connects this unfortunate state of affairs with the necessity for human space

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<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, Sarah. "No more 'Big Brother' on the red planet: Endemol axes plans for reality TV show that would record life of Mars One explorers - but a documentary will still be made." *Daily Mail*. February 23, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Keep, Elmo. "All Dressed Up For Mars And Nowhere To Go." *Matter*. November 9, 2014.

travel.<sup>8</sup> Later in the presentation, he further elaborates his worldview, stating his belief that the only living heroes are the eight remaining astronauts who walked on the moon. Lansdorp's apparently fundamental belief that human beings require "excitement," and his curiously narrow and personal interpretation of 'heroism' speak directly to Boorstin's description of what he termed society's "extravagant expectations":

We are ruled by extravagant expectations:

- (1) *of what the world holds.* Of how much news there is, how many heroes there are, how often masterpieces are made, how exotic the nearby can be, how familiar the exotic can become. Of the closeness of places and the farness of places.
- (2) *Of our power to shape the world.* Of our ability to create events when there are none, to make heroes when they don't exist, to be somewhere else when we haven't left home... To fabricate national purposes when we lack them, to pursue these purposes after we have fabricated them. To invent our standards and then to respect them as if they had been revealed or discovered.<sup>9</sup>

One of the peculiarities of Mars One is the degree to which it utilizes the rhetoric and tropes of patriotism while attempting to evoke a global nationalism. The concept of space travel as an expression of ideology brings to mind the Cold War, the Space Race, and the use of such programs and achievements to bolster nationalism. For Ehrenreich, positive thinking is related to (in fact, is a requirement of) the ideology of American Exceptionalism. Here, she defines positive thinking as a mass self-delusion, for how can Americans believe their country to be 'the greatest' when confronted with the fact that people in other developed nations are largely better off in terms of quality of life?

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<sup>8</sup> TEDx Talks. "Getting humanity to Mars: Bas Lansdorp at TEDxDelft." Online video clip. YouTube, November 5, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Boorstin, Daniel J.. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1961. 132-135.

Paradoxically, this kind of positive thinking, requiring as it does a denial of inconvenient truths, perpetuates an environment in which improvements to the system cannot be made (because, of course, none are needed).

Lansdorp, however, is admitting that we have a problem that needs solving: a positivity deficit. He seems to be arguing that humankind as a whole is in need of the self-esteem boost that a symbolic act might provide. That we should undertake this mission has for him far more to do with ideology than with the practical outcome: “The most important reason I think to send humans to Mars is to inspire. When humans land on Mars, the whole world will be inspired to believe that anything is possible.”<sup>10</sup>

I was wholly unconvinced by Lansdorp and his proposal, but utterly fascinated by the phenomenon. Although the company has been accepting donations for a project that is largely considered to be impossible to execute as proposed and could be seen to be taking advantage of the hopes and dreams of gullible people, I am not convinced that it is a simple scam in the guise of scientific progress. Many of Lansdorp’s critics do not doubt that a mission to Mars will be possible at some point, or that it will likely be undertaken. But it may not occur in his lifetime, and that is what seems to be unacceptable for Lansdorp. The elements of Mars One that don’t make logical sense can perhaps be explained by the simple and very human horror of being left behind.

While my point of entry had been Lansdorp, as the public face of the company, I eventually refocused my attention to the people who would volunteer for the mission. Fortunately, Mars One applicants are required to upload a public profile, including an introduction video, to the firm’s website where they are available for public viewing.

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<sup>10</sup> TEDx Talks. “Getting humanity to Mars: Bas Lansdorp at TEDxDelft.” Online video clip. YouTube, November 5, 2012.

These ‘audition’ videos provided an invaluable insight into the people who would want to volunteer (or, at least, to be on a TV show about people who would want to volunteer). In terms of character, I am interested in how people choose to represent (and invent) themselves in a public context. It creates a kind of failed Pseudo-Event wherein a more compelling truth emerges from the effort to create the public face. Viewing these videos also served to deepen my suspicions about Mars One. While some of the 100 finalists featured on the website had scientific or military backgrounds and presented themselves as competent and even-keeled, others seemed to have more likely been selected as fodder for a potential reality TV show, if the judges had taken to the time to view their profiles at all.

Although I was unable to find a specific list of the questions the prospective contestants may have been asked to answer, certain themes emerged from the videos. Each contestant spoke about their reasons for wanting to go to Mars and what they could bring to the mission. Particularly affecting were their efforts to describe their senses of humour, which was evidently something they were asked to do. One man volunteered that his sense of humour was “average”, another woman explained that hers was suitable for the isolation of outer space because she was able to laugh at the same joke over and over, and a third man attempted to demonstrate his by forcing a laugh as he introduced the topic. That this would be one of the questions asked of contestants suggests that the selection process may have been designed to emulate those used by more established organizations. In her book *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*, the science and humour writer Mary Roach details the personality types and psychological profiles that are considered desirable amongst astronauts:

NASA's recommended astronaut attribute list includes an Ability to Relate to Others with Sensitivity, Regard, and Empathy. Adaptability, Flexibility, Fairness. Sense of Humor. An Ability to Form Stable and Quality Interpersonal Relationships. Today's space agency doesn't want guts and swagger.<sup>11</sup>

While these are all fine qualities, they would seem to be at odds with those considered suitable for reality television. Roach's book offers a detailed account of the kinds of tests and psychological experiments NASA conducts in order to determine whether or not their astronauts exhibit the appropriate traits. The more I researched the manner in which Mars One was interfacing with contestants, the more the entire endeavour seemed to me to have the aspect of hastily copied homework. Instead of vetting their candidates, Mars One appeared to be requiring that they do it themselves and then taking the results at face value. I was surprised to learn that Mary Roach, whose book details the physical and psychological torment astronauts endure (and could serve as a deterrent to anyone considering a trip to outer space), is named on Mars One's official website as an Ambassador. Ambassadors are described as people who "spread the word about Mars One and support the ambitious endeavour it has undertaken."<sup>12</sup>

As with Lansdorp's Ted Talk, in viewing the audition videos I was struck by a prevailing, and often superficial, rhetoric of progress. Prospective contestants made frequent and uncritical use of the language of colonialism and conquest, drawing parallels between themselves and problematic historical figures such Christopher Columbus. At the same time, much of the rationale evoked doomsday, arguing that humanity has so

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<sup>11</sup> Roach, Mary. *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*. W. W. Norton & Company. Pg. 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Mars One*. 2017. [www.mars-one.com](http://www.mars-one.com).

decimated the planet Earth that the only viable option is to seek out and conquer a new home. I was ultimately more drawn to the stories of the people who seemed to have a sincere belief in the importance of the mission and what it could mean for posterity, rather than the more shameless ‘reality TV’ aspirants.

## Source Materials

Three pieces of research set me in the direction of what became the final film. The first was a *Shouts and Murmurs* column in *The New Yorker*. Though it took a tone of mockery, it touched on one of the questions that had been forming in my mind while watching the audition videos: how would announcing the sincere intention to leave earth permanently affect a person’s relationships, especially if that trip never actually came to fruition? The piece hinted at what this might look like, and how a person might digest the negative feedback they would be likely to receive:

Buccheri: “I got a question—how’s everybody’s family taking this? Because mine is completely ignoring me.”

Silverphoenix: “I have a daughter who’s ten. She’s been like, ‘I don’t want you to go.’”

Staugler: “I think it’s a little weird, but my girlfriend just doesn’t want to do things like this.”

Buccheri: “I bet she thinks you’re weird.”

Morphy: “My sister always thought I was an alien, so I’m just going home.”

Buccheri: “My family thinks I’m a joke. On Facebook, they click ‘Like’ when I post pictures of my cat. Then I’m like, ‘I made it to Round Two of Mars One!’ Nothing.”

Reeves: “If we could vote, I’d put you on Mars right now just to get away from your family. Fuck those guys!”

Buccheri: “I just said that the other day—‘Fuck youse, I’m going to Mars!’”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wiedeman, Reeves. “Martian.” *The New Yorker*. April 28, 2014.

The second piece was *All Dressed Up For Mars And Nowhere To Go*<sup>14</sup>, written by Elmo Keep for *Matter*. This was a more in depth look at the issue raised in *The New Yorker*. Keep profiles a Josh, a young man who has broken off his relationship and moved back in with his parents as a result of being named a Mars One finalist. The rationale he gives for taking these extreme measures is that they would allow him to better focus on his preparations for the next stage of the competition. It wouldn't have been fair to his girlfriend to prevent her from having the opportunity to meet someone else. Josh, along with a number other contestants, have been attempting to parlay their candidacy into a sort of pseudo-career, or at least into pseudo-credentials:

He's appeared on national television, on radio, in the local papers to talk about Mars One; he visits primary school classrooms to talk with young kids he hopes will be inspired to follow a path in the sciences, to follow their passions and dreams and make their lives into something meaningful. He's been writing a book he's hoping someone will publish, about how colonizing Mars would affect the human body, mind, and soul, not to mention the future of humanity.<sup>15</sup>

With a BA in applied physics and a background in the Navy, Josh presents a curious character. Despite the extremity of the measures he has taken, he admits to having reasonable doubts about the feasibility of the mission:

He is not a stupid person, by any stretch. When I say that Chris Hadfield has serious reservations about Mars One, Josh says that he isn't surprised and that other astronauts have expressed their skepticism, that he knows about it... Josh knows, on some level, that what Mars One is proposing is

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<sup>14</sup> Keep, Elmo. "All Dressed Up For Mars and Nowhere to Go". *Matter*. November 9, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



unlikely to come off. At least not in the time frame it has set and not for the amount of money it says. But it's even that most minute, most remote chance it could actually work that keeps Josh holding on to hope, the hope that brought him home from Europe and away from a girl he really loved, to dedicate all his energies completely to Mars One. To keep trying to make it real. "It's Joseph Campbell's Hero With a Thousand Faces type of thing," he says, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees. "Except you stay in the hall of heroes, you don't return with the boon. You are sending it back, you're sharing it with the old world. But you're staying out there on the adventure calling others to come. That's why I'm willing to sign up to go one way."<sup>16</sup>

Josh's invocation of Campbell is characteristic of how the applicants speak in their audition videos: they want to do something great; they want to go down in history.

Heroism was also a concern of Boorstin, who felt that heroes and great men were being usurped by famous men. I am more sceptical than Boorstin about either heroes or great men, but I am interested here in the conflation of fame, greatness, and immortality, and the unselfconscious manner in which candidates express their desire to possess all three. Of course, I do understand the impulse. I've wondered what people might say about me after I'm gone, or how long it will take before nothing is said at all. But to me, it also speaks to the insatiability described by Boorstin, and a fundamental dissatisfaction with what life has to offer; to the cultural fixation on fame as an objective rather than a by-product.

The third item was *The Vegan Astronaut*, a blog that was being kept by Maria Lukic, a student living in the UK, and a Mars One hopeful. Maria had been recording the early days of her application process, including her hopes that she and her boyfriend

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

would be selected together (much to her dismay, he was not selected for the first round).<sup>17</sup> In addition to her own ruminations on the mission, Maria reproduced the full text of an email she had received from Mars One informing her that she had made it through the first round of the competition:

Dear Dr. Maria Lukic,

You and only 1057 other aspiring astronauts around the globe have been pre-selected as potential candidates to launch the dawn of a new era – human life on Mars. Congratulations. You have made it to the next round.

Now. Catch your breath.

We know you need details. We promise they are coming. In the meantime, here's what you need to know:

- Norbert Kraft, MD, Chief Medical Officer of Mars One, will be in touch with you (by January 6th, 2014) with critical information about your application. Your status is reliant on quick responses to his requests.

- To make our mission a success, we need to have a successful [sic] with our crowd-funding campaign. You must spread the word. Use Facebook, Twitter (#Marstronaut), ВКонтакте, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Vine... tell everyone you know, including friends, family, and media that you need their help. You are now a key part of the group of people around the world we're counting on, and helping generate interest and funding in the Mars One mission is your first assignment. Among other criteria, finalists for the mission will be judged on their ability to be evangelists for this project.

If you haven't already, it's time to talk with your loved ones regarding your dream of starting a human civilization on Mars. Passing the first round of selection is a major step closer to going down in history as one of the chosen few who will experience and live something that has never been done before. You'll need your family and friends' support as we begin the next stage of the selection process.

Congratulations on making the first cut. Time to prepare for Round 2.

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<sup>17</sup>*The Vegan Astronaut.*

Best regards,  
Mars One Selection Committee<sup>18</sup>

This piece of direct communication from Mars One gave me a perspective on how opaque the selection process was, and how that might drive the behaviour of a serious contestant. Reading the instruction that applicants become ‘evangelists for mission’ on social media brought to mind the contestant in the *New Yorker* piece who complained that their family wasn’t ‘liking’ their Mars One posts on Facebook. More than a social slight, they might perceive this lack of support as a direct threat to their candidacy. With no concrete objectives, a contestant would never know how well they were doing as ‘evangelists’. This emphasis on using social media to spread the word was an apt illustration of the pseudo-existence of the company itself. I decided the fictionalized version of Mars One in my film would never be named, any physical manifestation of it would be digital, and seen only through the eyes of the contestants.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## **Shaping of the Story**

### **Tone**

There is certainly comic potential in the prospect of a person expecting to be congratulated by a loved one for the pursuit something that would mean a permanent separation, and I was interested in including this uncomfortable humour in the film. But I was equally interested in taking a sincere look at what might push a person to such an extreme. And in practical terms, I was most interested in what daily life might look like after this intention had been announced. I wanted the film to explore the tension between the private hope, the familial displeasure, the potential for public ridicule, and the co-enablement that might occur between two contestants.

### **Workshopping**

My process in turning the inspiration into the film began with the scanned medical form on the Vegan Astronaut blog. The blogger, Maria, had written about her experience of completing the required medical tests, beginning with a visit to her university's medical centre. The doctor at the clinic advised against proceeding with the tests, estimating that they would cost her as much as £300. It was at this point that I began to consider the financial burden of being a contestant. First there was the cost of applying, then the medical tests, and then the ambiguous requirement that contestants help to raise funds.

Using the same medical form that had been uploaded to the blog, I devised an improv exercise. I've employed improvisation in the past and I was interested in exploring it again with this project, in particular by using a beat-by-beat naturalism that

could help keep the tone from veering towards overt satire. I also decided that I would play the role of the contestant, who I named Martha. In addition to the practical appeal of not having to cast and feed another actor, I felt that playing the role myself would ensure that I was working from a place of empathy, and serve as further protection from the trap of judging the character.

I enlisted an actress who is also a professional nurse to play the role of a doctor at a walk-in clinic. Though she knew the basic premise, I didn't give her any instruction other than to react as she might if a patient had presented her with such a form. I did not show her the actual form until we were shooting the first take. She reacted much like the doctor described in the blog post, advising that the tests were medically unnecessary and would be costly. Afterwards, we watched the playback, and discussed what had happened and why. I gave notes, and we shot a few more takes, repeating this process. Once we were satisfied with the scene, we moved to coverage. The honest reaction of the actress playing the doctor was that she would try to dissuade the patient from having the tests completed at her own expense, and she expressed suspicion about the company that would request this.

The experience of creating the scene and showing it in class for feedback influenced how I ultimately decided to structure the film. Rather than depicting several contestants in a fictional version of the Mars One competition, I would instead follow only one character through a series of interactions, both digital and interpersonal. One of the things that had worked dramatically in the workshopped scene was that I did not reveal what exactly the purpose of the tests was until midway through the scene, and even then only in minimal detail. This lent it an element of suspense and mystery, which

helped to keep the audience engaged. That the world of the film is confined to a doctor's office allows for the possibility that this scene is taking place in the near future or perhaps even an alternate reality. This sense of uncertainty regarding the rules of the world appealed to me both dramatically as well as thematically.

For the final film, I wanted the possibility that Martha really is going to Mars to remain open. In order to achieve this, I decided that, chronologically, the film should start after she has already been accepted into the first round of the competition. This would allow me to focus on the liminal state of state of someone who has been named a finalist and believes that her life has fundamentally been changed, but who is still having to go about her quotidian existence as before. The revelation of the specifics of her ambition would be withheld until the midway point of the film.

By starting the narrative after the inciting incident, I was able to more efficiently create tiered interpersonal relationships, and also to dig deeper into how the response from loved ones might evolve. For example, Martha's mother is already aware of her daughter's candidacy, and it has been a source of tension between them prior to the start of the film. The other characters, being strangers to Martha, present new opportunities for her to invent herself in their eyes. Martha's repeated struggle to present herself as she would like to be seen becomes a theme of the film. Her mother's easy dismissal opens old wounds and results in a sullen outburst, while the doctor's barely disguised incredulity offers a different kind of humiliation. The smiling, encouraging reporter from a local news program seems to be taking Martha at her word. But perhaps she is preparing a story that will expose the competition as a fraud and Martha as a fool. Asked to comment on concerns that the company has misrepresented their ability to complete

the mission, Martha nonsensically responds that “it’s sad” that “people are negative try to tear down” anything positive. A moment later she lies about the sizable donations that she has been secretly making to the company. When Martha meets Dave, a fellow contestant, she finally has an ally (or, rather, an enabler). Dave breezily explains that his girlfriend (the mother of his child), “flipped out” over his intention to permanently leave the family for Mars, and that “it’s probably over.” He has managed to interpret the dissolution of his relationship as a net positive, as his girlfriend has exposed herself as a negative person who he would be better off cutting out of his life. Dave encourages Martha to follow suit and distance herself from anyone who fails to support her involvement in the competition. The character of Dave serves to introduce some of the more extreme contradictions expressed by Mars One contestants. Having fully assimilated the rhetoric of the company (while Martha is not quite able to banish her doubts), he also serves to represent the kind of relentless individualistic positive thinking emblematic of Silicon Valley. Martha tries to defend herself against criticism using similar tactics, but does so with hesitation. “Why can’t you be happy for me?” she demands of her mother, who would prefer that she focus her energy on steady employment and suggests that Martha try volunteering if she wants to “help people.” But Martha doesn’t really want to help people, not unless she can help *all* of the people, thus becoming great, or famous.

Martha’s repeated and secret donations to the company represent her efforts to be an ‘evangelist’ for the mission. I imagined that she, having limited social reach and lacking the support of her family, might have been frustrated in her attempts to garner attention on social media. Failing this, she has turned to the donations, which have now

become unsustainable. But she is uncertain of how else to further herself in the competition, without which her life will lose the meaning she managed to attach to it. The final scene between Martha and her mother represents an escalation in the tension between them, as well as an escalation in Martha's financial crisis. Suspecting that Martha has been making donations to the company, her mother refuses to lend her any more. Furious with her grown daughter, she accuses her of lying and deluding herself. Rather than getting through to Martha, this tirade only further cements her determination. Martha responds by stealing her mother's credit card information while she is out of the room. The film ends ambiguously with Martha sitting silently and passively in the passenger seat as her mother drives her to the subway. Perhaps she is not destined for greatness. Perhaps she will always remain in this infantilized state, being driven by her mother to a destination about which she is indifferent. The moving vertical reflection in the windshield over Martha's frozen face is reminiscent of a rocket launching into space.



## Cinematic Influences

The film that most influenced me while I was developing this project was Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995), in which Julianne Moore plays a wealthy suburban housewife who develops a mysterious and debilitating allergy to her environment. In early scenes we see Moore's meek and frail Carol struggling with the more concrete elements of her surroundings. Her massive house looks as though it might swallow her up. When a new sofa is delivered in the wrong colour, she stammers and falters in her attempts to berate the workers. She seems to be asking them, "Am I doing this right?" It is as though she is an imposter in her own life, performing a rudimentary idea of how a rich white lady is expected to act. As Carol becomes increasingly ill, she retreats further and further from her life, eventually ending up in a private desert compound for fellow sufferers of "environmental disease." Though they provide a degree of community that Carol did not previously have in marriage or friendship, it is a community nonetheless predicated on a form of co-enablement. At the film's close, Carol, emaciated, her face covered in sores, has sealed herself away in a small structure on the edge of the compound that she has been told will keep her safe from chemicals and toxins. She stares into the mirror and repeats the words "I love you." As Mallory Andrews points out in *Cleo Journal*:

it may be tempting to read Carol's journey of spiritual awakening as one of empowerment, in which she breaks free of her stifling home life and enters a world wholly of her own making. And certainly, this analysis initially seems supported by the narrative. Such a reading, however, would ignore the class privilege at work in Haynes's ultimately critical film. Specifically, the dangerous ways upper-middle-class self-involvement and

delusion can be mistaken for radical self-actualization and empowerment.<sup>19</sup>

This subversion of the self-help narrative is precisely what makes *Safe* such a rich source of inspiration for *This Will Be My Legacy*. As a protagonist, Carol offers a fascinating conundrum. She must be one of the meekest and most unreliable heroines ever to be committed to film. Though we observe her illness escalating from a cough to nosebleeds to seizures, it remains unclear if its cause is psychosomatic, as her dismissive and condescending doctor implies. I kept this in mind while creating Martha's narrative. I wanted it to be unclear whether or not the competition she was involved in was legitimate. The tonal and visual vocabulary of *Safe* was also influential for this project. Haynes tells his story through a series of precise and highly symmetrical wide shots, allowing the scenes to play out with relatively few cuts. It is rare for us to get very physically close to Carol. Instead, we always see her in relation to her surroundings. When Carol is hospitalized, Haynes lights the scene in soft neons, and keeps his lens so wide that camera seems almost to be watching from an adjoining room. As most of my locations were neither large enough nor visually appealing enough to shoot these kinds of wide shots, I attempted to create a similar sense of dissonance by leaning into that physical claustrophobia. The majority of the shots in *This Will Be My Legacy* are medium closeups, rarely can a body be seen to be in motion. The hoped-for effect is one of suffocating airlessness punctured only once, when Martha briefly looks up the sky and the camera follows.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrews, Mallory. *She's Lost Control, Again: Todd Haynes's Safe*. *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism*. 1.2 (2013).

Haynes's visual detachment, combined with a subtle satirical bite in the dialogue, creates a sense of the uncanny that I also strove to emulate. When Carol visits a friend whose brother has recently died, the two women awkwardly dance around the fact that he died of AIDS until Carol changes the subject to the newly updated décor in her friend's kitchen. In writing the script, I thought frequently of this scene. The pivot is shocking, but it is played with such subtlety that there is a moment of uncertainty for the viewer over what Haynes's intention was in showing it. Though I wanted *This Will Be My Legacy* to be funny (as *Safe* frequently is), I did not want there to be any telegraphing to the audience that any particular moment was meant to be humorous or astonishing.

Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970), which she wrote, directed and starred in, has equally, although more indirectly, been influential on the development and creation of *This Will Be My Legacy*, and is significant in contextualizing myself as a performer/director. Against a backdrop of coal mines and endless highways, *Wanda* follows its title character from poverty to prison. Loden has characterized her film as being about a woman who is incapable of understand the rules of her world.<sup>20</sup> Though they are worlds apart, this description could also apply to Martha, who is cursed with the awareness that others are able to see her failure to comprehend and comply with societal expectations. When she is out with Dave, she shifts awkwardly in her seat as she struggles to parse her role in their interaction. Is this a date? How is one expected to react when shown photographs of children? How emphatically should she empathize with him? Luckily, he isn't really paying attention to her.

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<sup>20</sup> Álvarez López, Crisinta and Martin, Adrian. "Nothing of the Sort: Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970)". *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*. 4.8. (2015). 43-49.

For reasons that I cannot entirely explain, I knew from the very early stages of developing *This Will Be My Legacy* that I would play the role of Martha. Though I have a background as a performer, and have directed myself in previous films, those projects have more frequently been experiments involving one other actor at most. Prior to beginning my MFA, I studied acting and theatre at both McGill University, and the Atlantic Theater Company. My approach to both film and theatre as creator is shaped by the focus on character and performance that I developed as an actor. Though there were some practical factors that contributed to this decision, it was ultimately the result of an artistic impulse. In performing in my own work, I look to female filmmakers like Chantal Akerman, Elaine May, Barbara Loden, and Miranda July, who have used themselves as performers, often facing questions of whether or not their work is self-portraiture.

Loden conceived of her film after reading about a woman who had been sentenced to twenty years in prison for robbing a bank, and who had thanked the judge after her sentencing. This prompted her to wonder about the woman's story, her hopelessness, and how she could have come to greet incarceration with gratitude. Though my film is an exploration of emotional desperation, rather than poverty, I had ruminated on a similar question, contemplating the Mars One contestants: what could drive someone to the point of viewing this Martian exile as desirable? How could they blithely announce their intention to leave without ever returning? I don't believe that there is any definitive answer to these questions, but it was significant to me that I approach them from the perspective of an actor. Though we are not the same, her emotions are mine. Her sadness, her disappointment, her anger and confusion are also my own. However, the performance is not a self-portrait, and is very much calculated.

Antonio Campos's *Christine* (2016), which offers an interpretation of the story of Christine Chubbuck, a Florida anchor who committed suicide on air, is of thematic interest in as much as it deals with an individual's collision with the media, and in its depiction of a difficult female protagonist. But it is equally, if not more so, of interest as a performance reference. Rebecca Hall's remarkable and unusual performance of Chubbuck avoids many of the stereotypes of female madness, instead rendering a character that is painfully familiar despite rarely having been seen onscreen. Her characterization of Christine was influential in my writing and performing of Martha. There is a heaviness and monotony to her suffering. She is brooding and awkward, and her palpable unhappiness surges under every scene, causing others visible discomfort, but rarely results in a showy, cinematic outburst. There is a moment early in the film in which Christine approaches a couple at a restaurant and tells them how in love they seem to be and that they'd be great subject matter for a human interest story. Suddenly embarrassed, she stammers, "Sorry to interrupt, you just made my night. Don't lose sight of what you have here." It is an attempt to connect underwritten by profound self-loathing. The audience can see the wheels turning as Christine tries on a new persona for a moment (the sage, outgoing stranger celebrating love). Christine's misery is in part due an inability to cope with the rise in sensational media coverage ("if it bleeds it leads," her boss tells her). This is the cynical and logical progression of the model presented in Boorstin – that the news has become a commodity that can be churned out to satisfy demand, and consumers can tailor their exposure to suit personal tastes. Campos's film is speculative, and he is not entirely satisfied with the interpretation that her suicide was a simple, if extreme statement about the media. In any event, we do have Chubbuck's final

words, delivered on live television: "In keeping with Channel 40's policy of bringing you the latest in 'blood and guts,' and in living colour, you are going to see another first— attempted suicide."

Like *Christine*, both Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* (1982) and Sydney Lumet's *Network* (1976) deal thematically Boorstin's notion of the Pseudo-Event. In the *King of Comedy*, Scorsese explores the hold that the very idea of celebrity has on the culture through the character of Rupert Pupkin (Robert De Niro), who is obsessed with both celebrity (specifically, with a talk show host played by Jerry Lewis), and with becoming a celebrity himself. In Sydney Lumet's *Network*, news anchor Howard Beale (Peter Finch) threatens to commit suicide on air in retaliation against the cynical restructuring of the network, which will result in his being fired. Seeing the spike in ratings caused by the commotion, network executive Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway) conspires to have the nightly news broadcast moved to the entertainment division so that she can 'develop' the news.

Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* (2014) provided a model for a film in which the plot was being driven by a non-event. In the case of *Force Majeure*, the non-event is a controlled avalanche that for a moment appears as if it might be headed straight for the film's protagonists, a well-to-do Swedish family on a skiing vacation. In the momentary panic, the family patriarch flees the scene, leaving his wife alone with their two young children. The remainder of the film follows the family as they process the undesired knowledge of what he *would* do in such a situation. With the Mars One contestants, it was this notion of a person having announced a willingness and an intention to leave and then to *not leave* that I had initially found so fascinating.

## Previous Work

With this project I continue my exploration of themes such as female isolation, apocalyptic anxiety, fraud, and women's interactions with technology. My previous works have dealt with these subjects, frequently incorporating elements of sci-fi and magical realism. My most recent short, *A Brief History of The Apocalypse* depicts a young woman who is paralyzed by her terror of climate change. Already an anxious person, she has begun devoting every waking hour to reading disaster scenarios online, making no distinction between self-published conspiracy theories about chemtrails and more legitimate (though equally dire) reporting. Unwilling to leave the apartment, she relies on her reluctant roommate to supply her with food and keep her company. They wake up morning to discover that a catastrophic rainstorm has decimated the planet, leaving only their tiny apartment untouched.

My current project, *A Woman on the Telephone*, is a trilogy of shorts that I am writing an actress with whom I have collaborated on other projects. Each film features the same actress playing a different take on an archetypal woman as she engages with communication technology in an effort to remedy her isolation. In the first film, *A Woman on The Telephone: Carol*, a receptionist for 'Infotech Communication Services' is enclosed in a circular, neon desk, answering phones and perpetually reordering light bulbs for the office. When she takes a call from someone looking for Gail (the company's receptionist prior to Carol), she begins to realize that she has no memories of a life outside of the office.

Two earlier shorts, *Night Life* and *Are You With Me?* depicted young women struggling to make their way in a hostile economic climate. The latter film is set in a

fraudulent call centre and, similarly to *This Will Be My Legacy*, engages in the themes of desperation and deceit. The film was based on my one of my own experiences as young person on the job market. Having replied to a Craigslist post that I believed was advertising for a receptionist at a travel agency, I found myself in an unmarked warehouse being trained to hard-sell ‘vacations’ to people who were calling from somewhere in the United States in response to a pop-up ad informing them that they had ‘won’ a discount. Terrified that this was a scam, I made up an excuse to leave, but kept the script that the company had provided, which I used, years later, as the basis of this film. Working with the actress playing the call centre manager, we came up with a bulleted motivational speech reminiscent of P.T. Barnum that she could improvise on the day.



## Production

Though I had initially hoped to make a greater use of improv during production process (as I had in the test scene I'd shot for class), and cast a number of actors with strong improvisational skills, the limited time allotted to each of our locations made this increasingly unlikely as we approached the shoot. The exceptions were the scenes between Martha and her mother, Diana, which were heavily improvised. Carolyn Taylor, the actress playing Diana, had come aboard the project mere days before we shot the scenes, meaning that she and I were meeting for the first time that morning. Because Carolyn (who has a background with the Second City and is currently enjoying success with her CBC sketch program *Baroness Von Sketch*) has such strength as an improviser, and because I wanted to give her total freedom to create a bold character in the short time that we had, we improvised much of the scenes, using the scripted beats as guideposts to keep us on track in terms of the overall story. We used the early takes as rehearsals, watched them back, and discussed what we felt was working, and what wasn't. I was thrilled with the results, especially with the levels of emotion that she was able to convey in unpredictable and truthful ways. Though I find improvisation to be an incredibly valuable tool in the writing process, and in accessing the emotional truth of a scene, it can present challenges in the edit, as it is often difficult to cut together. The contributions of my producer Lesley Loksi Chan and my cinematographer James Poremba were especially invaluable during the improvised scenes, and in assisting me as an actor/director. They were able to catch things that needed to be redone for the sake of continuity, and also to provide feedback on the performances. I have worked with James on a half dozen short projects, most of which I have also acted in. We've developed a

level of trust and a shorthand that allows me to rely on him heavily during production. Lesley, who is both a friend and fellow MFA student, has been aware of this project since I first began developing it. I had tremendous trust in her opinion, as well as her understanding of my vision for the film. Having these collaborators allowed me to switch with confidence between my roles as actor and director.

Aside from the improvised scenes, the remainder of production followed a relatively traditional trajectory. With a few exceptions, I had written the script with an eye on what would be feasible in terms of location and cast. I had initially intended that the scene in which Martha and Dave are interviewed would take place on the set of a local morning show like the Big Breakfast. With no budget and not much time, this proved impossible, and I changed it to a pre-recorded segment.

The editing process was fairly long and I relied heavily on feedback to arrive at picture lock. Because I was attempting to create a sense of controlled confusion, it was imperative to hear from viewers who had not been involved with film about their understanding of what was happening, and why.

## Conclusion

With *This Will Be My Legacy*, I have returned to the thematic well that I have been drawing from since I began making films. The opening shot – a woman in bed at night staring at her laptop, mirrors the opening shot in my first film, *Night Life*. I have also continued my exploration of the line between writing and improvising, especially in as far as it concerns me as an actor/director. The process has deepened my understanding of how I want to write, and how I want to prepare in order to have freedom to *not write*, and allow unplanned moments to take place within a carefully considered structure. Overall, my intent with the film was to create a challenging and unlikable character who could invited empathy as well as critical engagement with of the broader themes at play in the film.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Stills From *This Will Be My Legacy*



Image 1: Martha calls in sick



Image 2: Martha and Diana



Image 3: Martha at the clinic