



each thing I show you is a piece of my death

Gemma Files and Stephen J. Barringer

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”
— *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*,
William Shakespeare.

From a journal found in a New Jersey storage unit, entry date unknown:

Somewhere, out beyond the too-often-unmapped intersection of known and forgotten, there's a hole through which the dead crawl back up to this world: A crack, a crevasse, a deep, dark cave. It splits the earth's crust like a canker, sore lips thrust wide to divulge some even sorer mouth beneath—tongueless, toothless, depthless.

The hole gapes, always open. It has no proper sense of proportion. It is rude and rough, rank and raw. When it breathes out it exhales nothing but poison, pure decay, so awful that people can smell it for miles around, even in their dreams.

Especially there.

Through this hole, the dead come out face-first and down, crawling like worms. They grind their mouths into cold

dirt, forcing a lifetime's unsaid words back inside again. As though the one thing their long, arduous journey home has taught them is that they have nothing left worth saying, after all.

Because the dead come up naked, they are always cold. Because they come up empty, they are always hungry. Because they come up lost, they are always angry. Because they come up blind, eyes shut tight against the light that hurts them so, they are difficult to see, unless sought by those who—for one reason, or another—already have a fairly good idea where to start looking.

To do so is a mistake, though, always—no matter how “good” our reasons, or intentions. It never leads to anything worth having. The dead are not meant to be seen or found, spoken with, or for. The dead are meant to be buried and forgotten, and everybody knows it—or should, if they think about it for more than a minute. If they're not some sort of Holy Fool marked from birth for sacrifice for the greater good of all around them, fore-doomed to grease entropy's wheels with their happy, clueless hearts' blood.

Everybody should, so everybody does, though nobody ever talks about it. Nobody. Everybody. Everybody . . .

. . . but them.

(The dead)

July 26/2009

FEATURE ARTICLE:

COMING SOON TO A DVD NEAR YOU?

**“BACKGROUND MAN” JUMPS FROM 'NET
TO . . . EVERYWHERE**

By Guillaume Lescroat, strangerthings.net/media

Moviegoers worldwide are still in an uproar over *Mother of Serpents*, Angelina Jolie's latest blockbuster, being pulled from theatres after only four days in wide release due to “unspecified technical problems.” According to confidential studio sources, however, the real problem isn't “unspecified” at all—this megabudget Hollywood flick has apparently become the Internet-spawned “Background Man” hoax's latest victim.

For over a year now, urban legend has claimed that, with the aid of careful frame-by-frame searches, an unclothed Caucasian male (often said to be wearing a red necklace) can be spotted in the background of crowd scenes in various obscure films, usually partially concealed by distance, picture blur or the body-parts of other extras. Despite a proliferation of websites dedicated to tracking Background Man (over thirty at last count), most serious film buffs dismissed the legend as a snipe-hunt joke for newbies, or a challenge for bored and talented Photoshoppers.

But all that changed when the Living Rejects video “Plastic Heart” hit MTV in September last year, only to be yanked from the airwaves in a storm of FCC charges after thousands of viewers confirmed a “full-frontally naked” man “wearing a red necklace” was clearly visible in the concert audience . . . a man that everybody, from the band members to the director, would later testify under oath *hadn’t been there* when the video was shot.

“You know the worst thing about looking for Background Man? While you’re waiting for him you gotta sit through the crappiest movies on the planet! C’mon, guy, pick an Oscar contender for once, wouldja?!”

— Conan O’Brien, *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*,
November 18, 2008

Background Man has since appeared in supporting web material for several TV shows (*House*, *Friday Night Lights* and *The Bill Engvall Show* have all been victims) and has been found in a number of direct-to-DVD releases as well, prompting even Conan O’Brien to work him into a monologue (see above). *Mother of Serpents* may not be the first major theatrical release to be affected, either; at least three other films this summer have pushed back their release dates already, though their studios remain cagey about the reasons. The current consensus is that Background Man is a prank by a gifted, highly-placed team of post-production professionals.

This theory, however, has problems, as producer Kevin Weir attests. “Anybody involved who got caught, their career,

their entire life would be wrecked,” says Weir. “Besides the fines and the criminal charges, it’s just totally f---ing unprofessional—nobody I know who *could* do this *would* do it; it’s like pissing all over your colleagues.” Film editor Samantha Perry agrees, and notes another problem: “I’ve reviewed at least three different appearances, and I couldn’t figure out how any of them were done, short of taking apart the raw footage. These guys have got tricks or machines I’ve never heard of.”

Hoax or hysteria, the Background Man shows no signs of disappearing. However, our own investigation may have yielded some insights into the mysterious figure’s origin—an origin intimately connected with the collapse last year of the Toronto-based “Wall of Love” film collective’s Kerato-Oblation/Cadavre Exquis project, brainchild of experimental filmmakers Soraya Mousch and Max Holborn . . .

From: Soraya Mousch sor16muse@walloflove.ca
Date: Friday, June 20, 2008, 7:08 PM
To: Max Holborn mhb@ca.inter.net
Subject: FUNDRAISING PITCH DOC: “KERATO-OBLATION”
(DRAFT 1)

To Whom it May Concern —

My name is Soraya Mousch, and I am an experimental filmmaker. Since 1999, when Max Holborn and I founded Toronto’s Wall of Love Experimental Film Collective, it has been my very great pleasure both to collaborate on and present a series of not-for-profit projects specifically designed to push — or even, potentially, demolish — the accepted boundaries of visual storytelling as art.

Unfortunately, given that film remains the single most expensive artistic medium, this sort of thing continues to cost money . . . indeed, with each year we practice it, it seems to cost more and more. Thus the necessity, once government grants and personal finances run out, of fundraising.

(mhb): <yeah, say it exactly like that, that’ll get us some money
[/sarc]>

To this end, Mr Holborn and I have registered an internet domain and website (kerato-oblation.org), through which we intend to compile, edit and host our next collaborative project, with the help of filmmakers from every country which currently has ISP access (ie, all of them). The structure of this project will be an exquisite corpse game applied to the web-based cultural scene as a whole, one that anybody can play (and every participant will “win”).

WHY KERATO-OBLATION?

Kerato-oblation: Physical reshaping of the cornea via scraping or cutting. With our own version — the aforementioned domain — how we plan to “reshape” our audience’s perspectives would be by applying the exquisite corpse game to an experimental feature film assembled from entries filed over the Internet, with absolutely no boundaries set as to content or intent.

WHAT IS AN EXQUISITE CORPSE?

An “exquisite corpse” (*cadavre exquis*, in French) is a method by which a collection of words or images are assembled by many different people working at once alone, and in tandem. Each collaborator adds to a composition in sequence, either by following a rule (e.g. “The *adjective noun adverb verb* the *adjective noun*”) or by being allowed to see, and either elaborate on or depart from, the end of what the previous person contributed. The technique was invented by Surrealists in 1925; the name is derived from a phrase that resulted when the game was first played (“Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau.”/“The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.”). It is similar to an old parlour game called Consequences in which players write in turn on a sheet of paper, fold it to conceal part of the writing, then pass it to the next player for a further contribution.

Later, the game was adapted to drawing and collage, producing a result similar to classic “mix-and-match” children’s books whose pages are cut into thirds, allowing children to assemble new chimeras from a selection of tripartite animals. It has also been played by mailing a drawing or collage — in progressive stages of completion — from one player to the next; this variation is known as “mail art.” Other applications of the game have since included computer graphics, theatrical

performance, musical composition, object assembly, even architectural design.

(mhb): <don't know if we need all this history, or the whole exquisite corpse thing -- just call it "spontaneous collaboration" or something? keep it short>

Earlier experiments in applying the exquisite corpse to film include *Mysterious Object at Noon*, an experimental 2000 Thai feature directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul which was shot on 16 mm over three years in various locations, and Cadavre Exquis, Première Edition, done for the 2006 Montreal World Film Festival, in which a group of ten film directors, scriptwriters and professional musicians fused filmmaking and songwriting to produce a musical based loosely on the legend of Faust.

(mhb): <the montreal things good, people might actually have seen that one -- one more example?>

For your convenience, we've attached a PDF form outlining several support options, with recommended donation levels included. Standard non-profit release waivers ensure that all contributors consent to submit their material for credit only, not financial recompense. By funnelling profits in excess of industry-standard salaries for ourselves back into the festival, we qualify for various tax deductions under current Canadian law and can provide charitable receipts for any and all financial donations made. Copies of the relevant paperwork are also attached, as a separate PDF.

For more information, or to discuss other ways of getting involved, either reply to this e-mail or contact us directly at (416)- [REDACTED]. We look forward to discussing mutual opportunities.

With best regards,
Soraya Mousch and Maxim Holborn
The Wall of Love Toronto Film Collective

(mhb): <for crissakes soraya DON'T SIGN ME AS MAXIM -- if I have to be there at all its just max, k?>

8/23/08 1847HRS

TRANSCRIPT SUSPECT INTERVIEW 51 DIVISION

CASEFILE #332

PRESIDING OFFICERS D. SUSAN CORREA 156232,

D. ERIC VALENS 324820

SUBJECT MAXIM HOLBORN

D.VALENS: All right. So you had this footage for what, better than six weeks—footage apparently showing somebody committing suicide—and you didn't ever think that maybe you should let the police know?

HOLBORN: People send us stuff like this all the time, man! The collective's been going since '98. Most of it's fake, half of it has a fake ID and half of the rest doesn't have any ID at all.

D.VALENS: Yeah, that's awful lucky for you, isn't it?

D.CORREA: Eric, any chance you could get us some coffee?

HOLBORN: I don't want coffee.

(D.VALENS LEFT INTERROGATION ROOM AT 1852 HRS)

D.CORREA: Max, I'm only telling you this because I really do think you don't know shit about this, but you need to do one of two things right now. You need to get yourself a lawyer, or you need to talk to us.

HOLBORN: What the fuck am I going to tell a lawyer that I didn't already tell you guys? What else do you want me to say?

D.CORREA: Max, you're our only connection to a dead body. This is not a good place to be. And your lawyer's going to tell you the same thing: the more you work with us, the better this is going to turn out for everyone.

HOLBORN: Yeah. Because that's an option.

From: 11235813@gmail.com

Date: Wednesday, June 25, 2008, 3:13 AM

To: submissions@kerato-oblation.org

Subject: Re: KERATO-OBLATION FILM PROJECT

To Whom It May Concern --

Please accept my apologies for not fully completing your submission form. I think the attached file is suitable enough for your purposes that you will find the missing information unnecessary, and feel comfortable including it in your exhibition nevertheless. I realize this will render it ineligible for

competition, but I hope you can show it as part of your line-up all the same.

Thank you.

VIRTUAL CELLULOID (vcelluloid.blogspot.com)

Alec Christian: Pushing Indie Film Forward Since 2004

<- [Rue Morgue Party](#) | [Main](#) | [Rumblings on the Turnpike](#) ->

July 23, 2008

“Wall of Love” Big Ten Launch Party

Got to hang out with two of my favourite people from the Scene last night at the Bovine Sex Club: Soraya Mousch and Max Holborn, the head honchos behind the Wall of Love collective. The dedication these guys’ve put into keeping their festivals going is nothing short of awesome, and last night’s launch party for the next one was actually their *tenth anniversary*. Most marriages I know don’t last that long these days. (Doubly weird, given Max and Soraya are that rarest of things, totally platonic best opposite-sex straight friends.)

For those who’ve been under a rock re the local artsy-fart scene over each and every one of those ten years, meanwhile, here’s a thumbnail sketch of the Odd Couple. First off, Soraya. Armenian, born in Beirut, World Vision supermodel-type glamorous. Does music videos to pay the bills, but her heart belongs to experimentalism. Thing to remember about Soraya is, she’s not real big on rules: When a York film professor told her she’d have to shift mediums for her final assignment, she ended up shooting it all on her favorite anyways (8mm), then gluing it to 16mm stock for the screening. This is about as crazy as Stan Brakhage gluing actual dead-ass *moths* to the emulsion of his film *Mothlight* . . . and if you don’t know what *that* is either, man, just go screw. I despair of ya.

Then there’s Max: White as a sack of sheets, Canadian as a beaver made out of maple sugar. Meticulous and meta, uber-interpretive. Assembles narratives from found footage,

laying in voiceovers to make it all make (a sort of) sense. Also a little OCD in the hands-on department, this dude tie-dyes his own films by swishing them around in food-color while they're still developing, then "bakes" them by running them through a low-heat dryer cycle, letting the emulsion blister and fragment. The result: Some pretty trippy shit, even if you're not watching it stoned.

Anyways. With fest season coming up fast, M. and S. are in the middle of assembling this huge film collage made from snippets people posted chain-letter-style. You might think this sounds like kind of a dog's breakfast, and any other self-proclaimed indie genius you'd be right. But S. took me in the back and showed me some of the files they hadn't got to yet, and man, there's some damn raw footage in there, if ya know what I mean; even freaked *her* out. So if you're looking for something a little less *Saw* and a little more *Chien Andalou*, check it out: October 10, the Speed of Pain . . .

From: Soraya Mousch sor16muse@walloflove.ca
Date: Wednesday, June 25, 3:22 PM
To: Max Holborn mhb@ca.inter.net
Subject: Check this file out!

Max --

Sorry about the size of this file, I'd normally send it to your edit suite but it's got some kind of weird formatting -- missing some of the normal protocols -- I don't have time to dick around with your firewalls. Anyway, YOU NEED TO SEE THIS. Get back in touch with me once you have!

From: Soraya Mousch sor16muse@walloflove.ca
Date: Wednesday, June 25, 3:24 PM
To: Max Holborn mhb@ca.inter.net
Subject: Apology followup

Max: Realized I might've come off a little bitchy in that last message, wanted to apologize. I know you've got a lot of shit on your plate with Liat (how'd the CAT-scan go, BTW?); last thing I want to do is make your life harder. You know how it goes when

the deadline's coming down.

Seriously, though, the sooner we can turn this one around, like ASAP, the better -- I think this one could really break us wide open. If you could get back to me by five with something, anything, I'd be really grateful. Thanks in advance.

See you Sunday, either way,
Soraya.

From: Max Holborn mhb@ca.inter.net
Date: Wednesday, June 25, 4:10 PM
To: Soraya Mousch sor16muse@walloflove.ca
Subject: Re: Apology followup

S.--

cat-scan wasn't so great, tell you bout it later. got your file, i'm about to review. i'll im you when it's done.
m.

TRANSCRIPT CHAT LOG
06/25/08 1626-1633

<max_hdb>: soraya? u there?

<sor16muse>: so whatd you think?

<max_hdb>: jesus soraya, w?t?f? who sent THIS in? even legal to show?

<max_hdb>: I didnt get into this to go to jail

<sor16muse>: message came in from a numbered gmail account, no sig – check out the file specs?

<sor16muse>: relax max – we didnt make it, no way anybody cn prove we did, got to be digital dupe of a tape loop

<max_hdb>: yeah, I lkd at specs – these guys know tricks I don't. u can mask creation datestamp in properties to make it LOOK blank, bt not supposed to be any way to actually wipe that data out without disabling file

<sor16muse>: my guess is the originals at least 50 yrs old

<sor16muse>: max, we cant NOT show this

<max_hdb>: gotta gt somebody to lk/@ it first – im not hanging my ass out in th/wind

<sor16muse>: why don't we meet @ laszlos? he can run it through his shit, see what pops

<max_hdb>: don't like him. his house smells like toilet mold,
hes a freak
<sor16muse>: whatever, hes got the best film-to-flash
download system in the city doesnt cost \$500 daily
rental, so just grow a fucking pair
<max_hdb>: you know he tapes every conversation goes on in
there, right? wtf w/that?
<sor16muse>: (User sor16muse has disconnected)
<max_hdb>: and btw, next time you wanna show me shit like
that try thinking about liat first
<max_hdb>: (User max_hdb has disconnected)

July 26/2009
"BACKGROUND MAN", Lescroat,
strangerthings.net/media
(cont'd)

"That original clip? Hands down, some of the scariest amateur shit I've ever seen in my life," says local indie critic/ promoter Alec Christian, self-proclaimed popularizer of the "Toronto Weird" low-budget horror culture movement. "A little bit of *Blair Witch* to it, obviously, but a lot more of early Nine Inch Nails videos, Jorg Buttgereit and Elias Merhige. That moment when you realize the guy's body is rotting in front of you? Pure *Der Todesking* reference, and you don't get those a lot, 'cause most of the people doing real-time horror are total self-taught illiterates about their own history."

Asked if there's any way the clip might be genuine, rather than staged, Christian laughs almost wistfully. "Some people still think *Blair Witch* was real; doesn't make it so," he points out. "Anyway, think about how hard it would be to shoot this using World War One technology and logistics, at the latest, which is what we'd be looking at if it was real—and if it was filmed later but aged to look older, then everything else could have been engineered as well. Sometimes you just have to go with common sense."

TRANSCRIPT EVIDENCE EXHIBIT #3 51 DIVISION
CASEFILE #332
RECOVERY LOCATION 42 TRINITY STREET BSMT
DATE 8/20/2008

Item: 89.2 MB .MPG file retrieved from hard drive of laptop SONY VAIO X372 s/n 10352835A, prop. M. Holborn, duration 15m07s.

0:00 – (All images recorded in black-and-white monochrome.)
Caucasian male subject (Subject A), 40s, est. 6'1", 165 lbs, dark hair, wearing black or brown suit appearing to be 1920s cut, shown sitting in upright wooden chair looking directly at camera. Room is a single chamber, est. 8' x 10', hardwood floor, one window behind subject, one door in right-hand wall at rear. No painting or other decoration visible on walls. Angle of light from window suggests filming began early morning; light traverses screen in right-to-left direction, suggesting southward facing of window and room. Unknown subject has no discernible expression.

0:01-4:55 – Subject A rises and removes clothes, beginning with detachable celluloid collar. Each garment removed separately, folded and placed on floor. Care and placing of garment removal suggests ritual purpose. Subject is shown to be uncircumcised. Subject continues no discernible facial expression.

4:55-5:19 – Subject A resumes seat and looks straight into camera without movement or speech. Enhanced magnification and review of subject's right hand reveals indeterminate object, most likely taken from clothing during removal.

5:20-5:23 – Subject A opens object in hand, demonstrating it to be a straight razor. Subject cuts own throat in two angular incisions, transverse to one another. Strength and immediacy of blood flow indicates both carotid and jugular cut. Evenness and control of movement suggests anesthesia or psychosis. Review by F/X technicians confirms cuts too deep to have been staged without use of puppets or animatronics. Subject maintains lack of facial expression.

5:23-6:08 – Subject A's self-exsanguination continues until consciousness appears lost. Subject collapses in chair, head draped over back.

6:09 – Estimated time of death for Subject A.

6:11 – Razor released from subject's fingers, drops to floor.

6:12 – 13:34 – Clip switches from real-time pacing to timelapse speed, shown by rapidity of daylight movement and day-night

transitions. Reconstruction analysis specifies 87 24-hour periods elapse during this segment. Subject's body shown decomposing at accelerated pace.

7:22 – Primary liquefaction complete; dessication begins. Clothes left on floor have developed mold.

10:41 – Dessication largely complete. Rust visible on blade of razor. Fungal infestation on clothes has spread to floorboards.

13:10 – Subject's cranium detaches and falls to floor.

13:17 – Subject's right hand detaches and falls to floor.

13:25 – Subject's left arm detaches and falls to floor. Imbalance in weight causes remains of subject's body to fall off chair.

13:34 – Decomposition process complete. Footage resumes normal real-time pacing.

14:41 – Subject B walks into frame from behind camera P.O.V. Subject B's appearance 100% consistent in identity with initial Subject A, including lack of circumcision and identifiable body marks. Remains of Subject A still visible behind Subject B.

15:01 – Subject B bends down in front of camera and looks into it. Subject B shows no discernible facial expression.

15:06 – Subject B reaches above and behind camera viewpoint.

15:07 – CLIP ENDS

TRANSCRIPT EVIDENCE EXHIBIT #2 51 DIVISION
CASEFILE #332

RECOVERY LOCATION 532 OSSINGTON AVENUE BSMT
RESIDENCE LASZLO P HURT DATE 8/19/2008
AUDIOTAPE PROPERTY OF LASZLO P HURT

(IDENTIFICATION RETROACTIVELY ASSIGNED TO VOICES
FOLLOWING CONFIRMATION FROM M HOLBORN AND S
MOUSCH OF CONTENT)

V1 (MOUSCH): (LOUD) . . . see, here it is. Never see it if you weren't looking for it.

V2 (HOLBORN): (LOUD) Shit. He really does have his own place bugged. What's this for? Legal protection?

V1 (MOUSCH): (VOL. DECREASING) Maybe, but I think it's really just because he wants to. Like his whole life is a big cumulative performance art piece. Sort of like in that Robin Williams movie, where people have cameras in their heads, and

Robin has to cut a little film together when they die to sum up fifty years of experience?

V2 (HOLBORN): Yeah. That really sucked.

V1 (MOUSCH): I know. Just . . . keep it in mind, that's all I'm saying.
(BG NOISE: TOILET FLUSH)

V3 (HURT): Sorry about that. I haven't got new filters put in on the tapwater yet.

V2 (HOLBORN): That's . . . okay, Laszlo.

V3 (HURT): Yeah, you want some helpful input? Try not patronizing me.

V1 (MOUSCH): Laz, come on.

V3 (HURT): Yeah, okay, okay. So I reviewed your file.

V2 (HOLBORN): And?

V3 (HURT): First thing comes to mind is a story I heard through the post grapevine, one of those boojum-type obscurities the really crazy collectors go nuts trying to find. Though this can't be that, obviously, the clip would be way older, not digitized—

V1 (MOUSCH): People digitize old stuff all the time!

V3 (HURT): Really? Yeah, Soraya, I get that, actually; do it for a living, right? Look, the upshot is that you do have some deliberate image degradation going on here, so—

V2 (HOLBORN): I knew it, I knew it was a fake. Thank Christ.

V3 (HURT): I'm not finished. There is image degradation, but it wasn't done through any of the major editing programs; I've run your file through all of them and tested for the relevant coding, and this thing's about as raw as digicam gets. I'm betting whoever sent this to you digitized it the old brute-force way, like a movie pirate: Physically projected the thing, recorded it with a digital camera, saved it as your .mpeg, and sent it to you as is. Whatever the distortions are, they're either from that projection, or they were in the source clip all along.

V1 (MOUSCH): So . . . this could be a direct copy of that original clip you were talking about. The urban legend boojum.

V3 (HURT): Yeah, if you wanna buy into that shit.

V2 (HOLBORN): And when Laszlo Hurt tells you something's too weird to believe . . .

V1 (MOUSCH): Max, don't be a dick; Laz's doing us a favour. Right?

V2 (HOLBORN): Yeah, okay. Sorry.

V3 (HURT): (PAUSE) Way I heard, it goes back to this turn-of-the-century murderess called Tess Jacopo . . .

8/23/08 1902HRS

TRANSCRIPT SUSPECT INTERVIEW 51 DIVISION

CASEFILE #332

PRESIDING OFFICERS D. SUSAN CORREA 156232,

D. ERIC VALENS 324820

SUBJECT MAXIM HOLBORN

D.VALENS: Jacopo. That was in Boston, in the 1900s—she was a Belle Gunness-type den mother killer, right? The female H.H. Holmes.

HOLBORN: Why am I not surprised you know this?

D.CORREA: Mr Holborn, please. Go on.

HOLBORN: The story isn't really about Jacopo herself. What happened was, this guy who'd been corresponding with Jacopo in prison, her stalker I guess he was, he managed to bribe a journalist who was on-site at her execution into stealing a copy of the official death-photo and selling it to him. Guess he wanted something to whack off with after she was gone. Anyway, a couple weeks later this guy's found in his flat, dead and swollen up, the Jacopo photo on his chest.

D.CORREA: How did he die?

HOLBORN: I don't think it matters. The point is, somebody there took a photo of the photo, and that became one of the biggest murder memorabilia items of the 20th century. You know these guys, right—kinda weirdos who buy John Wayne Gacy's clown pictures, shell out thousands to get Black Dahlia screen-test footage, 'cause they think they'll unearth some lost snuff movie they can show all their friends . . .

D.VALENS: I'm not seeing what this has to do with your film clip, Mr. Holborn.

HOLBORN: Okay. This is where the urban legend kicks in. See, Jacopo's mask slipped a bit during the hanging, so you can just barely see a sliver of her eyeball, and the story says if you blow up and enhance the photo like a hundred times original size, you're supposed to be able to see in the eyeball the reflection of what she was looking at when she died. Like an asphyx.

D.VALENS: Ass-what?

HOLBORN: It's the word the Greeks used for the last image that gets burned on a murdered person's retina, like a last little fragment of their soul or life-force getting trapped there.

D.CORREA: And under sufficient magnification, you're supposed to be able to see this?

HOLBORN: "Supposed to," yeah. Thing is, everyone who ever tried this, who actually tried blowing up their copy of the Jacopo photo?

Went nuts or died. Unless they burned their photo before things got too bad. That's supposed to be why it's impossible to find any copies.

D.CORREA: Why? What did they see?

HOLBORN: How the fuck should I know? It's a spook story. Maybe they saw themselves looking back at themselves, whatever. The point is . . . it's not about what those people saw, or didn't. It's about the kind of voyeuristic obsession you need to go that deep into this shit. And Laszlo said that was what the clip reminded him of. Somebody trying to make some kind of, of—"mind-bomb," was the term. An image that'd scar you so badly, the mere act of passing it on would be enough to always keep its power alive.

D.CORREA: Uh . . . why?

HOLBORN: Excellent question. Isn't it?

From: Liat Holborn <liath@ca.inter.net>

Date: Thursday, July 3, 10:25 AM

To: Soraya Mousch <sor16muse@walloflove.ca>

Subject: Max and me

Dear Soraya,

I was talking to Max last night about how we're going to try to handle the next few months, and it came out that for whatever reason, Max still hadn't filled you in completely on our situation. I think he finds it pretty tough to talk about, even to you. Upshot is, the last CAT-scan showed I have an advanced cranial tumour, and Dr. Lalwani thinks there's a very good chance it could be gliomal, which (skipping all the medico-babble) is about the least good news we could get. Apparently, it's too deep for surgery, so the only option we have is for me to go into a majorly heavy chemo program ASAP. So I'm going to be spending a lot of time in St. Michael's, starting real soon now.

My folks've volunteered to foot a lot of the bill, which is great, but poor Max is feeling kind of humiliated at needing the help – and of course he totally can't complain about it, which just makes it gall him even more. The reason I'm telling you all this is because (a) I want the pressure of keeping this a secret to be off Max, and (b) I know how much you depend on Max this time of year, and I don't want you to think he's bailing on you if he has to take time out for me, or that he's finally gotten fed up with you, the Wall of Love, or your work.

(Actually, I'm pretty sure the festival's the only thing that's kept him stable this past little while. I hope you know how much I appreciate the support you give him.)

Could you show this e-mail to Max when you get a chance, and apologize to him for me when he blows his top at my big mouth? :) He doesn't feel he can shout at me any more about anything, obviously. But I really think things'll be easier once all the cards are on the table.

Thanks so much for your help, Soraya. Come by and see me soon – I want you to get some photos of me before I have to ditch the hair.

Much love and God bless,
Liat

P.S.: BTW, I'm also totally fine with accidentally seeing that thing you sent Max, that file or whatever, so tell him that, okay? *Impress it* on him. He seems to think it "injured" me somehow – on top of everything else. Which is just ridiculous.

I have more than enough real things to worry about right now, you know?

– L.

8/23/08 1928HRS
TRANSCRIPT SUSPECT INTERVIEW 51 DIVISION
CASEFILE #332
PRESIDING OFFICERS D. SUSAN CORREA 156232,
D. ERIC VALENS 324820
SUBJECT MAXIM HOLBORN

HOLBORN: We were on about the third or fourth draft of the final mix when we started splicing in the clip—

D.VALENS: Splicing? I thought you said this was purely electronic.

HOLBORN: It is, it's just the standard term for—look, do you want me to explain or not?

D.CORREA: We do. Please. Go on.

HOLBORN: We broke the clip up into segments and spliced it in among the rest of the film in chunks; we were even going to try showing some shots on just the edge of subliminal, like three or four frames out of twenty-four. This was a few weeks ago, beginning of August. And then it started happening.

D.CORREA: What started, Max?

HOLBORN: The guy. From the clip. He started . . . appearing . . . in other parts of the film.

D.VALENS: Somebody spliced in more footage? Repeats?

HOLBORN: No, goddammit, he started popping up in pieces of footage that were already in the film! Stuff we'd gotten like weeks before, from people who never even saw the clip or knew about it. Like that performance art piece in Hyde Park? Guy walks by in the background a minute into the clip. Or the subway zombie ride, you look right at the far end of the car, there he is sitting down, and you know it's him 'cause he's the only one not wearing any clothes. This was stuff nobody ever shot, man! Changing in front of our fucking eyes! Christ, I saw him show up in one segment—I ran it to make sure it was clear, ran it again right away and he was just fucking there, like he'd always been in the frame. The extras were fucking walking around him . . .

(FIVE SECOND PAUSE)

D.CORREA: Could it have been some kind of computer virus?

Something that came in with your original video file and reprogrammed the files it was spliced into?

HOLBORN: Are you shitting me?!

D.VALENS: Dial it back, Holborn. Right—now.

HOLBORN: Okay, sorry, but—no. CGI like that takes hours to render on a system ten times the size of mine, and that's for every single appearance. A virus carrying that kinda programming would be fifty times bigger than the file it rode in on and wouldn't run on my system anyway.

Besides, it kept getting worse. He didn't just show up in new segments, he'd take more and more prominent places in segments he'd already, corrupted, I guess? Goes from five seconds in the background to two minutes in the medium frame. I'd get people to resend me their submissions, I'd splice 'em in to replace the old ones and inside of a minute he's back in the action. It was like the faster we tried to cut him out the harder he worked at—I don't know—entrenching himself.

the thing with the photo, and thought: Oh hey, wonder how that'd work with a moving picture. Maybe he just stumbled across the concept all on his lonesome, or by accident: I don't know. But . . . he did it.

D.VALENS: Did what, Holborn?

HOLBORN: He put himself in there. Made himself an asphyx.

D.CORREA: So he could live forever.

HOLBORN: Yeah. Maybe. Or maybe just . . . so he could . . . not die. Maybe—

(TEN SECOND PAUSE)

HOLBORN: Maybe he was sick. Like, really sick. Or sick in the head. Or both. Maybe it just seemed like a good idea, given the alternative. At the time.

D.CORREA: So what did happen to the Wall of Love mainframe, Max?

HOLBORN: I crashed it. (BEAT) I mean—I told people there was a big Avid crash and the whole server got wiped . . . actually, I used a magnet. Like Dean Winchester in that “Ghostfacers!” ‘Supernatural’ episode.

D.VALENS: What?

HOLBORN: Doesn't matter. Ask me why.

D.CORREA: . . . why?

HOLBORN: Because I thought maybe I could trap him there, like he must have trapped himself inside that loop. Because he probably didn't think about that, right? When he was doing it. How it wasn't likely anybody was really going to watch that sort of shit, once they figured out what it was, let alone show it in public. How probably it would just end up left in the can, passed from collector to collector, never really watched at all, except by one person at a time. One . . . very disturbed . . . other person.

I thought I could stop him from going any further, so I crashed my own mainframe, without telling Soraya. But . . .

D.VALENS: . . . it didn't work.

HOLBORN: Well. Would I even be here, if it did?

CYBER-CRIME OFFICE,
TORONTO POLICE SERVICE 51 DIVISION
EXCERPTED REPORT
DETECTIVE LEWIS McMASTER (CYBERCRIME) SUPERVISING
DETECTIVES ERIC VALENS, SUSAN CORREA (HOMICIDE)
CONTRIBUTING
Casefile #332: Notes

INITIAL CONTACT:

Aug 14 2008 – CyberCrime received anonymous email sent from Hotmail account created that morning, with copy of “suicide guy” .mpg attached. Flagged as “harmful matter”. Email noted .mpg was sent to kerato-oblacion.org as experimental film clip submission; identified source of original message, webmail address 11235813@gmail.com.

[Hotmail account eventually traced through Internet café to Laszlo Hurt, known member of local Toronto “collector” circuit; Hurt now missing, presumed deceased based on evidence found in subject’s apartment. —EV, SC]

INVESTIGATION:

August 15 – Flagged file screened and sent for forensic analysis, results inconclusive. Source of original submission email traced to Google-owned server in Newark, New Jersey, United States of America.

August 16 – Established contact with Detective Herschel Gohan of Newark CyberCrime Unit, who persuaded server admins to cooperate with investigation; message back-tracked and triangulated to establish physical location and address of originator machine. Address is confirmed as unit #B325 of E-Z-SHELF storage locker facility, 1400 South Woodward Lane, Newark. Facility manager, Mr. Silvio Galbi, provides name of renter (“John Smith”), confirms unit prepaid for six months with cash. Mr. Galbi refuses to cooperate with search request without a warrant.

August 18 – Warrant issued for search and seizure operation at 1400 South Woodward, Unit #B325, by Judge Harriet Lindstrom. Operation executed under supervision of Detective Gohan. Contents of unit as follows:

1. Unclothed body of unidentified male, Caucasian, est. premortem age mid-20s, seated on floor in pool of waste.
2. One (1) empty film canister.
3. One (1) 35mm film projector, set up to project upon unit interior wall.
4. One (1) 35mm film reel mounted in projector, est. 15 minutes in length, confirmed on-site to be original of transmitted .mpg file.
5. One (1) white cotton sheet at base of same interior wall; tape on corners indicates sheet was hung on wall.
6. One (1) SONY video camera, with tripod, set up focused on same interior wall.

7. One (1) TV monitor, with built-in VCR and DVD player.
8. One (1) DELL laptop computer, with built-in wi-fi modem.
9. One (1) Coleman oil lantern, fuel supply depleted.
10. Pile of empty water bottles.
11. One (1) Black & Decker emergency brand power generator.
12. Fifty (50) gallon gasoline containers, empty.
13. Two (2) six-socket power bar outlets.
14. One (1) tube-gun of industrial caulking sealant.
15. One (1) journal with handwritten notes.

Galbi confirms he accepted illegal payment to lock unit on “Smith’s” written instructions without confirming contents, in violation of state safety and insurance regulations. Galbi arrested and cited.

FORENSICS:

Examination of laptop hard drive reveals series of webcam captures which suggest basic chronology of events as follows:

1. Unidentified male (UM) arrives in unit roughly two weeks before email sent to kerato-oblacion.org.
2. UM uses video camera to record digital copy of original film reel from wall projection (distortion visible in .mpg file caused by loose fabric in sheet).
3. UM uses laptop to program recorded file into continuous video loop on DVD.
4. UM arranges laptop and webcam to face DVD monitor, setting DVD on continuous play and webcam on indefinite record.
5. UM remains seated in front of monitor for majority of remaining time, urinating and defecating in place. Time-signatures confirm he created .mpg file, wrote submission email, then waited until death was imminent to send it, on date above.
6. Final action of UM on morning of death was to use sealant gun to caulk up door, rendering unit virtually airtight. This prevented odors from escaping unit, and retarded decomposition by hindering evaporation of fluids from the body.

AUTOPSY:

Body shows no sign of struggle or restraint. Autopsy reveals primary cause of death as oxygen deprivation, aggravated by starvation and dehydration. Probable date of death on or around June 25 2008 (date

on which .mpg file was sent to kerato-oblacion.org). Corneas of victim preserved by airtight environment, and found to be deformed on both exterior and interior surfaces, damage suggesting both physical and heat trauma to tissue. Computer reconstruction of deformation suggests artificial origin, as pattern appears to portray a fixed image: the face of suicide victim in original film, in close-up still frame. Pathologists unable to establish cause or method of corneal deformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Unidentified male's selection of Holborn/Mousch as recipients suggests foreknowledge, possible contact. Recommend either Holborn or Mousch be brought in for further questioning.

From: Det. Herschel Gohan <hgochan@newarkpolice.gov>
Date: Thursday, August 21, 7:20 AM
To: Det. Lewis McMaster <lewis.mcmaster@torpolservices.net>
Subject: Notification: Evidence compromise

Lewis —

Bad news. We had a fire in our station evidence locker last night; looks like some meth really past its sell-by date may have spontaneously cooked off. Nobody hurt, but we lost some critical evidence on a number of cases, including, sorry to say, your film-nut-in-the-storage-unit material. The film reel's melted, the laptop motherboard is gone, and most of the other equipment's unusable now. I've attached .jpgs to document the losses; I'm hoping this'll be enough for your dept. to maintain provenance on your own stuff.

Sorry again; call me if you need to know anything not covered by the pictures.

— Herschel

8/23/08 1928HRS
TRANSCRIPT SUSPECT INTERVIEW 51 DIVISION
CASEFILE #332
PRESIDING OFFICERS D. SUSAN CORREA 156232,
D. ERIC VALENS 324820
SUBJECT MAXIM HOLBORN

HOLBORN: So I went home after crashing the mainframe, and I didn't go upstairs, because I thought my wife was asleep. And I wanted to let her sleep, because . . . she'd been in pretty bad shape, you know? She'd only just finished her chemo, she hadn't gotten a lot of . . . sleep . . .

But then I turned on TCM, to relax, and they were playing Richard Burton's adaptation of 'Dr. Faustus,' which was made the year before I was born, and—in the scene in the Vatican? Where Faustus is throwing pies at the Pope? I saw him. That guy.

Stuck around, kept watching; the next film was from 1944, and he was in it too. In the background, until—it was like—he notices me watching him. Turns and smiles at me, raises his eyebrow, starts—coming closer.

I swear to God, I jumped back. If Cagney hadn't been in the way—

And then it was Silent Sunday, some all-night Chaplin retrospective, and . . . yeah. There, too.

Everywhere.

So . . .

D.VALENS: Obviously not.

HOLBORN: Obviously.

[TEN SECOND PAUSE]

HOLBORN: My wife wasn't asleep, either, by the way. Just in case you were wondering.

D.VALENS: Aw, what the fuck—

D.CORREA: Shut up, Eric. [To HOLBORN] Look, you can't be serious, that's all. Are we supposed to believe—

HOLBORN: I don't give a fuck what you believe. Seriously.

D.CORREA: Okay. So what about the disappearance of Laszlo Hurt?

[FIFTEEN SECOND PAUSE]

HOLBORN: I don't know anything about that.

D.VALENS: And again: We should believe you on this . . . why?

[FIFTEEN SECOND PAUSE]

D.CORREA: Mister Holborn?

HOLBORN: . . . you know, I don't know if you guys know this or not, but . . . my wife? Just died. So, in the immortal words of every 'Law And Order' episode ever filmed—charge me with something, or let me go. Or fuck the fuck off.

From: qmail@ca.geocities.com
Date: Saturday, August 16, 9:45 PM
To: Soraya Mousch <sor16muse@walloflove.ca>
Subject: RE: LASZLO ANSWER ME

Hi. This is the administrator at qmail@geocities.com (00:15:32:A3)
Delivery of your message to {lazhurt@geocities.com} failed
after <15> attempts. Address not recognized by system.

This is a permanent error; I've given up.

>Laszlo, it's Soraya, would you CALL ME PLEASE? I've left
>about twenty messages on your voicemail, Max and I have a big
>problem and we need your HELP! Where the fuck are you?
>Call me!
>S.

From: <help@geocities.com>
Date: Monday, August 18, 8:55 AM
To: Soraya Mousch <sor16muse@walloflove.ca>
Subject: RE: Account Tracking Request

Dear Ms. Mousch,

Sorry it took us so long to get back to you; we get a lot of backlog on weekends. I'm afraid I have to admit we're stumped on this one. I personally went through our server records day by day over the registration period you specified, and as far as I can tell, we have no record whatsoever of a "Laszlo Hurt" on our roster. I've checked under the "lazhurt", "laszloslabyrinth", and "hurtmedia" addresses and their variants, as well as with our billing department, and there's just no indication that this Mr. Hurt was ever a Geocities user.

I realize this may be an unwelcome explanation, but it sounds to me like you may have been a victim of an attempted phishing scam using dummy-mask addresses. I'd get your computer checked for viruses and malware right away.

Again, I'm sorry we couldn't be more help.

Best regards,
Jamil Chandrasekhar
Geocities.com Tech Support

From: Soraya Mousch <sor16muse@walloflove.ca>
Date: Saturday, August 23, 11:01 PM
To: Max Holborn <mhb@ca.inter.net>
Subject: Blank

Max, I'm just so sorry.
– S.

YOUR COMFORT SOUGHT
IN THIS TIME OF GRIEF

With sorrow we announce the passing of Liat Allyson Meester-Holborn on August 23, 2008, beloved daughter of Aaron and Rachel Meester and wife of Maxim Holborn.

Funeral service to be held at
St. Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church,
8 Elizabeth Avenue, Port Credit, Mississauga
Tuesday August 26, 11:00 A.M.

Commemorative reception
to be held at the Meester residence,
1132 Walden Road #744, 3:00 P.M.
Confirmations only

From: Max Holborn <mhb@ca.inter.net>
Date: Tuesday, September 2, 2:31 AM
To: Soraya Mousch <sor16muse@walloflove.ca>
Subject: look closer

s.–

hospital released the file on liat to me today. was going over it. couldn't sleep. found something.

the attached .jpg's a scan of the last x-ray they took, just before she crashed out. look at the upper right quarter, just up and right of where ribs meet breastbone. then do a b-w negative reverse on the image in your photoshop, and look again.

it's not a glitch. it's not me fucking with you. look at it.
call me.

– m.

SURVEILLANCE TRANSCRIPT 14952, CASEFILE #332
9/19/08 2259H-2302H 416-[REDACTED] TO 416-[REDACTED]
WARRANT AUTHORIZED HON. R. BORCHERT 9/9/08

(CONNECTION INITIATED)

MOUSCH: Hello?

HOLBORN: You never answered my e-mail.

MOUSCH: What did you want me to say? I read it, I looked at the scans you sent. That . . . could be anything, Max. A glitch in the machine, some lab tech sticking his hand on the negative—

HOLBORN: Soraya—

MOUSCH: —and even if it's not, what's it matter? What difference can it make? (PAUSE) I'm sorry, Max. I didn't—I'm sorry.

HOLBORN: Uh huh.

(PAUSE)

HOLBORN: So . . . I hear you put your stuff up on eBay. Going Luddite?

MOUSCH: Well, uh . . . no, I'm just switching disciplines. Going non-visual. Film's . . . all played out, y'know? I mean, you've noticed that.

HOLBORN: Yup. Good luck, I guess. (BEAT) Everything just back to normal, huh?

MOUSCH: . . . hardly . . .

HOLBORN: You really think any of this is gonna help? Dropping anything with a lens like it's hot, cocooning?

MOUSCH: I don't . . .

HOLBORN: You remember what I told you, at the hospital?

(FIVE SECOND PAUSE)

MOUSCH: . . . I remember.

HOLBORN: That guy killed my wife, Soraya. Just because she saw him—over my shoulder, right? When she didn't even know what she was looking at. She's fucking dead.

MOUSCH: Liat's dead because she had a tumor, Max. Nothing we did made Liat die.

HOLBORN: What do you think he's going to end up doing to us, Soraya? After he's fucking well done with everybody else?

MOUSCH: Look . . . Look, Max, Christ. Liat, Laszlo, even that crazy fucking moron dude who made the clip in the first place, let alone sent it

to us . . . (BEAT) And why would he even do that, anyway? To, what . . . ?

HOLBORN: I don't know. Spread the disease, maybe. Like he got tired of watching it himself, thought everybody else should have a crack at it, too . . .

(FIVE SECOND PAUSE)

MOUSCH: I mean . . . it's not our fault, right? Any of it. We didn't ask for—

HOLBORN: —uh, no, Soraya. We did. Literally. We asked, threw it out into the ether: Send us your shit. Show us something. We asked . . . and he answered.

MOUSCH: Who, "he"? Clip-making dude?

HOLBORN: You know that's not who I'm talking about.

(TEN SECOND PAUSE)

HOLBORN: So, anyhow, 'bye. You're going dark, and I'm dropping off the map. I'd say "see you," but—

MOUSCH: Oh, Max, Goddamn . . .

HOLBORN: —I'm really hoping . . . not.

(CONNECTION TERMINATED)

OFFICE OF FORENSICS
TORONTO POLICE SERVICE 51 DIVISION
EXCERPTED REPORT
Casefile #332

Final analysis of X-ray images taken of Liat Holborn (dcsd) shows no known cause of observed photographic anomaly. Hand-digit comparison was conducted on all possible candidates, including Maxim Holborn, attending physician Dr. Raj Lalwani, attending nurse Yvonne Delacoeur, and X-ray technician John Li Cheng: no match found. Dr. Lalwani maintains statement that cause of death for Liat Holborn was gliomal tumour. Conclusion: Photographic anomaly is spontaneous malfunction, resemblance to intact human hand coincidental.

Following lack of forensic connection between Maxim Holborn and Site of Death 1, and failure to establish viable suspect, this office recommends suspension of Case #332 from active investigation at this time, pending further evidence.

July 26/2009

“BACKGROUND MAN”, Lescroat,
strangerthings.net/media
(cont’d)

One year later, the crash which brought kerato-oblation.org/cadavrexquis down—melting the server and destroying a seventy-four minute installation cobbled together from random .mpg snippets e-mailed in from contributors all over the world—has yet to be fully explained, by either Wall of Love founder. While Mousch cited simple overcrowding and editing program fatigue for the project’s collapse, Holborn—already under stress when Kerato-Oblation got underway, due to his wife’s battle with brain cancer—has been quoted on Alec Christian’s blog as blaming a slightly more supernatural issue: a mysterious figure who appeared first in an anonymously-submitted pieces of digital footage, then eventually began popping up in the backgrounds of other . . . completely unrelated . . . sections. Background Man? Impossible to confirm or deny, without Holborn’s help.

Still, sightings of a naked man wearing “red” around his neck wandering through the fore-, back- and midground of perfectly mainstream movies, TV shows and musics videos continue to abound. Recent internet surveys chart at least five major recent blockbusters (besides *Mother of Serpents*) and three primetime television series rumored to have inadvertently showcased the figure.

At the moment, the (highly unlikely) possibility of pan-studio collaboration on a vast alternate-reality game remains unresolved, while at least three genuine missing persons reports are rumored to be connected with a purported Background Man personal encounter IRL. The meme, if meme it is, continues to spread.

Neither Mousch nor Holborn could be reached for comment on this article.

. . . and up they come—

(the dead)

*Crawling through the hole with their pale hands
bloody from digging, their blind eyes tight-shut and their
wide-open mouths full of mud: Nameless, faceless, groping
for anything that happens across their path. With no easy end
to their numbers . . .*

*(For once such a door is opened, who will shut it
again? Who is there—*

—alive—

—that can?)

*No end to their numbers, or their need: The dead, who
are never satisfied. The dead, who cannot be assuaged.*

*The dead, who only want but no longer know what, or
from who, or why. Or just how much, over just how long—
here in their hole which goes on and down forever, where time
itself slows so much it no longer has any real value—*

—can ever be enough.