

The Halftime Show: Conversation, over email between Jesse Fleming, Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, and Lewis Pesacov

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: Kablooney! OK, so it appears you made some kind of masterpiece. Beyond offering lush, beautiful, and impeccably shot images to pore over, *The Halftime Show* is just so damn strong and polished. It's a tight statement—a complete, bowl-you-over kind of video sentence, which is not to say closed, uncomplicated, or unambiguous in any way. It feels powerful and effective and, by the end, the structure of the piece as a whole clicks into place like an epiphany. On a certain level, it is so effective on its own and explains itself that it doesn't need verbiage to surround it. You have captured and depicted a certain, precise 'meditation' consciousness and shown how its flow state-of-mind, its whirring stillness is experienced in a range of real social and natural environments. It works. On another level, I have lots of questions!

The whole video feels mind-altering, maybe like an alien percept or, more likely, like a levitated state of mindfulness and hyper attunement that attends to the interior and the social with an engagement that is paradoxically detached and deeply present. Leaving audio activations to the side for the moment, there are two main visual qualities you cultivate throughout the video that are primary to the defamiliarization and altered state you achieve: soft focus and slow-motion time. We can talk about time first because the super sharp focus of *The Halftime Show*'s gorgeous opening shot makes the slow-motion all the more gripping right off the bat. The second set of shots translates the idea of slow-motion into a strange, destabilizing transition of distortion and blur between still photographs, still moments in time. (Perhaps these shots imply that the key effects of slow-motion and blur (soft-focus) cannot be separated.) Can you talk about how you are thinking about an experience of time in *The Halftime Show*? And, in addition to temporally conveying a sense of homing in on the present, does your emphasis on slowing things down also respond to our historical moment, the short-attention-span times we live in?

Jesse Fleming: After 3 years of research, development, and proposals to get to 13 minutes of content, I find it very rewarding and encouraging knowing this is landing deeply.

In response to the experience of time in *The Halftime Show*: Often, reports from people who experience what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has termed *Flow*, indicate that our sense of time shifts out of 'normal'. There is a hyper concentration and loss of self-identification—you're just in it and experience unfolds from one moment to the next. I think most of us can relate to those moments of concentration, perhaps in the context of nearing a serious accident when we fully 'drop in' and everything around us settles. Over this project I've also been following and talking with a

neuroscientist named Judson Brewer who's currently at the University of Massachusetts. He's a long time meditation practitioner and a researcher of Flow. His first Flow moment happened when he was mountain biking and got into a situation where his life was in jeopardy and

his attention was so critical that he wound up dropping into a Flow state. When he popped out of it he had this wonderful feeling that he describes as "delicious." I'm trying to take the viewer there in the video—maybe not to delicious but certainly into a contemplative space where time and attention is, as you said, an alien percept, but through this looking glass we can observe something that's happening within and all around us, all of the time.

I don't see this work expressing a bias in response to the times we live in, but rather pointing out the dualistic human experience of self-manifestation and self-transcendence. For example, the dervish is in a Flow state, the crowd reacting to the success of the team is somewhere in between an empathy state and self-manifestation. Alternately, when people see themselves on the jumbotron and celebrate that, they are exemplifying all self. But yes, in our time some very exciting things are happening and some very odd things are happening too, mostly due to technological shifts. All these devices of accessibility and devices of recording have made us very connected to the global network of *all of us* and on the other end, they've given us a lot of self-referencing. Facebook and these types of places are masters and manipulators of this paradox. I think our future is in the hands of user experience designers. Technology can easily be a contemplative tool or it can be a tool for distraction, if we go the way of distraction we're almost certain to destroy our species soon—end game. But if we move towards contemplation and connection and empathy and Flow, then we're in really good shape to be happier people and more oriented towards inclusion. Luckily a lot of people in the tech world and the world of neuroscience happen to have meditation backgrounds and there seems to be a genuine hunger in the world for contemplative technology.

SLG: Focusing on the focus, as a viewer I am very aware that you are manipulating the camera's focus with purpose. I'm specifically connecting to the soft-focus of a lot of the shots. I first notice this in the video's third passage, the wide city shot that zooms in on the whirling dervish, as well as the subsequent ground-level shot of the dervish that makes effective use of being out-of-focus. But altered focus occurs elsewhere and throughout. The dervish, whirling in circles and in and out of focus, became a drishti, similar to the way my gaze can lock on something in concentrated focus and then, at a certain point as concentration builds, suddenly slip out of focus into a soft gaze that is sometimes used (including in sit sessions you lead) as a meditation technique in place of closed-eyes. I was wondering, how does the meditative state you are channeling and depicting relate to vision—or other senses—going in and out of focus?

JF: I really appreciate your drishti reference, although I had to look it up. I interviewed Mira Hunter, who is the whirling dervish in the film and also an artist in New York City. She described her experiences whirling as a contrast of being hyperaware of her surroundings and yet insulated "like in a perfect sphere or the eye of a hurricane where you're in this other sense of self." And I relate to that—in my experience, when you can drop into experience deeply as it is, you lose that fixated sense of self that maintains

separation from the world. I needed to take the audience along this path, pointing to situations where this stream of self and non-self are present, and then the spectrum between. That's the gaze or the drishti as you said.

SLG: My next question is about the particular sequence of images you composed. An overall idea that comes across in the video is the possibility of experiencing or consciously tapping into Flow and developing one's awareness of it in all kinds of unexpected, challenging social environments full of distractions and activity, like a sports stadium or Times Square. Can you talk about the decision to isolate the specific situations, environments, and events (social and natural) that you include and what motivated the order they appear in?

JF: I think we're dropping in and out of flow quite often—maybe not capital FLOW but certainly little Flow. So the point is just to see it and familiarize yourself with it on these little levels and then, through sensitivity and clarity, perhaps it can become an experience that pervades our awareness and perception. When I'm at a concert or on a hike or on vacation, the times that are really meaningful to me are the times I'm most there—present. But often I've felt this underlying yet very uncomfortable sensation (a suffering) of just NOT being able to connect—and I know that there's beauty all around me and so it makes me feel all the worse. So what can we do? As my friend and teacher George Haas helped me confirm one day at Walt Disney Concert Hall, you just need to deconstruct the self-identifying that's getting in the way of being THERE. So how do we do that—well, FLOW or Flow is a great ticket in. Close your eyes, feel the vibratory energy of the person next to you at the concert hall, hear the sweep of the orchestra, the Doppler effect of each instrument, the temperature in the room, even our emotional response to the context. Anchoring into our experience, we naturally drop into varying levels of flow, and then we're in it—present.

SLG: As long as we're talking directly about learning to experience little Flow and big FLOW, as well as the teachers who help us achieve contact with those states, can you explain who the man is

in the video's last scene and what he is doing?

JF: That's Shinzen Young, a Western Vipassana teacher. He's sort of my big boss teacher, or one of them. I'm using big boss as it relates to video games—the person at the end of a level that you interact with to get to the next stage. He's 'a heavy dude'. And he's hyper nerdy and scientific with his views and his teachings. His system of teaching is his modification of long-standing Buddhist practices into a secularized form.

As to what he's doing in *The Halftime Show*—in the traditional Buddhist maps of enlightenment there are four paths. The first is called cessation or stream entry. That means you work your way up a map (although everyone's map seems to be a bit different), go through a variety of different experiences and states, and at the end of that first path, you fall into what is called cessation.

If we can agree that all experience arises and passes away then we can also ask the question where does experience come from and where does it go? In Shinzen's lineage, experience comes from and returns to "source." If you can imagine a graph with an X/Y axis, time and space arise and exist above X. Source exists below. If we can get to the place where we are hyper concentrated and equanimous, we can follow our own experience into source. As we lock onto our sensory experience, we can acutely notice this arising and passing away—and if one can tether into and follow the passing away aspect, it can pull us below X and into source. The first time this happens, it is called stream entry. Now, in source there is nothing, so if you enter there, there is no you, no memory, no self, no consciousness. Coming out of it, a practitioner (or someone who had spontaneous cessation with no pre-existing practice) can know they've been to source because they experience the re-manifestation back into their body and into their consciousness. This can be a very big shift in the way we see ourselves and the world. It's such a big shift that we're forever in the stream, which means we are compelled towards practice. For Shinzen, he can more or less enter source at will, which is unusual but possible. And this is what he did for camera in the video.

SLG: OK, I don't want to ignore a very powerful, guiding aspect of *The Halftime Show* which is the sound. A strong 'tone' is set. Throughout the video, there are oscillating, droning beats that crescendo and decrescendo at varying speeds. The aural ebb and flow is hypnotic, a sonic counterpart to the dervish whirling round and round. The soundtrack both establishes an ambient background pitch that feels constant and an arcing, quasi-narrative, and even eerie sense of suspense that alternately peaks and relaxes. The effect is, as with the visual slow-motion and manipulated focus, one of heightened concentration and getting into a special mental groove, a highly sensitized, yet-insulated headspace. The sound 'breathes' the images. You collaborated with Lewis Pesacov to

create the score. Can the two of you talk about the thinking behind the audio and how it came about?

Also, a crucial and surprising sound element occurs in the last scene when we get speech for the first time with Shinzen Young. The quality of his voice feels important, introducing an unexpected texture that punctuates the trance state the rest of the video has lulled me into. Had you thought about the tone of his voice, his words and how that would pierce, fit into, or contrast with the score?

JF: We had been talking about working together for sometime and Lewis had developed these custom-built oscillators he used for an opera written with his wife, Elizabeth Cline. Once we decided to work together using them, we got into a discussion around sound and found ourselves relating on some far-out sound stuff. The oscillators seemed like a great fit for this project because there is an inherent dualistic and non-dualistic experience they provide as they interact with each other in a series of pulses. I find the score that Lewis developed akin to a shaman guiding a trip. I was with Lewis for one improvised session that I recorded which became the skeleton for the score. From there we decided on certain parts of the film that would need to be called out from others—namely when there were moments in the film that create a self-referencing in the audience, primarily due to the subject confronting the camera with their gaze. So Lewis' score functions to bring us into the visuals by creating a synesthesia where the sound mixing with the visual information creates its own power—it deepens the experience through its own harmonic influence that heightens the sub-conscious (or possibly conscious) experience of self-referencing, non-self referencing, and the space in between.

As for Shinzen's voice, we thought it would be interesting to give his voice the slight feel of a stadium, keeping the piece within this imagined space of a surreal contemporary temple.

Lewis Pesacov: Jesse attended *The Edge Of Forever*, an opera that my wife, Elizabeth, and I wrote—a one-time only performance on the eve of the end of the Mayan Long Count Calendar, December 21, 2012. The foundation of the music for *TEOF* is pure tones, performed on eight individual analogue sine wave generators through a mixer. The sounds of the pure tones piqued Jesse's interest, and we've been searching for the appropriate collaboration ever since. Although we come from different schools, I feel that our individual meditation practices lead us to a similar point within, an infinite well-spring from which our work flows outward. *The Halftime Show* was a great opportunity for us to finally synthesize some of our converging ideas, merging sound and vision.

Our dialogue opened with Jesse visiting my studio, introducing me to an early cut of the footage.

While watching a loop of the video, we made a sketch recording of an extended improvisation in which I played the eight sine wave generators, reacting intuitively to the unfolding images. He spent some time listening to this music with the footage and illuminated the moments that resonated the deepest with his ideas about the piece. From there, we continued our dialogue back and forth. As the cut evolved, I scored closer and closer to picture.

As you mentioned, the score creates an almost otherworldly architecture for the narrative arc of the piece to live in. It acts as a 'shamanic guide', as Jesse so accurately described.

On the micro level, the music is composed using only pure tones. Sinusoidal sound waves consist of a smooth, repeating oscillation of a single frequency. Unlike other sound waves, sine waves are self-identical at any moment in time, without fluctuating harmonic content, or any initial transient/final decay. In this way, sine waves seem to exist outside of time itself and are to me, a sonic representation of the infinite. Composing with specific, self-identical sound vibrations I hope to draw the listener inward, if only momentarily, to dip into the unified field—an internal flow state without beginning or end. By dipping into the unified field via a regular meditation practice I've found that my thoughts and experiences in the outside world exist in a beautiful space of almost slow-motion time with improved dexterity for being present in the moment.

The natural phenomena of sound are defined by periodic disturbances in the air, vibrations with frequencies way too fast for the brain to perceive as individual pulses— oscillations. As a mode of conceptually mapping slow-motion time onto music, I've been interested in different forms of pulsing. Utilizing beating between sine waves within a critical bandwidth exposes the otherwise hidden inner pulsing of specific frequencies. Zooming out one step, amplitude modulation (volume swells at regular intervals) form slightly larger pulses, longer 'beats' on top of larger phrase lengths, for example the music reflecting the wind grazing over the flowers, or the whirling of the dervish. The club sequence allowed for a perfect opportunity to use discrete pulse bursts in the form of a regular Roland 808 kick drum pattern (an idiomatic sound, also constructed from sine waves). Zooming out a few steps more, large-scale pulses are created with pairs of crescendos/diminuendos, creating the 'breathing' of the music that you picked up on, like the slow ebb and flow of the tide.

Zooming out to the macro formal scale, the majority of the music is a bed of low and mid-range frequency material establishing a nebulous and trance-like sonic field. This sound world mirrors the shots of subjects merging with their experience in the world, the Flow state that you and Jesse have been discussing. Conversely, the higher frequency material implies a very specific harmonic field, mirroring the fewer shots of self-identification in the subjects as well as moments of self-

identification for the viewer.

These moments of high frequency self-identification are very sparse, appearing first with the glances of the tourists in Times Square, as well as the dancer and DJ in the club scene. Activated by the succession of shots from the whirling basketball to the basketball players to the waves in the ocean, these sparse glimmers grow quickly and ecstatically to overtake the entire musical spectrum—a breakthrough moment, enlivening the fragile veil between self-identification and Flow states. Could this be a fleeting moment of self-realization?

I see the final scene with Shinzen Young functioning as an epilogue. Shinzen's locked stare saturates the viewer with the feeling of self-identification. It's almost as if the high frequency sine waves have gone haywire and shoot directly out of his eyes. Yet, he's not self-identifying, but merging with the experience of being filmed and with the viewer. His voice echoes like an announcer at a half time show. It is the only sound in the piece not comprised of sine waves. He intones, "Feel flow... See flow...Gone."

SLG: In *The Halftime Show*, you spend a lot of time and attention on shots of stadium crowds watching a basketball game. This presents both a case study in the immersive, empathic experience (emotional, physiological, and mental) of an engaged spectator (mirror neurons on full fire) as well as those instances of jarring and de-familiarized self-perception when those same spectators view their own image projected on the stadium jumbotron. Elsewhere in the video, you similarly study tourists in Times Square taking 'selfies'. Combined, these scenes seem to venture some hypothesis or argument about the strange, intimate relationship today between self-perception, cameras/photography (images, more generally), and sociality. This still feels like a foggy, but very compelling notion. Could you help me de-fog it?

JF: I'm very glad you asked this question because it opens up to a backstory I had forgotten about. About ten years ago I went to a Yankees game with a friend. We sat in the cheapest seats, 'the nose bleeds'. My friend had brought a pair of binoculars with him and I spent most of the game watching the crowd instead of the field. The thing about the nose bleeds was that they were so steep that when I stood up I felt a sensation of vertigo. This made for very interesting viewing because when I watched a block of spectators they seemed to be on the same vertical axis, like Hollywood Squares. This perspective made for a great case study because it brought a group of 100 people or so onto the same flat plane. I remember becoming fascinated with watching the spectators oscillate from self-awareness (drinking their beverage, talking to their friend, mind wandering, etc.) to all collectively beaming their attention onto the field when there was a highlighted moment in the game. At the time

I didn't know what it was I was observing but I knew it was something and that something was special.

We returned to another game, this time with a camera and I intended to make a series of images identifying this happening. My friend had a camera with a long lens and had brought it for me to use with a roll of film he had loaded. I took what I thought were an amazing series of photos, and at the end of the day went to wind the film in and nothing happened—he hadn't loaded it correctly and nothing had exposed, the day's pictures were lost. For some reason I didn't go back, but I never forgot about that experience of watching.

A few years ago (about 7 years after the Yankees game), I heard a TED talk by Jill Bolte Taylor. She is the neuroanatomist who had a stroke, which, for a period of time, wiped out the left hemisphere of her brain. This is the region that provides us with a sense of self, time, space, language, math, and separation from others and experience. The right hemisphere is totally inclusive, experiencing the world as one unified field of energy with no separation. When I heard her speak, something clicked and that experience at the Yankees game that I couldn't understand at the time was all of the sudden filled in. It was then that I started to draft *The Halftime Show*. This spectacle of people at a game self-identifying versus merging with the experience of the game was a big part of what I wanted to identify. I see it as a catalyst for describing how much this shifting experience of self pervades our lives. Perhaps a massive arena is a temple for worshipping this oscillation.

The selfies are a really interesting part for me. It's not a critique on where we are in history but definitely I see it as a marker of this moment in time being very significant and becoming historical. The way cameras and digital technology have merged has created a flood of self-recording. I was in New York and, the day before shooting the selfies in Times Square, I had gone to The Metropolitan Museum to see the Garry Winogrand show with my photographer friend Dylan Chandler. We were struck by how wonderful the show was but also remorseful as photographers because it feels like there's such a flood of picture-taking these days that this type of observational photography doesn't carry the same weight or value. I made a joke to Dylan that maybe we needed to move into taking pictures of people taking pictures. The next day I passed through Times Square and happened to have my video camera with me. I noticed the city had built a large stand of bleachers at the north end of the square and I went to have a look. It was wild. In all directions there seemed to be a selfie epidemic and, again, there was this beautiful oscillation between self-identification and merging away from self into the hypnotic ocean of Times Square, a place where everything frenetically vies for our attention in an effort to lead people's sense of self into becoming consumers of whatever is being advertised.

There is a lot of beauty in a strong sense of 'the self': we need it, it's there for us, it protects us from danger, and helps us to really manifest in the world. But, for the moment, we as a general culture of science and technology may be too self-centric and so we lose the elasticity between self and transcendence that's so important to being a complete and healthy human being. I think we do best when we can drop into Flow and when we can also remember to return a phone call. And although it may be technology that's really feeding us to our self, it's the same technology (designed properly) that has an unprecedented capacity to bring us into a contemplative reality where the perceived separation between self and other, or self and world, is lowered and perhaps even removed. We can develop our awareness of self as a process of oscillation; a state of Flow that manifests and merges...manifests and merges...manifest and merges. The first step towards this is to know it's happening, then to witness it in our own experience, then to exercise it as a skill set, and then come and go as needed. This way, when the self is in the way of connection and making us suffer (stuck in the sensation of separateness), we can deconstruct the self and drop in; or if we've gotten too far off into transcendence that we can't be present, we add in a dose of self as needed.

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