

# ON HIATUS

Ericka Beckman’s *Hiatus* is an experimental film about online interactive ‘identity’, that went by unnoticed was a flop at the 1999 Rotterdam Film Festival but recently received wide acclaim when it was included in Beckman’s two day *Image Games* screening at Tate Modern. Sarah Baker thinks that, 14 years on, we’re now ready to revel in Beckman’s visually elaborate virtual reality cyberdrama.

— **SARAH BAKER**  
“From your point of view, Wanda, this may seem like the most remote place in the Universe”, said *Player33* from Houston, who prefers if you call him Wang. Wang is a greedy cyber tycoon son-of-a-bitch who hacked into Wanda’s abundant power garden to exploit her impressive accumulation of memory storage. “You’re a cutie, plant a field of narcissus or something. A woman shouldn’t master her talent on such a harsh game,” he condescends to Wanda, whose mission is to reclaim the power Wang stole. Wanda is not alone in her quest – she has guidance from a fan-wielding cyber geisha, a barefoot contessa, a Native American totem pole guru, a computer corset and various painter decorators who are deemed useless to Wanda, or Madi, depending if you are in real space or in virtual reality.

Wanda is Madi’s avatar, who takes shape as a pink go-go cowgirl. Madi is geared up with the cyber headset in her real-life apartment, playing the online virtual reality game Hiatus. Hiatus is a product of the ‘90s, completed in 1999, the world it depicts really does seem like the most remote place in the universe; black and vast like outer space, its terrain is nonsensical - like a dream. The story takes place in the future and the past at the same time - it’s a futuristic retro video game. It is nostalgic of a time that never really happened, in the same way Virtual Reality was never really accessible. We are used to seeing it represented in various science fiction films or TV shows; I have even seen

it in an episode of *Murder She Wrote* – Mrs F solves the crime by putting on the virtual reality headset and hacking into a locked virtual room where the virtual murder weapon is hidden.  
Ericka Beckman was involved with virtual reality research as early as 1991 when she immersed herself in state-of-the-art experimentation at NASA laboratories in California. I was impressed to discover that Beckman was reading online forums about virtual reality in 1991, 8 years before I even had an email address.

— **ERICKA BECKMAN ON VIRTUAL REALITY**  
I went to NASA Ames Research Center and Cyberthon in San Francisco in 1991 where all these gaming people would beta test their games. There was a lot of Virtual Reality and I did a bunch of submersive experimenting where I would put on the virtual glasses – ‘headset eyewear gear’ I think it was called. It was basic animation that could be done in a virtual environment, and then you would put someone into that space and see how they would react to the animation – if they could coordinate with it; or if they would bump into things or not. I was excited by the crude 3D world that existed, and happy to see how simple that Virtual Reality animation really was. It was all stick wireframe figures and objects. There would be something on the table and you couldn’t pick it up, then you slam into the chair and fall and you don’t know where you are, so you have to reset everything to get back to the table and start it over. I was interested in the scientific side and

the developers. I did magazine interviews with three developers of virtual reality at NASA Ames. These guys were all working on different projects with virtual reality: one was a Mars Landing Robot, one was for flight simulators and the other was a replacement for the telephone in space. I was able to ask the developers about the human issues of wearing the gear and operating in this space. One of the guys at NASA was an early 3D artist, he wanted to make art in three dimensions and found himself working in a science community. The people that I met at that time were all very idealistic, filled with potential about what this technology could do and how it could change the world we live in, the way we experience media. I could go on, but for me what I saw and experienced had nothing to do with what came out in the movies, you know, like in *The Matrix*.

— **SB**  
There is apparent rigour in the visual images that Beckman presents, particularly in *Hiatus*, and I trust her artistic vision completely, even before I discover that she undertook years of research at NASA, was reading blogs practically before blogs existed, and that she painstakingly stop-motion animates the hell out of each frame: she maps the recorded image, rewinds the 16mm film and then overlaps the footage, with up to 16 layers, to create her cyber-scapes, in other words no After Effects. It produces a very individualistic visual outlook on something we think we know, but Beckman proves we must slow down and

Captions



have a rethink. I’m not just talking about her version of what virtual reality looks like. I’m also talking about narrative structure and timing in film. I trust Beckman’s visuals, costumes, story, character arch, dialogue, etc, because her independent artistic control, as opposed to *movies*, Beckman clearly doesn’t have to answer to Hollywood studio executives wondering if the ending is suitable for audiences, or if the film has selling power.  
Interestingly, when I asked Beckman about ‘narrative’ I was thinking ‘story’ - she was thinking ‘baggage.’

— **ERICKA BECKMAN ON NARRATIVE**  
In 1979, most of my colleagues that I went to school with were getting involved in narrative productions in L.A. Much later on, in New York City, a lot of friends jumped out of making film on the sidelines to pursuing Hollywood careers - they were all women, and there was a development of new narrative of focused women directors in the mid-’80s. At every turn, I avoided it because I wasn’t interested in narrative space; but now I have gotten to the point where I can embrace it. At that point it was very important for me to be self directed



– to really pursue my own path and not to take on the baggage of other structures... to find something I felt was my own. In my generation, we had to really pull ourselves away from all kinds of set media categories in order to make something new; the whole point was to design a kind of new media and that meant a lot of things to different people. There was this idea that you couldn’t follow any rules – you were supposed to turn things on their head and see what you could shake out of them, to get something new going. And that’s a sort of underwritten belief – if you’re going to do it you really have to look for what you want to do yourself and not try to follow anything. Now, there are so many acceptable media models and so much freedom to move around these models; the younger generation isn’t encumbered by this task of having to strike new ground or new territory to establish some kind of positioning. It’s not the same rebellious model.

— **SB**  
This notion of striking new ground calls to mind our super villain, Wang. To me, he is the prospector in search of gold, he is the

colonist who tries to blanket the natural world with his capitalistic computer-virus grasp. Wang is J.R. Ewing and represents Westward Expansion, while according to Beckman, Wang was modelled after Ronald Reagan. Wang is clearly a Republican capitalistic oil tycoon cowboy and the only thing to stop him from world domination is Wanda. In order for Wanda to win the game she must find a way to kill the virus that is Wang and nurture her power grids.

— **ERICKA BECKMAN ON ORGANIC PROBLEM SOLVING**  
In *Hiatus*, the feminist drive was really to have female audiences connect with the thinking and the energy of a female character to see how a character could work themselves out of a very complex situation. I wanted to really emphasize this idea of intuition and organic thinking. Not relying on models but on a more innate learning process. So it wasn’t really a feminist film, but there is a lot of revenge and Wanda takes action against Wang.